

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

mundane aspects of organization distinguished the ITU not only from the UTW but also from the major radical unions which had appeared among textile workers in the previous thirty years. The ITU's blend of lofty organizational ideals and hard-nosed administrative realism was one of the keys to the union's success.

The ITU's departure from the theory and practice of UTW unionism was deliberate. In 1931, the Belgian founders of the ITU had seceded from an ineffectual UTW local in Woonsocket, determined not to repeat UTW mistakes. Conditions in that year, though, were hardly conducive to the establishment of an independent industrial union. The founders had no support from other labor organizations or protection from unfavorable labor legislation. While exasperation with the UTW gave them a motive for secession, an earlier and quite different trade union experience gave them the confidence that their kind of union could succeed.

The founders were mostly skilled worsted mule spinners from Verviers, Belgium, a center of worsted and woolen manufacture. (2) They had been in the Verviers mills in 1906 when the employers tried to break rising working-class strength with a city-wide lock-out. The workers, however, had managed to forge a federation of Verviers textile unions representing almost 90 percent of the city's textile labor force of 17,000. The federation had effectively resisted the employers and finally forced them to capitulate. The workers had achieved more control over their laboring conditions in return for promising labor peace. This system of industrial relations prevailed in Verviers until the German occupation during World War I.

The ITU founders relied heavily on their experience as Belgian trade unionists. Their beliefs in the necessity of organizing all textile workers and in the possibility of succeeding independently of national unions grew out of their Verviers experience; so too did their self-assurance. They knew that the ability of textile workers to win significant and lasting control over their lives was more than a dream.

The presence of skilled Belgian trade unionists in Woonsocket was the critical factor in the emergence of an industrial unionism which antedated the CIO's Textile Workers' Organizing Committee in 1937. These Belgians remained in key leadership roles into the early 1940's, while actively seeking to broaden the union's participatory base. Elsewhere in the Northeast, native skilled workers prided themselves on their exclusive craft unionism and rarely reached out

to the unskilled. Divided by sex, age, ethnicity and skill, the masses of textile workers were notoriously difficult to organize. Significantly, the rank and file character of the ITU did not originate as a demand from below. In its first two years, the ITU remained small and marginally influential. Most of Woonsocket's largely French-Canadian textile labor force lacked trade union experience and remained deeply suspicious of all working-class organizations.

The attitudes and experience of Woonsocket's workers were powerfully shaped by French-Canadian culture. (3) For more than fifty years, French-Canadians had been settling in Woonsocket in large numbers. From 1880 to 1930, the numbers of first and second generation French-Canadians increased from 7000 to 25,143; by 1930 they comprised more than half of the city's population. The first settlers had been impoverished rural laborers looking for work in the textile mills of New England, but members of the French-Canadian elite, merchants, priests, and professionals, soon followed. Led by the clergy, they set up a network of institutions to insulate French-Canadians from American society and to preserve French-Canadian nationality and culture. The success of this mission depended on the survival--survival--of French-Canadian religion, language, and customs.

The circumstances surrounding the origins of the French-Canadian sense of national mission are of crucial importance. This sense grew in opposition to conquering English armies at a time when most French-Canadians lived in a rural, semi-feudal society in Québec. As a consequence, it managed to reject many of the ideals usually associated with the European Enlightenment and the English industrial revolution--democracy, individual rights, and material progress. It reaffirmed the primacy of the community over the individual, and the preservation of the community of French-Canadians in an Anglo-Saxon land became the major religious and secular concern. The flight of so many French-Canadians from their homes suggests that even in Québec, the sense of national mission was being eroded by economic pressures. Yet the land shortage which was disrupting traditional French-Canadian society prompted a threatened elite to vigorously reassert its leadership. Though they failed to halt the flow of emigrants, they did provoke an examination of ways of adapting traditional culture to new social and economic conditions. When French-Canadian priests arrived in Woonsocket, they already had a sharpened ethnic identity and considerable training in cultural survival. Their efforts there were aided by the

city's relative proximity to Québec, the large size of French-Canadian settlement, and the ownership of many mills by French capitalists. They were so successful that they practically insulated all of Woonsocket from American society. Throughout the 1920's, French was the language of Woonsocket streets. New, non-French immigrants would learn French before English.(4) Woonsocket became known as "La Ville la Plus Française aux Etats Unis."

The effect of this insularity on the class consciousness of Woonsocket workers was devastating. The Church joined hands with the French capitalists to create a very powerful Franco-American bourgeoisie. It strove for and achieved cultural hegemony. French-Canadian workers, it seems, cared less about improving their economic condition than about maintaining their French-Canadian culture. They accepted their subordination as individuals to French-Canadian communal authority, quietly submitting to the will of both Church and employer.

The lack of class identity among French-Canadian workers attracted the attention of contemporaries. Their alleged strikebreaking activity earned them the label the "Chinese of the East." But to focus on their strikebreaking habits diverts attention from their powerful but ambivalent sense of ethnic solidarity. Although it often insured their complete submission to French-Canadian leadership, it also produced defiance of any external authority threatening to the French-Canadian community. Thus the character of a French-Canadian community really depended on its attitude to its local authorities. In Woonsocket, the continued quiescence of French-Canadian workers hinged on two interrelated factors: the degree of isolation of the French-Canadian community and the legitimacy accorded the Franco-American elite.

There were signs in the 1920's that the insularity of the French-Canadian community was breaking down. Although still at very low levels, the intermarriage rates of second and third generation French Canadians began to climb. The New England cotton textile industry entered a depression in the early twenties from which it never recovered. The Church's continuing insistence on the primacy of survival sounded hollow when a large cotton mill shut down in 1927, depriving 1600 Woonsocket workers of their jobs. Many members of the French-Canadian elite began to sense the futility of their mission but, unable to jettison it, engaged each other in a vicious ideological battle. The battle grew out of a dispute between

a Woonsocket parish priest and the Irish-controlled diocese in Providence over the right to use French in Woonsocket parochial schools. A small group of militants supported the priest in his desperate determination to preserve the French-Canadian culture. They severely antagonized a larger group of moderates who could not justify defiance of a properly-constituted Church authority. Known as the Sentinelle Affair, after the newspaper of the militants, it consumed much of the elite's energy and resources from 1924 to 1929. It limited the elite's ability to lead and compromised its legitimacy.

The pressures of maintaining power and hegemony dissipated the cohesiveness of the elite more rapidly than assimilative forces eroded the ethnic identity of the French-Canadian masses. Whether the elite could ever have recovered its former position became, in 1929, a moot point. The Depression intervened, giving a new immediacy to non-ethnic economic priorities. The effects of the Depression on Woonsocket industry were severe, aggravating the already strained relationship between the masses of French Canadians and their traditional leaders. At this juncture, the ITU appeared and appealed for the support of Woonsocket workers. From the beginning, its success hinged on its ability to mobilize the French-Canadian working-class community.(5)

The union diligently catered to its potential French-Canadian constituency. The first ITU Constitution was published in French and English. Union meetings were often conducted in French. The ITU carefully avoided any confrontation with the Church. It demanded that all union members subordinate their politics to purely trade-union aims. Although a number of the founders were socialists, that fact was formally denied. The preamble to the ITU Constitution declared the ITU's desire to live in harmony with all classes, and ITU rhetoric contained no references to the inherent nature of the struggle between capital and labor, or to the need to appropriate the means of production.

Despite its diligence, the union was not greeted with any groundswell of support. It led several victorious strikes but then the employer counterattack began. Unable to defend its members against employer reprisals, the ITU had little recruiting success. The early years of the union were so tenuous that had it not been for the Norris-LaGuardia Act of 1932 outlawing yellow-dog contracts, the ITU might have perished altogether.

The first major breakthrough for the ITU occurred during the general textile strike of September, 1934. Across the nation, 400,000 textile workers left their jobs to demand higher wages, union recognition, and an end to the "speed-up" and the "stretch-out." ITU members voted to strike in sympathy with UTW demands. This decision became the ITU's opportunity to demonstrate its character and potential power. ITU members quickly shut down all but one of the city's textile mills and Woonsocket's unorganized workers began rallying to this small but dynamic union in their midst. When the Woonsocket Rayon Company refused to stop its operations in compliance with union demands, violence erupted. For four days, Woonsocket workers fought company guards and National Guardsmen in the city streets. Throughout the ordeal, the ITU retained its composure and angry, unorganized workers began swelling its ranks. By the end of the strike, ITU membership had doubled from 1500 to 3000. It doubled again in the period 1934 to 1936 and reached 10,000 by 1939. Eighty to ninety percent of the textile workers in the Woonsocket industrial vicinity had been organized and the ITU emerged as the first major industrial textile union in the Northeast. A careful study of these years reveals that it had successfully tapped the French-Canadian working-class community, thereby enlisting a vibrant ethnic solidarity in the service of a labor organization. Although the union outwardly appeared to be purely French Canadian (even the union songs were in French), it included among its ranks workers from Woonsocket's many other ethnic groups. Under "French cover," the ITU had transcended ethnic and skill prejudices and nurtured a genuine spirit of class unity among its members. This constituted one of the union's most important achievements and proved crucial to its continued growth and vitality. The union attributed its unity to the strength of the ITU's industrial and democratic structure. But just as significant were the informal but powerful ways in which the ethnic solidarity of the French-Canadian majority influenced the union.

The importance of this informal unifying process to the union's development can be seen in the spontaneous evolution of the ITU from an industrial to a general labor union. In 1934, a group of bakers petitioned for and received a local charter. They were followed the next year by a local of three hundred rubber workers. By 1939, the ITU also included barbers, electricians, retail clerks, and public works employees in its ranks. (6) There is no evidence to indicate that the initiative for this development came from ITU leadership; nor is there evidence to suggest

that it encountered any opposition from ITU members. The most plausible explanation is that it was a natural by-product of the mobilization of the French-Canadian community. The Independent Textile Union was renamed the Industrial Trades Union, and by 1943 the ITU had more than forty locals and 18,000 members.

As the ITU encompassed more and more of the workers in Woonsocket, its perception of its role changed. No longer content to fight for recognition and better working conditions, it assumed the responsibilities of a community organization. It became active in city and state politics, advocating a series of reforms ranging from day-care centers for working mothers to public housing projects. More importantly, it constructed a vast recreational, educational and social welfare program for its own members. By 1940, the union had become the center of the workers' lives, both on and off the job. The rapidity of this development again suggests the importance of the cultural ties that already existed among many workers. The persistence of a French-Canadian ethnic solidarity meant that a community did not have to be forged; rather it had to be mobilized and educated.

The vitality of the ITU community was impressive. Every Labor Day was a virtual municipal celebration, culminating in a parade in which each local presented a float. Annual outings to the beach and more frequent picnics regularly drew thousands of union members. Communal leisure activity was central to their lives. In 1942, the entire union, in defiance of mill owners and the Department of the Army's war efforts, took a one-week vacation. ITU president Joseph Schmetz argued simply that workers, like soldiers, needed a rest.

It is important finally to assess the political nature of the union. If some of the decisive influences in the union's origins and development were "foreign," a crucial element in its emerging consciousness was its identification with America. The ITU encouraged the acculturation of its members. It offered citizenship classes, required all union officers to know English, and sponsored "Mrs. and Miss ITU" beauty contests. It led its members into participation in local and state politics. In the late 1930's, the ITU was the major force in Rhode Island's Non-Partisan League. For many French-Canadian workers, membership in the ITU meant accepting America as their home; and the cumulative discontent of their years of harsh labor became anger towards those who had denied them the right to enjoy the life promised

by America. (7)

The ITU provided not only a focus for discontent but also a vehicle for transforming it into effective struggle. The activity of the ITU during the 1930's is a record of the efforts of Woonsocket workers to better their lives and the workers' distinction lies in their determination to do it collectively. They, like their fellow workers across the country, demanded their own social enfranchisement and used the strength of their industrial union to get it. (8) The achievements of the ITU on the eve of World War II were impressive. Their contracts were among the most progressive and comprehensive for textile workers anywhere, including union recognition, closed shops, set workloads, forty-hour work weeks, time-and-a-half pay for overtime work, worker price committees to establish piece rates, seniority practices, grievance procedures, and paid vacations and holidays. Its social welfare concerns led the ITU to initiate its own cooperative housing projects, life insurance plans, and a subsidized medical clinic.

During the 1930's and early 1940's, the ITU encountered virulent opposition from political parties, the Church and industry. While these opponents were wrong in branding the ITU "communist," they were right in perceiving the radical nature of the ITU challenge. The broad participatory character of its internal government had radical implications when applied to American society. The demands of ITU members for decent and more secure lives assaulted the prevailing middle-class notions of the rights and entitlements of American workers. By acting collectively as a class they posed a radical challenge to the prevailing power structure in American society.

Ultimately, though, the ITU's radicalism, founded in practice but not in theory, was tenuous. As the success of the ITU became undeniable, the union received recognition and accommodation from its opponents. Many ITU members for the first time partook of the fruits of American civil society. Moreover, during the war years the leaders of the union were increasingly drawn from the ranks of the French Canadians. The comfort of their relative prosperity and the prestige of their newly acquired status as union leaders blunted the radical edge of their class consciousness. (9) Their identification with America, which had helped liberate them from the oppressive aspects of their cultural heritage, now led to a fervent attachment to war patriotism. They made few attempts to assess their new circumstances critically.

The ITU had never developed a radical theory and during the years 1943-1946, this failure became a fatal liability. Since 1931, the ITU had declared its desire to live harmoniously with other classes, but only after World War II would it deny a decade of class struggle and proclaim its "spirit of cooperation and fair play [as] the last best hope of American unionism." (10) The ITU maintained its numerical strength for another seven years, but there were signs of stagnation and decay. Few new programs were instituted and participation in many union activities declined. By the mid-1950's, the exodus of Woonsocket's woolen and worsted mills eliminated the largest component of the union's membership. Today the union lingers on, dispensing pension checks to the few remaining veterans. Few Rhode Islanders know about it.

It is unlikely that the history of the ITU could have been different. The lack of a radical ideology was a tactic made necessary by the problems of severing the connections of the French-Canadian workers to their traditional elite. The energy consumed and the tactics demanded by that struggle made the task of breaking through to a revolutionary conception of society much more difficult. Had the war not intervened or had a coherent left ideology been available from the CIO or from a political party, the story might have been different. Given the circumstances that did prevail, the ITU could get no further than social democracy in one city. Yet this was an impressive achievement. The rapidity of the union's growth and development among workers who had no prior trade-union experience and for whom ethnic consciousness took precedence over class consciousness was remarkable. The conjunction of an unusual industrial union blueprint designed by Belgian trade unionists with a French-Canadian community solidarity produced a highly successful labor movement in Woonsocket. From 1934 to 1943, the ITU made a major contribution to the national working-class surge which jolted American society to the left.

#### Notes

1. This summary is taken from a long research paper, "The Independent Textile Union of Woonsocket, Rhode Island," which I wrote in 1977. Most of the union's records burned in a fire in 1972 but fortunately a few key documents have survived. I relied heavily on newspaper articles and on interviews with people who were involved with the ITU in the 1930's

and 1940's as members, legal counsellors, or the children of union officers.

The task would never have been accomplished without the generous cooperation of Lawrence Spitz, general-secretary of the ITU, 1937-43. Mr. Spitz made available his two volumes of scrapbooks on the ITU covering the period 1939-43. He granted me a long interview, responded readily to my written queries, and sent me a lengthy critique of my original research paper. A man of immense energy and intellect, he is capable of giving a day-by-day oral history of his union during the years of his involvement. It is one of the great omissions of this article that his name does not appear.

Many people have helped me with my research and analysis and I thank them for their valuable criticisms. I must specifically express my debt to Gary Kulik for first alerting me to the rumored existence of the ITU and then always being available to offer his support, skill, and intimate knowledge of Rhode Island labor history.

2. The journeys of these mule spinners (the mule was an intricate machine designed for fine spinning and traditionally required skilled male labor) from Verviers to Woonsocket were long and varied. They found their way there because the French and Belgian capitalists who owned many of the city's worsted mills used European technology and needed skilled European labor.

3. My account of French Canadian culture and its effect on Woonsocket society is heavily indebted to Richard Sorrell, author of "The Sentinelle Affair (1924-29) and Militant Survivance: the Franco-American Experience in Woonsocket" (Ph.D. Dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1976).

4. This was one of the findings of Bessie Wessel Bloom, An Ethnic Survey of Woonsocket, Rhode Island (New York, 1970, a reprint of the original published by the University of Chicago Press, 1931).

5. Unfortunately, Sorrell took his study of Woonsocket no further than 1930 and said nothing about the ITU. His findings, however, strongly suggest the loss of elite legitimacy.

6. For those members who did not work in factories or mills, the ITU set up craft locals. But the union continued to define a person's work not by his/her occupation but by the nature of his/her employment. Thus electricians employed by a mill were

members of the mill local while electricians doing outside contractual work had their own craft local.

7. Joseph Schmetz, the chief Belgian cadre, held the presidency of the ITU from 1931 to 1943 and Lawrence Spitz was general-secretary from 1937 to 1943 (Spitz was born in Providence, Rhode Island, and the only major union figure who did not emerge from the Woonsocket mills). Together they dominated the union's Executive Board and were able to exercise considerable personal influence over the rank and file. They designed policies to insure that the ITU would not become a mechanism for French-Canadian ethnic survival. This meant reinforcing the function of French-Canadian solidarity as a bridge to class unity. The difficulties of accomplishing this process through "Americanization" are obvious; quick, indiscriminate attempts at "Americanization" might either have met with wholesale rejection by the French Canadians or else have prematurely enervated their solidarity as a means of building a working-class organization.

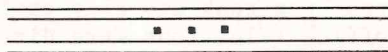
If the dominance of Spitz and Schmetz seems to violate the democratic character of the ITU it must be pointed out that the rank and file continually returned them to office (elections were direct and annual) largely because of their proven leadership qualities. Schmetz was the man most responsible for securing the existence of the union and for implementing its original structure. Spitz had no peer as an orator or in terms of sheer intellectual ability. He was the key architect of the ITU's system of industrial relations and community involvement.

8. The similarity of demands and tactics between the ITU and organized workers elsewhere naturally raises the question of the relation of the ITU to the CIO's Textile Workers' of America (formed in 1939 from the Textile Workers' Organizing Committee). For a while, the two organizations discussed the possibility of merging but by 1943, it was clear that the ITU would remain independent. The two became competitors and then bitter enemies, because of the pettiness of ITU leaders and the duplicity of Emil Rieve, president of the TWUA. But there was also a strong sentiment among the ITU rank and file against joining a national union. This sentiment arose partly from the lingering parochialism of French-Canadian workers and partly from a genuine fear of being overwhelmed by a large bureaucratic organization.

9. The ITU had modified its anti-bureaucratic framework in 1936 because it deemed full-time leader-

ship necessary to accommodate its growing size and power. The bureaucratization of the ITU is an interesting and complicated development similar to the one described by Peter Friedlander in his book The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936-1939 (Pittsburgh, 1976). Initially, Friedlander writes of the local's bureaucracy, "it was not a structure external to the drive for organization, but was rather the formalization and institutionalization of that very drive itself." (p. 96) In Woonsocket, the institutional separation of leaders from the rank and file only became politically significant once the ITU had emerged as a major union and its officialdom found itself "courted" by labor (CIO), industrial and state powers in Rhode Island. No doubt the death of Joseph Schmetz (the chief Belgian cadre) in 1943, the departure of Lawrence Spitz for the army in the same year and their replacement by rank and filers affected the union. But it was the coincidence of this change with two others--the recognition received by the ITU and the advent of war--that insured the union's political transformation.

10. ITU News, 2 January 1947.



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## Work and Community in Saylesville

**Kate Dunnigan**  
**Richard Quinney**

"Rhode Island being the birthplace of cotton manufacturing in America, it is only natural that it should likewise lead the way in the development of the bleaching, dyeing and finishing of cotton goods." "The industry owes much," as The Book of Rhode Island expressed it, to the company that became the Sayles Finishing Plants, Inc. The first and major plant of the company was established in 1847 along the Moshassuck River, adjacent to Central Falls, in the area that became known as Saylesville.

The first bleachery at Saylesville was equipped to bleach and finish muslins and shirtings. With the development of fine cotton goods and an advancing technology, the company rapidly expanded. By the turn of the century the company was operating four large units, the Sayles Bleacheries and Glenlyon Dye Works, at Saylesville, and the Glenlyon Print Works and Glenlyon Yarn Dye Works, at Phillipsdale. The company was making an appreciated contribution to the textile industry well into the twentieth century: "The management of the Sayles Finishing Plants, Inc., has consistently devoted its energies towards the increased consumption of cotton fabrics and every new demand finds the company prepared to do its share in the fullest development of its possibilities."

From 1918 to 1928 the Sayles Finishing Plants sponsored a company magazine called the Sayles News. Published "by and for the employees," the eight-page paper was distributed at the gates on the evening of the first and fifteenth of each month. "OBJECT: That we may become better acquainted with each other and with our work."

The Sayles News reported on a wide range of events in Saylesville, covering happenings within both the plant and the community. There was, in fact, little distinction between the community and the workplace. Reports ranged from the scores of the company bowling and baseball teams to the visits of Santa Claus at the Sunday School of the Sayles Memorial Church, from a story about the main office beach party to the first ice skating of the season on Bleachery Pond, from the