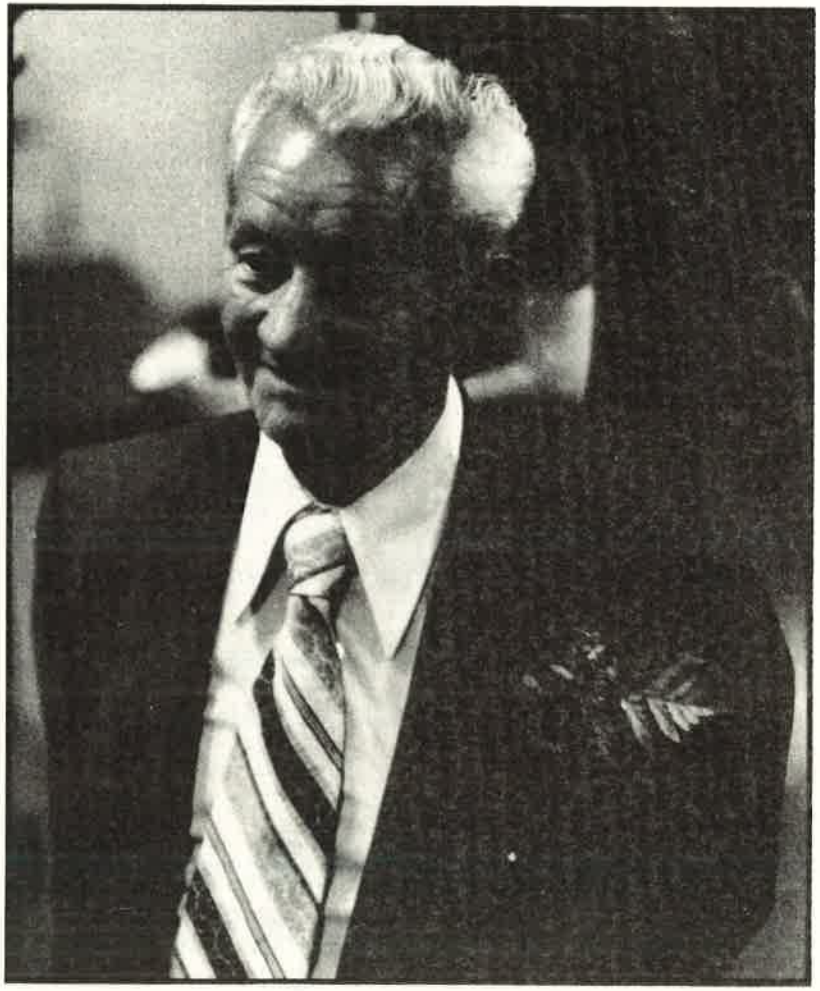

Luigi Nardella

"Born Out of Strikes":
An Interview with Luigi Nardella

Introduction

The following interview with Luigi Nardella recounts his experiences during the Rhode Island textile strike of 1922. This strike, with the exception of the textile strike of 1934, was the most significant episode of class conflict in the state's modern history. In early January 1922, mill owners throughout the state announced wage reductions of up to twenty percent and an increase in the hours of work to fifty-four a week. Coming a year after a previous wage cut of twenty-two percent, this announcement was an extension of a general assault upon workers' war-time gains. Mill worker reaction was prompt. Weavers at the Royal Mills in the Pawtuxet Valley (a valley of mill villages southwest of Providence) walked out on January 23 shutting down the mills. The strikers proceeded through the Pawtuxet calling out the workers in mill after mill. In the Blackstone Valley (a series of mill towns north of Providence) scattered locals of the United Textile Workers protested the owners' announcement and called a strike. Unorganized workers in the Blackstone mills joined immediately in the walkout. By February, the mills in both valleys were shut down, and the strike quickly spread to textile firms in Providence, to Lawrence, Massachusetts and to Manchester, New Hampshire. Thus, the Rhode Island strike precipitated what amounted to a general textile strike throughout New England in which between sixty and eighty thousand workers struggled for eight to nine months to defend what they had achieved during the war.

The rapidity and solidarity of the Rhode Island mill workers' response has to be understood in the context that these were primarily unorganized immigrant workers. There were several United Textile Workers (UTW) locals, largely of skilled workers, in the Blackstone, and the Amalgamated Textile Workers (ATW), a radical dual union based among New Jersey textile workers, had been sporadically active in Rhode Island since late in 1921. But the decisiveness of the initial walkout and the motivation to persist in a

long and difficult struggle grew out of the strike's communal character. Local support was critical in circumventing evictions, injunctions, and police intimidation; community hostility towards scabs was decisive in preventing the re-opening of the mills. In Pawtucket, a large manufacturing center directly north of Providence, tenements housing scabs were repeatedly threatened and some were bombed.

While not as spectacular, it was the profound determination to last out the strike that demonstrated the critical importance of the immigrant communities. This tenacity was especially true of the Portuguese, who were galvanized by the killing of a Portuguese striker in Pawtucket. Thereafter, the Portuguese, chiefly in Fall River and New Bedford, provided incalculable support for the strike. And much the same was true, though on a more limited scale, of the Italian, Greek, French Canadian and Polish communities.

The bulk of the strikers were unorganized, but the textile unions provided direction and structure to the strike. In the Pawtuxet Valley, the Amalgamated quickly built up a rank and file organization. With roughly five thousand new members the Amalgamated effectively nurtured a democratic structure: each mill village maintained its own strike committee and the direction of the struggle rested primarily with local workers. In addition the ATW helped to sustain the strike by providing an extensive network of activities: frequent meetings, mass rallies, dances, an excellent cafeteria and relief system, and even a baseball league. In contrast, the UTW largely engineered the strike in the Blackstone; and while the union did provide an effective relief system, it failed, especially in the critical Central Falls-Pawtucket area, to cultivate and extend local immigrant leadership.

Nonetheless, both unions shared a general political strategy. They pressed for a political solution to the strike by unsuccessfully pressuring the state legislature to enact the workers' demands--a forty-eight hour week, abolition of night work for women and children, and the eradication of property qualifications in local elections. Union organizers persistently urged the workers to vote against the Republicans, the dominant party with close ties to the mill owners, in the upcoming elections. (During the strike the Republicans were badly mauled in local elections in Cumberland, in the Blackstone; and in two years were to lose control of the Governor's office.) During the strike the unions invited the Labor Bureau

Inc., an autonomous leftwing research group based in New York City, to refute mill managements' explanations for the wage cuts.

In August and September the majority of strikers went back to work with tentative agreements. Some of the wage cuts were trimmed, but there were wage cuts. And the workers lost the forty-eight hour week. (The only clear victories were registered at the Goddard Brothers Mills in Lonsdale, Berkeley, Ashton, and Pawtucket.) Efforts to prevent discriminatory rehiring were especially fierce in the Pawtuxet, but there were numerous cases of discrimination. (Over two thousand textile workers left the state.) No lasting union organization survived the strike. To a considerable degree, the cause for the failure of the strike rests with the structurally weak, deeply overcapitalized and poorly managed textile industry. New England textiles were in the process of a historically decisive decline.

Nevertheless, though the strike was a failure from the perspective of the work situation, it had a deep impact on other aspects of the class structure. Local immigrant and foreign language communities emerged with a heightened sense of their class position. Immigrant workers were growing more politically active, and while this activity was limited in scope and direction, it would subsequently shatter the political supremacy of the Republican Party in the state.(1)

— James Celenza

Luigi Nardella on the 1922 Textile Strike

Question: Did you have any background in the labor movement before the strike?

Nardella: I came over from Italy in 1913. I was already a barber, and I joined the Barbers' Union in Rhode Island before I was seventeen. Two years after that I became recording secretary for a textile union in Natick, though I never worked in a textile factory. In 1918 I and my brothers started a local of the

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This transcript is edited from two interviews (done by Paul Buhle, James Celenza, and Chuck Schwartz) and a talk given by Mr. Nardella to the Rhode Island Labor History Forum.

Amalgamated Textile Workers Union. My father wasn't a socialist, but he voted the Socialist ticket once in Italy. My mother went out on the picket line with me, she used to hold my arm while she would get after the scabs. Both my brothers, Guido and Calvino, supported the labor movement.

Question: Was there any reason why Italians took the lead in the strike?

Nardella: Italians took the lead because they were in a majority in the mills.(2) They suffered discrimination. People said "Dago," you might as well say "Nigger." When Italians first moved to Atwells Avenue they couldn't walk the streets. They'd get pelted with everything, eggs, tomatoes. They had to organize to defend themselves. In Natick the company wouldn't allow the Italians into the tenements on Main Street, even if the tenement was vacant and the Italians needed it. And Italians were fifty percent of the workers in the mill!(3) The Providence Tribune had a reporter in the Pawtuxet Valley who said that the first Pawtuxet soldier wounded in the War was an Italian, yet the Italians weren't allowed onto Main Street!

Question: Do you remember how the strike started?

Nardella: Yeah, my oldest brother, Guido, he started the strike. Guido pulled the handles on the looms in the Royal Mills, going from one section to the next shouting, "Strike! Strike!" But I was the one who had to go out and bring in the support. When the strike started we didn't have any union organizers. But we had gotten the mills out, one after the other. We got together a group of girls and went from mill to mill, and that morning we got five mills out. We'd motion to the girls in the mills, "Come Out! Come Out!" Then we'd go on to the next.

I went out to look for some organizers from the Amalgamated. I knew whereabouts they'd be, because there had been a strike in Woonsocket. I went there, but nobody could tell me where they were. Then I went to Pascoag, where they had a hall, and some people hanging around gave me the information. I had to hire a car to drive me over to Webster, Massachusetts.(4) It was a terrible day, snow and ice. James Dick was there, and a Polish fellow, quite radical, who went back to Poland later on.(5)

Question: Did the organizers help you?

Nardella: Otherwise the strike couldn't last. They held the people together. While the strike was on they had an organizer who would set up a system to be sure that dues were collected. The people who were coming out of the mills knew nothing about setting the machinery up any more than I did. But they [the ATW] didn't come in as much as we wanted. They never spoke about a contract. The union was born out of strikes and didn't have any money. We wanted the Amalgamated Clothing Workers to come in, to mold the organization. But they didn't; none of their famous organizers came to Rhode Island then. When the organization of the union was finally set up, the strike had ended.

Question: So you organized relief yourself, through the union?

Nardella: That's right. One time we had to get fifty cents per striker for benefits, and that money had to come out of the strike fund. We set up thirteen restaurants in the Pawtuxet Valley, three in Natick alone. My brother was the head of one; it fed the most people and was the least expensive. There'd be one hot meal, sandwiches and plenty of milk for the children. If they wanted a second glass, and they hadn't spilled, they could have a second. The doctors said that the children looked more healthy after the strike than before. We were proud of that. And we were giving relief to families who couldn't come to the restaurants. A woman who had just given birth, for instance, couldn't come to the restaurants. She had to have home relief. We gave the most needy families coal, we gave them wood, we gave them enough to get along.

Question: Did you go to the Blackstone Valley to see what was going on there?

Nardella: No, I was too busy. We used to meet every morning, the Strike Committee. Then, we'd go out on the picket line. Then, if I had time, I'd go open up centers for collecting funds. There was no strike in the Blackstone till after we struck. Thomas McMahon never called a strike, though the workers came out.(6)

Question: What did you think of McMahon and the United Textile Workers? Was there a split between the skilled and unskilled workers?

Nardella: McMahon didn't want to strike, without Pawtuxet Valley he would have settled for ten percent wage cut. The UTW had some loomfixers, but not much else. They had James Powers, president of the loom-

fixers' organization, who had been a socialist; but he ran the loomfixers' like it was his own personal property. Loomfixers and skilled workers all had to come out during the strike because the mills were shut down. The Blackstone Valley strikers came out because the Pawtuxet Valley strikers led them.

Question: You and the other activists in Natick were known as the Iron Batallion, because of the way you shut down the mills and kept the strike going. Why were you called the Iron Batallion?

Nardella: I don't know how we got that name. I went to testify against an injunction, and they called me the head of the Iron Batallion. I told them that I didn't make up the name, the newspapers did to create an impression of conspiracy, to get a headline. But a group from Crompton, when they heard the name, they called themselves "The Shock Troops." But it's true that we were determined. We had rock throwing, scabs pushed back, electric cars pulled off the tracks. The strikers wanted to stop automobiles from entering the factories. I told them, "Don't do that. The best you can do is to get all the stones you can, put them along the sidewalk. Don't get in front of a car full of scabs. They'll run you down." So kids, women, everyone threw stones. There were busted windshields. But these things happen in all strikes....

Question: Did you have any contact with the labor radicals, especially from Olneyville?

Nardella: Yes, James Reid came down from Olneyville. (7) Everybody looked up to him even then as a great leader. He could speak on every subject. He came to Natick and brought money he'd collected in Olneyville. I went to Olneyville to speak at one of the radical forums on a Sunday night. I spoke about the strike, but in the question period people would go off the strike. They wanted to know what the political trend was. I told them how the workers acted; I told them what I saw. I told them, I'm young, I haven't had the experience in the labor movement like many of you.

Question: What about the Amalgamated? It had a radical reputation?

Nardella: In Artic Square, where we had our main rallies, William Derrick would speak for a while and then the Democrats would use the rally.(8) [Russell] Palmer, the president of the ATW who was also a minister, came to speak, but his voice sounded like it came out of the pulpit; it didn't sink in. (9)

Strikers wanted somebody who could inflame them. Derrick didn't have the psychology of a radical, but he had a good voice. He "goddamned" people and the strikers liked that. Dick was more radical than Derrick, and the Polish fellow who stayed a few weeks to help organize the Polish community was the most radical of all. But they would not let Reid talk. He was too radical, a communist.

Question: Didn't the ATW try to influence the legislature by sending crowds up to the Capital? Was it successful?

Nardella: Yes, to a certain extent. Because in 1924 we elected a Democratic governor. In 1932 we elected a whole Democratic ticket. In Natick, the lawyers who offered to help us were Democrats who wanted to take over the town. They did. The chairman of our strike [committee] became chief of police, a strike lawyer became town solicitor, his nephew became governor, and his cousin became sheriff of Providence County. Derrick stayed on after the strike to campaign for the Democrats.

I was practically alone in putting up a labor party ticket. I didn't like the Republicans or the Democrats. Reid helped. We put up a full state ticket, and a full town ticket for West Warwick.

Anyway, that was the beginning of Democratic Party rule. Some Italians I knew very well turned away from the Republicans. They became state officials under the Democrats.

Question: Didn't the strike help to create a new political movement, at least for you and a few others?

Nardella: Yes. Somebody from the Young Workers' League came out to bring a check, and invited me to a meeting, and I went. Then I joined, and in a few years I was in the Risorgimento Club in Providence. We were anti-Fascists. I spoke on street corners, bring a stand, jump up and talk to good crowds. And we led the support for Sacco and Vanzetti....

Edited and transcribed by Paul Buhle and James Celenza.

Notes

1. Susan Jaffee, "Ethnic Working Class Protest: The Textile Strike of 1922 in Rhode Island," (Honors

Thesis, Brown University, 1974), is a very informative and detailed discussion of the strike.

2. In the Natick mills.

3. The Italians, Mr. Nardella informed us, walked out of the mills to protest this discrimination just before the 1922 strike. They won the right to tenements on Main Street.

4. The ATW was helping to conduct a woolen weavers strike in Webster since the fall of 1921.

5. Dick was an ATW organizer.

6. McMahon was the president of the UTW, AFofL.

7. Reid was the leader of the Communist Party in Rhode Island.

8. Derrick was an ATW organizer.

9. Palmer, a silk weaver from Paterson, N.J., was the General Secretary of the ATW. The "minister" was probably A.J. Muste, the previous General Secretary, and the director of the Brookwood Labor College.

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The Mobilization of the Working Class Community: The Independent Textile Union in Woonsocket, 1931-1946

Gary Gerstle

In the early years of the Depression, a small group of Belgian trade unionists in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, launched their own industrial union, the Independent Textile Workers. Their goal, to organize all of the city's textile workers in a single, enduring union, had never been accomplished before. The majority of the workers were first or second generation French Canadians who had rarely overcome the strong anti-labor bias of their ethnic culture. Yet the Belgians had the advantage of a bold concept in union structure as well as skill and diligence as organizers. In time they attracted the French Canadians to their organization and the subsequent interaction between the policies of union leaders and the ethnic solidarity of the French-Canadian rank and filers produced an exceptional labor movement. By the early 1940's, most Woonsocket workers, as members of the ITU, had achieved substantial improvements in their working and living conditions. They had made Woonsocket into a vital working-class community, firm in its class identity and avidly involved in its many communal activities. No sooner, however, had they established their community than its foundations began to weaken. What follows is a summary of the ITU's appearance, development, success, and decline.(1)

When it appeared in 1931, the ITU differed in significant ways from the major textile union of the era, the United Textile Workers. Its motto, "one mill, one local," announced a strict industrial form of organization which refused to segregate workers along craft lines. An intensely democratic and anti-bureaucratic internal government gave the rank and file substantial control over most union affairs. The requirement that all union officers retain their regular mill jobs encouraged close relations between the leadership and the rank and file. The union regularly elected a few members to review the management of union finances, hoping to prevent the debilitating effects of sloppy or extortionate financial policies and unreliable benefits. Close attention to the

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