

NEW YORK archives

\$9.95

FALL 2025

Volume 25 | Number 2



Diverse Borough

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Textile Strike | Worldly Canal | State Socialists

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28

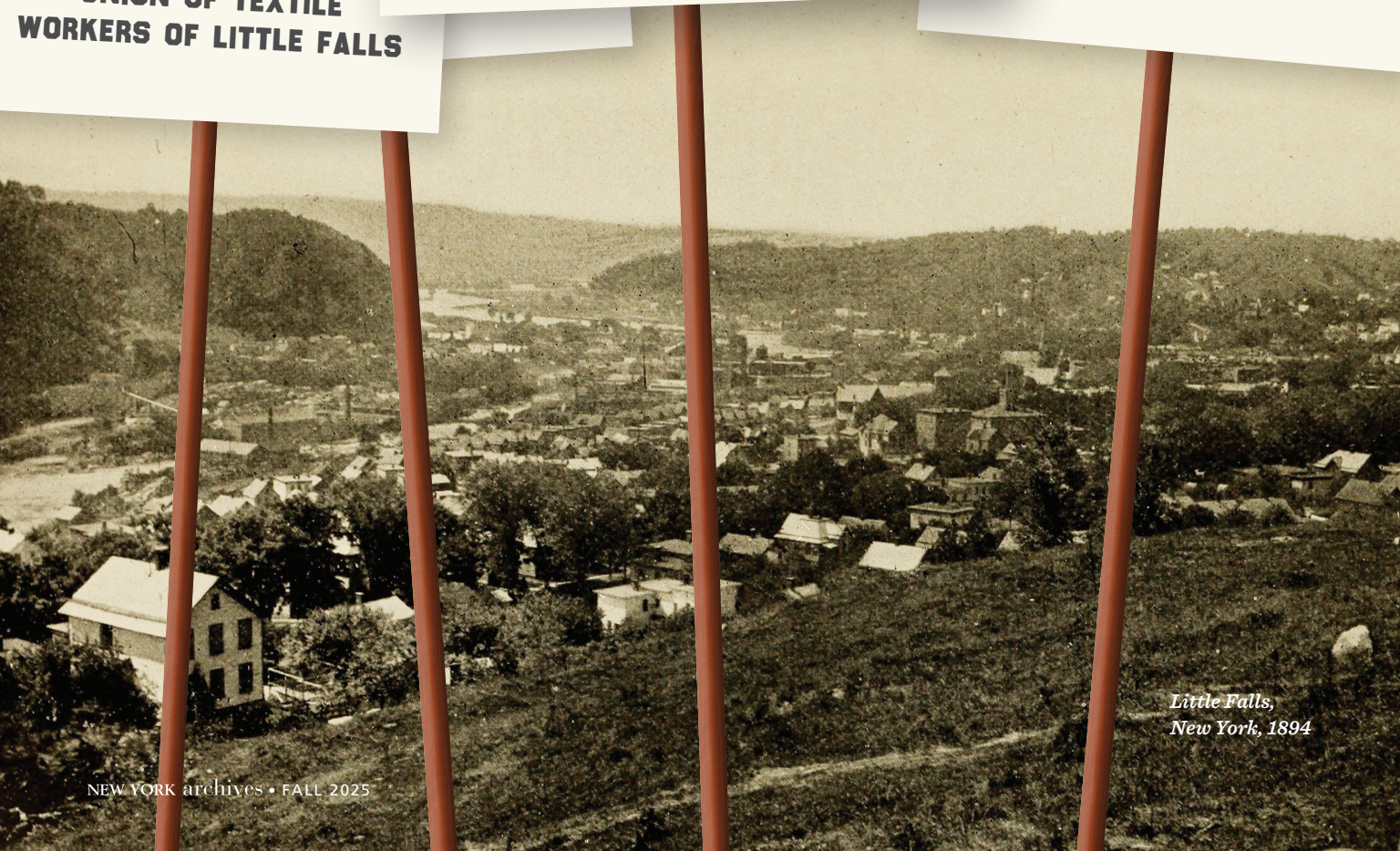
THE LITTLE FALLS TEXTILE STRIKE

BY J.N. CHENEY

Workers fought back
when factory owners
cut hours and pay
following mandatory
protections enacted
after the Triangle
Shirtwaist disaster.

**IWW
LOCAL
NO. 801**

**NATIONAL INDUSTRIAL
UNION OF TEXTILE
WORKERS OF LITTLE FALLS**



*Little Falls,
New York, 1894*

The troubles that came about in Little Falls, New York, were ultimately a response to the aftermath of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. After this horrific event, the New York State government enacted two measures to ensure nothing like that would ever happen again. First, they established the Factory Investigating Commission to review conditions of factories and mills throughout the state. They also enacted the Jackson Bill, also known as the 54-Hour Bill, which capped the hours that women and children could work per week at 54 hours, along with imposing other restrictions. Factory owners responded to this cut in hours by cutting workers' pay. This was the primary reason that textile workers—mostly immigrant women from Eastern and Southern Europe—in Little Falls went on strike on October 9, 1912.

Poor Conditions

Workers pointed to pay cuts as their reason for striking, but working and living conditions for the immigrant population were also very poor. Some reformers, like Helen Schloss, felt that these conditions required the attention of the city government. Schloss, a Russian immigrant, a nurse, and a socialist, was employed by the Fortnightly Club, an affluent women's group in the city, to investigate living and working conditions to aid in the fight against tuberculosis. What Schloss found was abysmal. As laid out in her collection of stories, *Tales from the Rocky City*, she saw no protective equipment at the Phoenix and Gilbert mills, toilets consisting of barrels over open holes that discharged into the

river, and workers being verbally and physically abused by the factory foremen. Living arrangements were even worse. Bathrooms were shared by upwards of twenty people, buildings had poor ventilation, and people sick with tuberculosis shared beds with others who were not infected. The owners of these dwellings often neglected to make repairs when problems occurred; at least one death resulted from the negligence of the tenement owners. When the textile workers officially went on strike, Schloss was one of the first to support them.

Schenectady Mayor George R. Lunn and the Socialist Party were among other early supporters of the strike. When the Socialists arrived in Little Falls to speak in support of the strikers, Police Chief James Long arrested many of them on the charge of violating a rarely enforced city ordinance prohibiting public speaking without a permit. Though not waning in their support of the strike, the free speech issue became the preeminent concern of Lunn and his cohort for most of the duration of the battle. When Lunn's arrest was made known, prominent Socialists Eugene V. Debs and Daniel De Leon expressed their support for the Little Falls strike in writing.



Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, 1911



Above: George R. Lunn, undated



Right: Helen Schloss behind bars, 1913

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IWW Involvement

The mass arrests of the Schenectady Socialists left a gap in the strike's leadership, which led to the involvement of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW helped formally organize the strikers by establishing the Local No. 801—the National Industrial Union of Textile Workers of Little Falls. The IWW likewise helped set up a strike committee that laid out the union's formal demands and organized the picket line. Helen Schloss helped set up a health clinic for those on the picket line. The demands presented to the mill owners were as follows: "The restoration of the weekly wage rate of sixty hours and [a] ten percent additional increase in pay. For night workers, we demand a sixty hour a week schedule and an hour at mid-night for lunch. We also demand that all strikers shall be taken back without discrimination."

The strike in Little Falls exemplified an early use of what became known as the Mohawk Valley Formula, a strikebreaking technique popularized during the Remington-Rand Strike of 1936–1937 in nearby Ilion, New York. Not all parts of the formula were used, but some tactics were used extensively against the strikers, such as discrediting unions leaders as "agitators"; forming a large police force; and using various forces to make the

union's struggle seem hopeless, in this case a sham-deal made between the mills and the American Federation of Labor (AFL), a rival of the IWW.

The Little Falls Police Department (LFPD), along with private security hired by the textile mills, continued to antagonize the strikers. Claims of the strikers' violence were often overblown by media sympathetic to the police and mill owners. Police reportedly harassed strikers routinely in hopes of causing a scene. In fact, the biggest act of violence was ultimately carried out by the police. On October 30, the LFPD and the private security raided the strike headquarters at the Slovak Gymnast Union (Sokol), after having



*Helen Schloss,
1912*

COURTESY OF ROBERT J. ALBRECHT



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Strikers in front of Sokol Hall. Matilda Rabinowitz is the fourth figure from the left in the front row.

1911

MARCH 25

Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City kills 146 workers

1912

JUNE 30

Factory Investigating Commission established

OCTOBER 9

Little Falls textile strike begins

OCTOBER 24

Local No. 801 union formed

STRIKE AT LITTLE FALLS, N.Y.

For weeks a one sided battle has been going on in this place between 1500 textile workers, mostly women and children and the power of the city made worse by the presence of the company's hired thugs and detectives.



Beginning of a Police Made Riot.

All the horrors of jails and clubbings are every day occurrences. In spite of all the suffering they have undergone the strikers are standing firm and ask for your support.

Strikers and sympathizers have been arrested for citing quotations from the Bible, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of U. S. and other documents regarded in Little Falls as Fiction.



A Six Dollar a Week Slave.
Only a Mother.

**HELP
IS
NEEDED**



The Majesty of the Law.
Off to Jail.

Send all Contributions to Matilda Robinowitz, Sec. Little Falls Defence Committee,



Textile Strike 1912

P. O. Box 458, Little Falls, N. Y.



Strike organizer Ben Legere

already attacked strikers assembled outside of the mills. They damaged instruments, ripped up the union's charter, threw women off the steps of the building, and finally, beat and arrested organizers, including Filippo Boccini and Ben Legere. During the raid, Chief Long also sent deputies to arrest Helen Schloss at the post office, where she was awaiting a message from Schenectady. They threw her down the front steps of the building.

This raid again caused a gap in union leadership. Matilda Rabinowitz, a Jewish-Ukrainian immigrant relatively new to union work, was sent to Little Falls by the IWW to lead the strike committee. Rabinowitz established a defense league for the strikers that took on what the strike committee didn't, namely sending out mass calls for financial support from sympathizers

Matilda Rabinowitz of the IWW sent out calls for financial support.

1913

OCTOBER 30

LFPD raid on the Sokol Hall results in arrests of strikers

DECEMBER 24

NYS Department of Labor launches investigation

JANUARY 3

Settlement is reached meeting all the workers' demands

JANUARY 6

Strikers return to work



Above: *Strikers and supporters preparing food in the strike kitchen.*

Below: *Schenectady Socialists joined the Little Falls strikers.*



and fellow IWW members. These funds were used for purposes like establishing a soup kitchen and legal fees. Bill Haywood, a major figure in the IWW, also came to Little Falls for a short while to help draw attention to the strikers' struggle and to call for acts of solidarity. Another big-name supporter of the strike was Helen Keller, a socialist and IWW supporter. Keller sent a letter of support and a check for \$100 to the Strike Committee. Other institutions, such as the People's Church in Schenectady, raised nearly \$1,500 for the strikers, in addition to contributions from IWW branches and other sympathizers throughout the country.

Great Hardship

The strike continued into December. Even with financial contributions, the Little Falls workers faced great hardship. With Christmas coming, the union and the Socialists arranged for temporary housing for families with sympathizers in Schenectady to allow them to celebrate the holiday. Police and private militias antagonized the workers and their children as they marched to the train station and barred them from speaking once they got to the station, but once the kids were on board, strikers sang and cheered in celebration. Multiple accounts reported that these children were in good hands during that holiday season.

The State Board of Mediation and Arbitration, within the New York State Department of Labor, initiated efforts to reach a settlement in this strike in early November. On December 24, they launched an investigation, interviewing strikers and investigating the living and working conditions of the mill employees and the claims of police brutality. After three months of struggle, picketing, marching, working on solidarity campaigns, and enduring the cold of winter and repeated harassment from the police and the media, a settlement was finally reached on January 3, 1913. All of the workers' demands were met, and they returned to work the following Monday, January 6.

Fight Continues

The battle wasn't over. After the settlement, the fight simply shifted from the streets to the courtroom. Mayor Lunn, Filippo Boccini, Ben Legere, and others still faced trial for charges ranging from violating the city ordinance on public speaking to inciting riots to first degree assault. Lunn was ultimately able to avoid any extended prison time with aid from New York Governor William Sulzer. Boccini and Legere, however, weren't as lucky. They both did time at Auburn Prison.

Troubles still remained for the textile workers and the City of Little Falls, even after victory. Mill owners reneged on parts of their agreement, which delayed many workers from returning to their posts, despite the resolution stating there would be no retaliation from the mills. The issue of living and working conditions was shown to require a concerted effort from the city government to address, which it did only in the most superficial ways, such as implementing a "clean up day." Wages, even with

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A poster used to promote subscriptions to the *Industrial Worker*, the publication of the IWW.

the push back to 60 hours' pay and the ten percent increase, were still insufficient for workers and their families. There was still much work to be done in addressing these problems. The Little Falls Textile Strike has been overshadowed by the Bread and Roses Strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and the Paterson Silk Strike in New Jersey, but that doesn't erase the historical impact of the Little Falls Strike. This strike brought radical unionism and the fight against exploitation and capitalism so prominent in much of the country to Little Falls, it brought the grander fight between the IWW and the AFL to the city, and it revealed the hidden radical history of the Mohawk Valley. ■

To learn more about the records of the Factory Investigating Commission at the New York State Archives, see the finding aid here:



Periodicals available online in databases like New York State Historic Newspapers, Fulton History, JSTOR, and the Marxists Internet Archive provided general information on the strike. The New York State Library, Union College, Utica University, and Alfred University provided access to newspapers like the *New York Call*, the *Schenectady Citizen*, the *Saturday Globe*, and the *Little Falls Evening Times*. The Little Falls Historical Society holds news clippings, letters, and photos that were integral in this research, including a copy of the Little Falls Strike Bulletin, clippings from the *Little Falls Evening Courier*, a poster from the strike committee, and other such archival materials. The New York State Archives maintains the records of the Factory Investigating Commission, including correspondence, financial records, press clippings, and research files. Other writings and photos were accessed in the personal collection of Robert J. Albrecht, retired SUNY Alfred Distinguished Teaching Professor Emeritus and a long-time Little Falls resident who also studied the strike.

J. N. Cheney is an independent historian focusing on the labor movement, radical politics, and community action in the Mohawk Valley. He is the author of the upcoming book *Women, Immigrants, and the Working-Class Battle in Little Falls, New York: The Textile Strike of 1912–1913*.

For more on labor strikes in New York State, see:

- "Teachers United" by Dennis Gaffney, Winter 2008
- "Strike!" by Stephen Cernek, Winter 2013

For more on the Factory Investigating Commission, see:

- "Made in New York" by Robert A. Slayton, Spring 2003
- "The Legacy of Frances Perkins" by Antonia Petrash, Fall 2021