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Bread And Roses: Mills, Migrants, And The Struggle For The American Dream



Synopsis

On January 12, 1912, an army of textile workers stormed out of the mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts, commencing what has since become known as the "Bread and Roses" strike. Based on newspaper accounts, magazine reportage, and oral histories, Watson reconstructs a Dickensian drama involving thousands of parading strikers from fifty-one nations, unforgettable acts of cruelty, and even a protracted murder trial that tested the boundaries of free speech. A rousing look at a seminal and overlooked chapter of the past, Bread and Roses is indispensable reading.

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Customer Reviews

It was mid-January in the year 1912. Storm clouds were gathering over the city of Lawrence, Massachusetts. But on this occasion the weather was clearly not the issue. Rather, this was the season of discontent for the tens of thousands of workers who labored in the dozens of textile mills that dotted the banks of the Merrimack River. The vast majority of these workers were immigrants hailing from all over Europe who had been attracted to Lawrence by the promise of permanent employment, higher wages and a decent standard of living. It all seemed too good to be true. And indeed it was. The realities of life in these mills would gradually fan the flames of rebellion. When affluent mill owners instituted what amounted to a cut in pay for their workers it proved to be the straw that broke the camels back. In "Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream" author Bruce Watson brings to life the tragic events of that winter in Lawrence. It is a story that needs to be told and one that our children need to read about. As events unfolded in

Lawrence the battle lines were quickly drawn. During this volatile period in American history labor disputes such as this were sure to attract a variety of characters each with his/her own political point of view and each with an ax to grind. Labor activists would descend upon Lawrence sensing correctly that the time was right to advance their cause. Enter one Joseph Ettor. Ettor was an organizer for the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World.) He would prove to be the catalyst that would transform what was about to occur in Lawrence from a local dispute into an event that would attract attention nationwide. As Bruce Watson points out the situation in Lawrence deteriorated rapidly. Although not all of the workers agreed with the strike roughly 2/3 of them walked off the job on January 12th. Mill owners such as William Wood of the American Woolen Mills refused to negotiate. Despite the appeals of Joseph Ettor and others violence would rear its ugly head on a number of occasions. As the strike progresses tensions between the workers continued to escalate. Those who chose to remain on the job were being threatened by the taunts and jeers of those on strike. It was an ugly situation and one that would take a great many weeks to finally resolve. "Bread and Roses: Mills Migrants and the Struggle for the American Dream" deserves a spot on the shelves of every library in America. This is an extremely engaging and well written account of a very significant event in our nation's history. Bruce Watson places the reader right smack in the middle of these events. You get to know all of the important players in this monumental struggle for the rights of the American worker. And at the same time you will gain an appreciation for all of those tens of thousands of working men and women who had the courage to say "enough is enough" and put it all on the line for what they believed was right. If you have a youngster in high school or college I would strongly suggest you get them a copy of this book. I read "Bread and Roses" in just a few sittings. I could not put it down. Very highly recommended!

I grew up in a town just 15 miles from Lawrence. Given this, one might think that this amazing piece of American history would be woven into the local lore. Nothing of the sort. This is beautifully written, displaying exhaustive research and attention to detail. The lives of the immigrant worker community are poignant and graphic. Watson writes with a point of view, no doubt, and tells the story beautifully. I especially enjoyed the depth of understanding the author brings to the major players and important social themes of the period. Many of these same themes continue to play out today. Immensely good reading - couldn't put it down, especially the last 100 pages.

I loved this story! Many years ago, I read about "Big Bill" Haywood and about the IWW. Every detail stuck with me. Watson fleshed out the man well, as he did all the characters involved in the 1912

Lawrence, MA, textile strike. Nevada Jane, wife of "Big Bill," is a case in point. She's not a key player in this tale, but nevertheless she piqued my interest. In fact, the "self-made" capitalist, who owned the mill, and the soldiers, who "owned" the streets of Lawrence, are mirror images of what the U. S. is becoming. However, I'm not the teller of this story. READ THE BOOK!

This is a surprisingly exciting read. A 10 star book, at least. I can't imagine this history being told better although I don't know what others have written about this strike, other than a brief reference from the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World). Watson captures the importance of the IWW to this strike but also shows the great problems that the IWW had in holding on to the strikers after the strike ended. So much detail but it flows so well. Watson seems to largely let the details tell the story rather than editorialize. This is history with the emphasis on history and not salesmanship. This is effectively a "you are there" episode accomplished in text. What motivated Bruce Watson to do such exceptional work? I suspect that, unlike the author of "How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, And Got a Life", Bruce Watson did not get anything like a \$500,000 advance for "Bread and Roses". We need more people like Bruce Watson. And more money directed to support them: so buy this book! So much about U.S. History I'm ignorant of. That a Kansas Socialist newspaper was our most popular weekly. That the IWW, after having so much success in Lawrence, would be nearly crushed by the federal government. That one young man of the IWW, Joseph Ettor, would have such a profound influence of the Lawrence strike but die largely forgotten. That so many women would play important roles in a strike at this time. That within a year of the 1912 strike, the Lawrence strikers would be in denial as the IWW membership in their city plummeted: but there was a lasting impact on the strike on wages and working conditions in other cities, afraid of what the IWW and people of Lawrence had done. The strike went from just Jan 12, 1912 to March 14 of the same year. But so much happened that it is amazing Watson was able to present it all clearly. Imagine that after holding to such a hard position in 1912, the mill owner William Wood, would, about seven years later give his employees insurance, maternity benefits, sick pay, help them buy homes, provide English lessons. Yet die by suicide within another decade after losing his children. These are powerful facts powerfully presented. At a time when globalism is weakening labor in the U.S. and everywhere else in the world, it seems worthwhile to learn what people did. And don't forget what Bruce Watson has done, by bringing that event to life again.

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