

## DEATH AND THE INDUSTRIAL GRUNT

SENTIMENTS OF THE AMERICAN TEXTILE WORKER FROM 1901–1935

*By Trevor Walker*

For years psychologists have fiddled and toyed with notions of internalized worth within the greater human context: seeking to answer what, precisely, “worth” is. Those who assume that the questions surrounding work-ethic, morale, and internalized worth of workers are new to our own era are sad victims of naivety. From 1901, when the United Textile Workers of America was founded, to 1935, when the National Labor Relations Act passed, the notion of labor unions fundamentally altered the perceived worth of American textile workers, changing their thoughts on life, and subsequently, their thoughts on death. The *hope* offered to workers by unified (read: union-ified) workforces helped alter the notion that death, disease, and despair in the workplace are not necessary evils, but are rather ailments that can be prevented and avoided.

Historical accounts and commentaries depicting the conditions plaguing the working class near the turn of the twentieth century are diverse and abundant. Based on these sources, Alan Brinkley, Professor of History at Columbia University, advances the idea that the striking of labor unions in the early twentieth century were causal forces in the advent of

healthy working conditions because of the influence strikes had over local government. He specifically notes that many strikes were stopped only when federal troops were involved.<sup>1</sup> Along a somewhat different path, Dr. Jacquelyn Hall and Dr. Vincent J. Roscigno both argue that the change in working conditions did not necessarily originate with third parties, such as unions, and their activities, but rather within the mindsets of the workers themselves. The advent of unions was critical in the development of workers' rights, but if one does not look to the workers for the source of workers' rights, the significance of the era can be missed.

In a review of historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's work, Jacqueline Jones summarizes that laborers all took pride in their work, struggled endlessly to provide for their families, and flexed more strength than their national union counterparts.<sup>2</sup> It seems to be suggested, somewhat paradoxically, that the whole is less than the sum of its parts. This is evidence that it was not just the labor unions that brought about the changes in life, but rather the workers themselves.

Vincent J. Roscigno, Professor of Sociology at Ohio State University, argues that because "paternalistic control and the possibility of severe sanctions were the reality in most mill workers' lives, workers had little resources or political power on which to draw, and the formal organizational presence of a union, to the extent it was ever existent, was typically so only after worker radicalism was formulated."<sup>3</sup> To him, the union did not have the "formal organizational presence" to defend the first protests of workers. The union could not offer any hope to the workers initially because the first instances of backlash against united workforces was most severe. If an organizational presence, *viz.* union, existed only after worker radicalism sprouted, the ability of the union to be the cause of worker's rights is called into question, demanding the investigation of alternate explanations of causality.

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*. (New York: McGraw-Hill Co., 2004), 478–479.

<sup>2</sup> Jacqueline Jones, review of *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*, by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *The American Historical Review* 94 (December 1989): 1481–1482. (JSTOR, accessed October 20, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Vincent J. Roscigno and William F. Danaher, *The Voice of Southern Labor: Radio, Music, and Textile Strikes, 1929–1934*, vol. 19 of *Social Movements, Protest and Contention* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 122.

A somber newspaper article from 1888 depicts a tragic inquest into the perceived level of worth in the average American worker. On the Friday of August 3, 1888, a scorching fire seared a tailor's shop located on Chrystie Street, New York City. The circumstances surrounding the fire were confusing at best. Anthony Saffer, a local marble worker, watched as the fire took its toll on twenty workers. To his horror, he saw the workers lugging their tailored clothes to the window and dropping them out, only to see them ignite on their way to the street below. The fiery clothes landed and obstructed the entrance to the building, one of the only means of escape. Contemporary newspapers paraphrased Saffer as saying that had the persons in the building attended to their own safety instead of bothering about the clothes, they could have escaped.<sup>4</sup> The fire did not discriminate between the men, the women, or even the four-year-old child. They were "all Polish Jews, and employers and employed worked, ate and slept in the crowded rooms of the dingy tenement."<sup>5</sup> Further inquiry into the Chrystie Street's fire indicated that better building codes would not have necessarily stopped the carnage that unfolded. The problem did not wholly lie within the building, but rather within the mindset of the workers.

In an inquest into the events of that frightful day, judge and jury alike tried to decipher why the twenty had to die. Abraham Schneider argued that the workers were killed by inhabitants of neighboring buildings when they closed the shutters, effectively trapping the workers in the inferno.<sup>6</sup> What is suspect, however, is Mr. Schneider's involvement in the fire. As the inquest soon unveiled, his testimony was riddled with vested interests: he was the overseer in this textile operation. Michael Nathan, an inhabitant of a local building, told the court he opened his shutters to save trapped workers, but was rebuffed by the workers who told him to "get away and mind his own business [because] Schneider had ordered them to close the window to save his stock."<sup>7</sup> John Stevenson, the janitor of the scorched

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<sup>4</sup> *New York Times*, "Chrystie Streets Fire: Inquest into the Tragedy Begun-Property Valued More than Lives," August 10, 1888, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com) (accessed September 27, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Associated Press, "A Death Trap," *New York Times*, August 4, 1888, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com) (accessed November 1, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> *New York Times*, "The Shutters Were Closed," August 14, 1888, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com) (accessed October 20, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, "Chrystie Streets Fire."

building, made it clear in the same article that the workers could have safely jumped into neighboring buildings, assuming the shutters had been open. Because the neighboring shutters were opened, the whole tragedy can be seen to be hinged on the workers' perceived level of worth.

Surprisingly for the era, the untimely death of twenty workers was widely publicized. With scant building codes and limited legal protection, the workers took the problem into their own hands. Within fifteen days of the Chrystie Street tragedy, individuals sent letters to legal authorities citing horrible working conditions throughout the greater city. One letter described a building initially intended to be a stable and storehouse for carriages. The problem, however, was that it had since been transformed into a tailor's shop. The building was constructed of brick, four stories tall, but never outfitted with fire escapes. The lower two floors functioned as stables and storehouses, complete with the dried food that horses loved, but the kindling workers feared. The upper two floors housed 150 textile workers. Mr. F. Boehm, the building owner, made it clear that he "was not making arrangements to put any [fire escapes] in the building" because no one had told him the building must include them.<sup>8</sup>

With the Chrystie Street's fire fresh in mind, Coroner Levy and those sympathetic to the families who lost their loved ones both agreed that something must be done to avert future disaster. An investigation into a nearby building found that the workers "felt very ill at ease... that their lives are placed in jeopardy on account of the present state" of it.<sup>9</sup> Noting such cases, the jury deliberated and found that, while no foul play was involved in the Chrystie Street's fire, there was gross negligence inherent in New York building codes. They claimed, "We believe that the present laws relative to fire escapes...are inadequate to practical application and recommend that the same be revised so that proper protection be afforded them in case of danger."<sup>10</sup> While somewhat timid, the push for alteration of working conditions after the Chrystie Street's fire exemplifies the determination of the working class. Though fearing for their job and their life, the

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<sup>8</sup> *New York Times*, "The Law Needs Revision," August 18, 1888, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com) (accessed October 20, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

workers mustered the courage to make known the woes affecting them. No strong union united their efforts. Hope for a better life united their efforts.

The tragedy that unfolded that fateful August afternoon was by no means unheard of in the era. On January 12, 1893, there were twenty-three fires reported within New York City over the course of nineteen hours.<sup>11</sup> A few months later, another fire ripped through a tailor shop, much to the effect of the one on Chrystie Street years before. This time, four people were killed and eight were injured. The nationality of those killed and injured was practically uniform. Of the four dead, three were Russian immigrants and of the eight injured, five were Russian immigrants. On the body of one dead worker, Kiva Boox, a receipt was found from the purchase of a passage ticket sent to Russia for his wife.<sup>12</sup> With such carnage confined to members of the working class, it is clear that their lives were predisposed to specific hardships. The life of the American worker was precisely what prompted the desire for labor unions. The hope for a good life without the protection of an external, third party agency seemed dismal at best. Anything was better than succumbing to the conflagrations searing the shops of New York City.

Textile workers and others involved in the tedious cotton industries all felt similar pressures and pains inherent in their work. In the Northern cotton mills of 1899, the labor force was composed of 45.1% women over the age of 16 and 6.7% children under the age of 16. While somewhat striking, these percentages cannot compare to the 33.4% of women aged 16 or older and the 25.0% of children aged 16 or younger in the Southern cotton mills. In 1900, the ratio of native to foreign born worker was roughly 1:2, with foreigners amounting to 67.9% of the work force in the North. What was worse, however, were the hours imposed on the workers: 62.2 hours per week were required of cotton mill workers in 1901, compared to all other manufacturing jobs which required an average of 58.7 hours per week. Adding to the list of unfortunate circumstances, the average cotton worker made only 10.4 cents an hour, compared to 21.9 cents an hour of all

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<sup>11</sup> *New York Times*, "One Day's Fires In This City" January 12, 1893, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com) (accessed November 1, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> *New York Times*, "Caught in a Death Trap: Four Workers in a Sweatshop Killed and Many Hurt" June 14, 1893, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com) (accessed September 27, 2007).

other manufacturing jobs in 1901.<sup>13</sup> These statistics paint the bleak portrait of the American cotton industry worker.

At its formation in 1901, the United Textile Workers of America (UTW) sought to protect the workers. Its leader thought that “without unions and without the legal and administrative apparatus that now provides a basic level of industrial health and safety, millhands were at the mercy of dangerous machinery.”<sup>14</sup> For the average Northern cotton mill worker, the prospects for life and longevity seemed scant. When 51.8% of the Northern cotton mill workers could not vote due to age or gender restrictions and 67.9% of the workers were foreign born, despair was rampant. Without the political clout to positively affect Washington, the workers put their hope for better life in the union. “The union was good to us,” reminisced Mary, a child working in the Massachusetts textile mills, “they helped all they could.”<sup>15</sup>

Unable to push for social change by the traditional American method of electing sympathetic leaders, the women and children were forced to endure the conditions plaguing the workplace. Disease, infection and catastrophe hit without mercy. “Sickness is the worst,” bemoaned one worker, “when you drive on eight looms all the time in busy season you get sort of ‘spent’ and you catch cold easily...some of the girls take sick awful sudden and never get back for their pay envelopes—they go that quick sometimes.”<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, the common cold often turned out to be the least of the worker’s worries. Byssinosis, or “Brown Lung,” inflamed the worker’s airways and constricted their breathing, clouding their lungs and coating them in a fine layer of cotton dust. “Monday morning sickness” resurfaced every week after the brief respite Sunday offered. The sickness persisted for years and years until their own inhalations caused their suffocation.<sup>17</sup> These

<sup>13</sup> Herbert J. Lahne, *The Cotton Mill Worker*, vol. 3 of *Labor in Twentieth Century America*, ed. Henry David, Harry J. Carman, and Herbert J. Lahne (New York: J.J. Little and Ives Company, 1944), 288–294.

<sup>14</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et. al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 81.

<sup>15</sup> Gertrude Barnum, ed. Leon Stein and Philip Taft, “The Story of the Fall Mill River Girl,” in *American Labor, Self Portraits: From Conspiracy to Collective Bargaining* (1906; repr., New York: Arno Press Incorporated, 1971), 30.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 29–30.

<sup>17</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Like a Family*, 82.

conditions were in desperate need of reparation, and the hope of the workers was placed in national unions to meet this end.

From 1914 to 1918, Europe trembled under the burps of machine guns and whirring of biplanes. At the same time halfway around the world, the United States shook with chants and cries demanding that the labor wrongs be righted. The American Federation of Labor saw its membership soar to five million souls during this period, while the UMW experienced similar growth: between 1914 and 1920, 70,000 new members joined their ranks. When the men who comprised most of the union went to fight Europe's war, those left behind filled their places. The populations who joined in droves were the unskilled women and young men—those who had been relatively unprotected in decades past—which fundamentally altered the composition of the union.<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 brought about an unprecedented shift in the balance of power. Within the course of a year, the national electorate nearly doubled with the inclusion of women. The number of votes increased from 18,252,940 in 1916 to 26,219,352 in 1920, while the overall voter turnout decreased roughly 12 percent, from 61.6% to 49.2%.<sup>19</sup> If women had not voted in this election, the voter turnout statistic would most likely fall to a meager 30% based on available demographics. While women did not vote *en masse* immediately, many flexed their new voting might right from the start. What was once a sizable population of disenfranchised voters two decades before had suddenly become a large and vocal voting bloc. Worth was added to 45.1% of the Northern cotton industry work force, a population who never felt it before. America had finally begun to recognize their existence.

The Roaring Twenties served as the incubator heating already stressed owner-worker relations. Many decades of neglect brought the two to picket lines and battlegrounds. Scattered strikes dotted the landscape of the 1920s, with particular ferocity in 1929. Union fever had struck and countless workers had joined the unions across America. The workers were tired of the catastrophes hitting them every day. To be sure, organized labor was

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 186.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*. (New York: McGraw-Hill Co., 2004), A-30.

still illegal, calling into question the true effectiveness of the union. During a typical strike in the South, it is very important to “remember that the UTW could offer no material support. Its treasury was practically empty; fewer than ten paid organizers covered the entire south.”<sup>20</sup> Hoyle McCorkle, a millhand at the time, lamented the fact that “[The union] told us they’d feed us. But they didn’t.”<sup>21</sup> The physical manifestation of unions did little to alter the status quo. In 1929, one third of the total strikers refused affiliation with a particular union. The strikes occurred with the workers taking the lead but they “receiv[ed] little in the way of organized support or resources from the unions.”<sup>22</sup> The wrongs of the working world were enough motivation to bring the workers to the picket lines.

The shockwaves sent from the collapsing of the U.S. Stock Market in 1929 reverberated through the working class. Massive unemployment, despair, and distress wrapped the seemingly good feelings of the 1920s in woeful nostalgia. Without jobs, money, or a future, life seemed desperate. The election of Franklin Roosevelt brought hope to the working class because his “impact on southern mill-worker consciousness via radio fireside chats was direct, altering perceptions of opportunity and providing some legitimacy to workers’ claims of injustice at the hands of mill owners.”<sup>23</sup> Roosevelt captured Southern hearts by signing the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933. This law offered “ambiguous assurances,” as Flamming puts it, that unions would have the right to organize. “Hardpressed millhands throughout America and the South seized upon the law as a mandate for unionization. ‘Roosevelt, he told ‘em to organize’ recalled one of Crown’s workers, voicing a common attitude in the mill village.”<sup>24</sup> Roosevelt was seen as the liberator, the one man in Washington who offered hope. In a stunning turn of events, the workers finally achieved uni-

<sup>20</sup> Hoyle and Mamie McCorkle, interview by James Leloudis, July 11, 1979, Southern Oral History Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 27–28, quoted in Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Like a Family*, 347.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Vincent J. Roscigno and William F. Danaher, *The Voice of Southern Labor: Radio, Music, and Textile Strikes, 1929–1934, vol. 19 of Social Movements, Protest and Contention* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 79.

<sup>23</sup> Roscigno, *The Voice of Southern Labor*, 32.

<sup>24</sup> Douglas Flamming, *Creating the Modern South: Millhands and Managers in Dalton, Georgia, 1884–1984* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 196.

fied clout: “Never had the mill owners’ credibility sunk so low; never had workers dared to voice such discontent.”<sup>25</sup> The average worker’s view of self dramatically changed in the decades leading up to 1935. Their hope for a better life came to fruition under Roosevelt’s watch. They were finally able to understand their worth and integral placement in the greater scheme of the American workforce. Unions did not achieve this end: the diligence of the workers searching for a better life did.

The tumultuous decades initiating the twentieth century brought unprecedented social shifts and inversions in power. Never before had the United States been so swayed by the political clout of the working class as it was in the 1930s. With the dramatic shift in power spurred by the working class, it must follow that the worker’s nature changed. The hope offered to the working class from the years 1901 to 1935 was not based on the union itself, which often proved to be cumbersome and ineffective, but rather the idea of the union uniting all workers under the common banner of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The workers acknowledged that they needed “the rights...if something was wrong, to be able to stand up and say that you’re not doing me right.”<sup>26</sup> This sentiment reflects the sense of worth eventually obtained by the workers. While the legalization of unions was critical to the development and progression of working-class rights, it was the workers—the immigrant men, the single women, the oppressed children—who had hope in organized labor forces that pushed for social rectification and a better life.

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<sup>25</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Like a Family*, 323.

<sup>26</sup> Flamming, *Creating the Modern South*, 218.

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