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One Hundred Years: the Proletariat in Search of a Class



Photograph Source: Massachusetts militiamen with fixed bayonets surround a parade of peaceful strikers. The Lawrence textile strike was a strike of immigrant workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts – Public Domain

Apparently, the super-indoctrinated, Trump-voting American working class, dulled by the mass media and the “American dream”, has changed very little since the crushing of the great textile strikes that swept The United States in the 1920s. Not an iota of class-consciousness has it absorbed. (Nor has it been explained and offered to all wage earners in sufficient doses.) For also the middle classes, crushed by an ever more desperate, an “end of times” form of capitalism, has not yet grasped that they too are now part of the

American proletariat. In that respect it seems that the old, often criticized word proletariat is still quite adequate.

Over ten years ago, on an extended visit to Asheville, North Carolina where I grew up, I ran into the novel *Call Home the Heart*, written by the self-professed Communist, Olive Tilford Dargan, also from Asheville. Her book tells the story of the Gastonia, North Carolina cotton mill strikes, today largely forgotten. The violent textile worker strikes that subsequently swept through North Carolina in 1929 are forgotten, too. The number of spindles in Gaston County, NC, had grown from 3000 in 1848 to 1,200,000 in 1930, making it first in the South, and third in the nation. The town of Gastonia swelled from 236 in 1877 to 30,000 in 1930, primarily from the influx of mountaineers from the Great Smokies in search of jobs in the new factories. Although blacks made up 15 per cent of the population of the county, few were allowed to work in the mills.

Call Home the Heart, Longmans, Green and Company, 1932—published under the pseudonym of Fielding Burke—is a proletarian novel depicting the role of mountain folks in the Gastonia, North Carolina mill strike, a novel which became a milestone in the written history of the American labor movement.

The Loray Cotton Mill, Gastonia's largest, was the first in the county to be owned and operated by "Northerners" seeking the benefits of a "poor white" labor pool. In 1926, southern textile workers, some of whom were children of 10 and 11, earned an average of \$15.81 for a 55-hour week compared to the \$21.49 for a 48-hour week earned by their New England counterpart. The Loray Mill was also the first in the South to undergo new "scientific management" techniques. The "stretch-out" (increasing the work-load per operator by speed-ups rather than technology) was introduced in the Loray Mill in 1927, and soon became widespread. In early 1929, the anger of thousands of textile workers exploded in mill towns throughout the region. Five thousand workers, mostly women, in Elizabethton, Tennessee, led the wave of walk-outs in March, 1929, that quickly spread to the Carolinas. The Gastonia strike at Loray Mills is the most famous of that movement.

The Loray plant, owned by the Manville-Jenckes Company of Rhode Island, went out on strike, reflecting the tensions rising from the industry's rapid development in the South after World War I when northern capitalists took over the southern mills to exploit cheap labor, an early form of the exportation of jobs. The Loray Mill (Low-Ray) was the first in the South to undergo the new speed-up techniques forced on the worker. That exploitation of labor ignited the anger of textile workers until walkouts began. The strike

in the Loray Mills was also the most violent: scabs, arrests, beatings, workers' evictions from plant-owned houses, and court trials of leaders. The red brick buildings, the chain-link fences and the little houses in Loray Village in Gastonia remained for many years afterwards, the symbol of labor's defeat.

Mill owners and state law enforcement officers crushed those strikes so viciously that subsequent attempts to organize labor in the North Carolina textile plants were unsuccessful. Yet the history of the strike remains, recorded in novels like those of Dargan and in the writings of one of the organizers of the Gastonia strike, Vera Buch Weisbord, a Communist and member of the National Textile Workers Union, NTWU. No less than Marxist writings, such histories of the battles for social justice throw light on the eternal struggle between labor and capital. The history of the clash in Gastonia offers the perfect setting for an epic film or a social play of an insurrection. All the classic characters are present: evil capitalist mill owners, exploited workers in hot dusty factories, tiny ragged children and their emaciated mothers in the square wooden houses, strikers, scabs and strike-breakers and both dedicated and corrupt union leaders.

Spontaneous and disorganized from the start, sporadic and likewise unsuccessful textile strikes continued for some years. I found this testimony in the book by John A. Salmond, *The General Textile Strike of 1934 , From Maine To Alabama*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London:

"WE DIDN'T HAVE NO BACKING.... WE SHOULDN'T have done it. The South hadn't even begun to organize well by then," remembered Kasper Smith, former textile worker and striker. "What happened in 1934 has a whole lot to do with people not being so union now." The veteran organizer, Solomon Barkin, made much the same point at a 1984 symposium commemorating the strike's outbreak. The strike's leaders had had little "experience with leading large strikes. There was no money to sustain the effort; organizational preparation was practically nil; there was little support from other unions." The AFL generally had failed its local union bases, especially those "which had been spontaneously formed. They were essentially left to their own resources during the strike. There was no national direction, no widespread public or union support."

The strikes did not generate a national strike, but rather there were thousands of essentially local efforts, often with differing impulses and aims. This was especially true of the cotton mills in the South, the strike's epicenter, where the workers' sacrifices were

the greatest, the repression the most severe, and the consequences of failure the most long-lasting. Today, the general strike and the Yellow Vests in France today reminded me of the labor struggles in the 'good old American South' one hundred years ago, events which could be a foretaste of the future in the USA.

One objects that the world and society have become so complex and multilayered and people's interests so diverse that old 'class' categories no longer apply and that only in certain places and under certain circumstances are old class divisions clear. Some critics maintain that the labels proletariat and bourgeoisie and capitalist are obstacles, that they alienate a section of the population such as the middle class in the USA today, who might comprehend their shared identity with the traditional working class if addressed in a different language. Moreover, although those masses once identified by the word proletariat do constitute a class, they themselves are seldom aware of it. To become a class of action, the proletariat, i.e. wage earners, require leadership, something those furious striking textile workers did not have.

During the witch hunts of native Communists in the 'fifties, Dargan wrote in a second novel: "A young black Harvard graduate makes a speech at a Fourth of July celebration: Suppose that some great disaster were to sweep ten million families out to sea and leave 'em on a desert island to starve and rot. That would be what you might call an act of God, maybe. But suppose a manner of government that humans have set up and directed, drives ten million families into the pit of poverty and starvation? That's no act of God. That's our fool selves actin' like lunatics. What humans have set up they can take down....Whoever says we've got to have a capitalist government when we want a workers' government, is givin' the lie to the great founders of these United States...." — A Stone Came Rolling, page 161, Olive Tilford Dargan

A widely traveled Radcliffe graduate, Olive Tilford Dargan lived most of her life in Asheville, NC. Acclaimed poet and novelist and in Who's Who, she was blacklisted during the McCarthy Communist scare. Not only witch hunters labeled her writing propaganda, but also other writers because, they charged, she hobnobbed with Communists. She said she lost her friends because of her red novels and that during the McCarthy scare she had to hide out.

This was off the pages of the Asheville history I knew. No relation to Thomas Wolfean Asheville. In a 1935 interview with the Raleigh News & Observer, Dargan said: 'I am more interested in humanity than literature. My interest in literature is probably in my

effort to put humanity into it.’ Writing about the workers’ struggles in the South last century Dargan claimed that for her literature was secondary to social commitment—‘They lie closer to real experience than the flutter of an eyelid which has occupied bourgeois writers for years and is considered by standpat critics as art.’

To the end of her life at one hundred years of age, Dargan wrote that she felt stymied by guilt because she wrote poetry when the real issues of the day called her to another job. She even saw good in a violent and scheming mountain folk lacking in any kind of class-consciousness. She claimed the sequel to her first novel—*A Stone Came Rolling*, same publisher, same pseudonym—was even more proletarian, while she continued to struggle with conflicting feelings about writing poetry and her social responsibility.

As compared to divided but class-conscious French workers striking today, American wage earners are unfortunately amorphous and blunted in their ignorance, the staunchest flag-waving defenders of the capitalist system that exploits them, so unstructured and ill-organized that they do not constitute a class in the political sense of the word. Though a person who works for wages, blue collar or middle class, is a member of the working class, his wage earner status does not make him a class-conscious revolutionary. Most certainly, capital’s defeat of labor is one of the greatest victories of American capitalism.

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