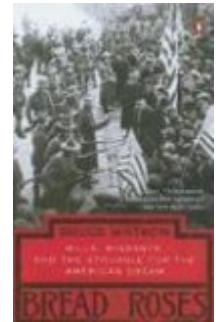




**Bruce Watson.** *Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream.* New York: Penguin Books, 2005. 337 pp. \$16.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-14-303735-4.



**Reviewed by** Mary Beth Fraser Connolly

**Published on** H-NewEngland (April, 2008)

In *Bread and Roses*, Bruce Watson argues that events of the Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1912 mill strike have long been "relegated to history's ghettos" (p. 3). Watson asserts that in the decades following the strike, fear of mill bosses prevented workers from revisiting the events of the winter of 1912. With the passing of time and the death of first-hand witnesses, the details faded. Watson seeks to rectify this and bring closer attention to the events in Lawrence. Even the name "Bread and Roses," according to the author, is incorrectly identified as a slogan of this labor struggle (p. 3). Watson tells an engaging story of this strike that captured national attention from January to May 1912. The book moves from the beginning of the strike to its conclusion, concentrating on the actions and events of the laborers and their families, as well as the union leadership, specifically the International Workers of the World (IWW) and the American Federation of Labor. The author also includes examinations of mill owners, particularly William Wood of the American Woolen Company. Watson, however, is intent on unearthing the obscured details of the strike and union activity to provide the perspective of the

workers and their families as they struggled to make a living.

*Bread and Roses* is a history of working-class immigrants who came to Lawrence in hopes of obtaining a better life. Watson ties this experience into the larger concept of the American dream, as his subtitle suggests. The workers at the Lawrence mills struck because of a cut in pay. The Massachusetts legislature had mandated a reduction in work hours as of January 1, 1912. The mills, however, continued to pay the same hourly wage to their workers, resulting in a smaller pay envelope. The workers, while happy with the reduction in hours, desired the same weekly pay they received prior to the reduction. By 1912, most male textile workers did not make enough to support their families and required the labor of others within the family to make ends meet. This struggle to make a living and to support families in the United States is at the heart of *Bread and Roses*, and it informs each dramatic example provided by the author as he carries the reader from the combative beginning of the walkout through the desperately cold weeks as tension rose in

Lawrence, and to the last negotiation that ended the strike five months later. As Watson moves through the major events of the strike, he dots his narrative with stories of individual workers and their families.

One of the strengths of this work is the manner in which Watson presents the facts of the strike. After finding few memories within Lawrence among descendents of the strikers, the author strives to paint a sweeping picture of the conditions in Lawrence in the winter of 1912 as workers struck against the American Woolen Company. Drawing heavily from newspaper accounts of the strike and other secondary sources of the period, Watson describes in detail what the tenements, streets, and mills, as well as the average working-class family would have looked like. Watson gives two aspects of the strike a significant amount of attention. First, he seeks to determine the extent of radicalism of the laborers. In connection with this first goal, Watson also attempts to locate the individuals who were chiefly responsible for the violence of the strike. As he recounts the sequence of events of the walkout over many weeks, the author portrays workers as largely nonviolent. Any act of violence, such as attacks on workers who did not wish to participate in the initial walkout or who crossed picket lines, was perpetrated either at moments of extreme passion or frustration. Labor leaders, such as Joseph Ettor, the representative of the IWW sent to Lawrence to direct the strike, strove to control workers' actions despite their own inflammatory rhetoric. Watson shows that while violent events surround the IWW, its leaders and members did not seek it out. The author gives a rather interesting discussion of the IWW's Bill Haywood, attempting to dispel the myths that surround him. While Haywood had a rough history, he generally acted aggressively only when pushed, and consequently he is misunderstood. Watson, however, does not sugarcoat Haywood. While the IWW leader positively affected the strike, the author shows how Haywood abandoned his flock at cru-

cial times, as during an attempt to send children of workers from Lawrence.

Two chapters, "The Children's Exodus" and "Crackdown," are excellent examples of Watson's gift for narrative and his efforts to locate the truly guilty parties in the strike. By February 1912, some parents sent their children to New York City and other parts of New England to sympathetic families in an effort to protect them and to use them to garner more support for their cause. The first waves of children left Lawrence successfully, but those set to depart February 23 did not. Watson, relying on newspaper accounts of the events at the Lawrence train station, paints a dramatic picture of police violence against women and children. "[F]ive men, nine women, and fifteen children" were rounded up and taken to "the police station" (p. 169). Ultimately, the police, mayor and other public officials, and mill owners did not emerge untarnished from this debacle at the train station. Consequently, the children's exodus served one of its purposes; it swung public opinion in favor of striking workers.

Watson's account of the Lawrence strike also includes a discussion of all participants, not simply the workers. The author strives to understand Wood, the chief representative of mill owners and owner of the American Woolen Company. Wood, while lauded for his own rags to riches story, falters in Watson's account when he failed to remember his own worker origins. Watson's most sympathetic account of the workers' opposition is that of the many soldiers who were assigned to Lawrence to keep peace. The militia who were called early in the strike was a mixture of bullies, particularly during periods of heightened tension, and sources of sympathy for workers. The "vast majority of the militia," Watson asserts, faced "boredom, bitter cold, and resent at being used," which resulted in demoralization (p. 151).

Details such as these add to the appeal of Watson's history of the Lawrence strike. One criticism is that Watson bases many of his conclusions on

newspaper accounts. For example, many of his sources for anti-owner characterizations come from labor papers. While these sources may be accurate sources for facts, they had their own biases or interpretations of events. Watson takes these accounts with little criticism or questioning of their points of view. While his sympathies lie with workers, the author's inclusion of a fuller picture of their opponents, such as mill owners and militia, as well as struggles between city officials and workers to find a solution to the strike brings *Bread and Roses* to life. While the author's intended audience goes beyond academia, this book does add to the existing literature of the Lawrence strike.

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**Citation:** Mary Beth Fraser Connolly. Review of Watson, Bruce. *Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream*. H-NewEngland, H-Net Reviews. April, 2008.

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