CHAPTER X

TEXTILES

The boundary between the clothing industry and that which produces fabrics is in some places shadowy—as in sweaters and knit goods, hosiery, cloth gloves, and lace. It is not chiefly on account of this kinship, however, that we shall make a brief excursion into the textile industry, but rather to illustrate a characteristic of the new unionism that is rapidly emerging—the fact that it is inter-industrial as well as industrial. Just as the concentration of capital and credit brings allied industries under a more nearly unified control, so the advances of aggressive labor organizations are forcing them to look for practical harmony, and consequently for a more centralized administration, among closely related industrial groups. Since the textile mills furnish the material out of which clothing is made, it would be an obvious advantage for the clothing unions if the textile workers were also strongly organized and ready to coöperate with them. For the same reason the garment unions have much power to help organization in the textile industry.

The value of the annual product of the textile group is exceeded only by the industries which the census places under the heading of "food and kin-

dred products." Its total capitalization was in 1914 about two and a quarter billions,[1] representing a larger investment than any other industrial group except iron and steel and food products. In number of wage-earners it leads all others; in 1914 its 5,942 establishments gave employment to 950,880. A high percentage of the mills is owned by corporations—some of them enormous corporations of the sort popularly called "trusts." Most of the enterprises have been highly profitable; their shares have advanced rapidly, are much sought after and are not easily obtainable.

The characteristics of the industry are not the same as those of the ready-made clothing trades. Here large-scale production, in factories representing heavy investment in plant, machinery, and power, is the rule. Of the cotton mills the largest group, 768 in number, had each in 1914 an annual product valued from $100,000 to $1,000,000, and there were 187 establishments with an annual product of over $1,000,000 each. The woolen mills also were large, with 455 producing between $100,000 and $1,000,000, and 84 over $1,000,000. The silk establishments average somewhat smaller. In both woolen and cotton mills, 35 per cent of the wage-earners worked in factories employing over 1,000 persons each; in the silk establishments, nearly 50 per cent of the workers were in mills employing from 100 to 500 each.

While the forces of capital are strongly entrenched

[1] Abstract of United States Census of Manufactures, 1914.

in the textile plants, therefore, the unions are not faced with the same obstacles as in the clothing industry. Territory here may be difficult to conquer, but once it is won it can be more easily retained. Home work is rare. Sweatshop competition is not always waiting around the corner for the first relaxation of vigilance. New establishments cannot spring up easily where they are least expected. Old ones cannot die so suddenly. A shop successfully organized means a leap to immediate power.

Although some seasonal variation is apparent in the textile establishments, it is not so severe as in the clothing shops. The amount of work available for those employed is less at some times than at others, but the number wholly out of work is comparatively small. The cotton mills in 1914 employed in the dullest month 94 per cent of those working in the busiest month; the silk mills 88 per cent, and the woolen mills 87 per cent. Some of this variation must be attributed to the industrial depression consequent to the beginning of the war.

The labor force in textiles shows more similarity to that in the clothing industry. With the installation of modern machinery, the processes have become easy enough so that with a few exceptions no high degree of skill is required. Immigrants who have never worked in factories can learn their trade without difficulty in a few months. Women and children can be employed in large numbers. In the northern mills foreign-born workers predominate. In Lawrence, Mass., the greater part of the employees are

South-Italians and French Canadians.[2] Then follow, in order of numbers, Poles, Lithuanians, Americans, Syrians, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Russians, and Ukrainians. In Passaic, New Jersey, the Poles predominate; there are also large groups of Italians, Hungarians, Rumanians, South Slavs, Americans and smaller groups. Paterson shows much the same mixture of races, with the addition of some skilled workers from France. In Philadelphia many of the workers are American-born; about one-fifth are Jewish. The cotton mills of the South employ a larger proportion of American born, including many children. The following table shows the percentages of men, women, and children under 16, as they were in 1914:

	Men	Women	Children
Cotton	53.4	38.2	8.4
Silk	38.5	54.3	7.2
Woolen	54.5	41.7	3.8

The industry as a whole has a higher percentage of child labor than any other in the United States, and employs many more children in all than any other.

For several years numbers of the foreign workers, especially the South Italians, were transients, saving all they could out of their wages and then returning to their native lands to profit by the lower price levels in Europe. This element naturally was not easy to organize, and did not exert effective pressure for higher wages or better conditions. The

[2] From statement of union officials.

tendency has recently decreased, and emigration fell to a low level during the four years of the war. It was never so great in the textile centers as in the iron and steel and mining regions. Now that prices abroad have risen to or above the level in the United States, the chief cause of impermanency is removed.

Wages in the textile mills long remained low, and have always dragged behind the trades in which labor was well organized. Hours were long and working conditions bad. Occupational diseases are prevalent, especially those due to dust and lint which many of the workers must constantly inhale. Housing in most of the textile centers has been unsightly, inadequate, and insanitary.

The oldest national union in the industry is the United Textile Workers of America, a conservative organization affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. Since it has jurisdiction over all textile operatives it is in a sense industrial, but its industrialism is incomplete, as it does not admit engineers, machinists, clerks and other incidental employees. As a matter of practice it has retained the methods of craft unionism, paying special attention to the more highly skilled English-speaking groups. It has been unable to bring about modern conditions or gain general recognition until recently, and the dues-paying membership which it reported to the American Federation of Labor in the spring of 1919, 55,800, is but a small fraction of those eligible.

Spontaneous general strikes, in the nature of unorganized rebellions against existing conditions, broke

out soon after 1910 in Paterson, Lawrence, and other centers. They were fought with great bitterness and caused much public interest. Members of the I. W. W. went into the cities after the trouble had begun and led the strikes, but neither the I. W. W., on account of its loose methods of organization, nor the United Textile Workers, on account of its conservatism, was able to hold the strikers after the trouble was over. Both unions continued to maintain locals in Paterson, and the United Textile Workers retained a few members in Lawrence, but these locals were small and ineffective. The Workers' International Industrial Union also maintained in recent years small and unimportant locals in textile towns.

In the late winter of 1918 the United Textile Workers inaugurated a nation-wide campaign for the 48-hour week, hoping to extend the influence of the union and gain membership. The eight-hour day movement, formally begun in 1877 and already successfully consummated by the majority of organized labor, had received a great stimulus by the favorable attitude of the British and American governments during the war, based on investigations showing that workers usually produced at least as much in eight hours as they did in a longer workday. This favorable background was supplemented by the fact that after the armistice a depression was felt in textiles, and the mills were not eager to keep their people through long hours.

In Lawrence an understanding was soon reached

by some of the companies and the 200 or more members of the United Textile Workers. The mills consented to grant the 48-hour week, but only at the same hourly rate which they had formerly paid for 54. This involved an actual reduction in weekly wages, and meant no financial sacrifice for the employer. Unions almost invariably, when demanding shorter hours, specify that the same weekly rate shall be paid as before, since shorter hours would not be worth winning if the slender pay-envelope must be reduced in proportion. In this case, however, the union consented, doubtless because it felt that a strike in the dull period would be difficult to win. It probably intended to ask for higher wages later on, when business should revive and a strike would be more inconvenient to the manufacturers. This was a cautious policy, of the type characteristic of conservative unionism.

The unorganized workers, however, did not understand this policy, and resented bitterly its results. When early in February the mills put in the pay envelopes a slip stating that the workng week would be reduced, but that wages would be reduced correspondingly, they walked out and an unorganized strike involving at different times from 18,000 to 28,000 wage-earners was the result. During the slack period their pay had fallen so low that they were unable to accept still smaller remuneration, in the face of the enormous living costs. This consequence might have been foreseen by the union if it had been in closer touch with the mass of

workers, or had taken the pains to consult them and gain their cooperation.

No sooner had the strike broken out than the officials of the union, seconded by the conservative central labor body of the city, antagonized the unorganized strikers by calling them "Bolsheviki" and refused to support their demands for the old wages. The charge was echoed by officials of the American Federation of Labor, and even by the Secretary of Labor of the United States. The press bitterly assailed the supposititious revolutionary aims of what it termed the "undesirable foreign element" and the whole city administration and police force was mobilized against them. The strikers were not without sympathizers, liberal members of the public coming in to help them organize, raise funds, and plead their case.

For a long time the unions in the clothing trades, especially the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, had been looking with concern at the weakness of the textile operatives, and hoping something could be done not only to improve their condition but to bring them within the ranks of aggressive labor. Here was an opportunity. A spontaneous strike, needing experienced guidance, had been repudiated by the very union which for long had been, for one reason or another, unable to make much progress in the industry. The Amalgamated therefore sent organizers and contributed funds to the strikers. Other radical unions and many members of the public also contributed.

The strike, like any mass movement giving vent to long suppressed sense of wrong, had many dramatic aspects. Three former clergymen of American birth, young men who had decided that they could best serve their ideals by assisting the labor movement, came to Lawrence almost as soon as the strike began and took a leading part in the work. They and the other speakers urged the strikers not only to commit no violent acts, but to meet any attacks of the police and mill guards with folded arms—to carry out literally the principle of non-resistance. As a result, in spite of great provocation, no outbreaks occurred. The police broke up peaceable meetings, clubbed unresisting pickets, arrested hundreds of strikers against whom no evidence could be brought, and picked out the leaders, including the young ministers, for special persecution and physical abuse. Over a hundred of the strikers were returned soldiers. One of these, a volunteer who had spent several months in the trenches, ventured to appear on the picket line in his uniform. He was clubbed by the police, arrested, clubbed again in the police station until he was insensible, called "dirty foreigner" and "Bolsheviki," and sentenced to jail.

Each of the eleven nationalities involved elected a relief committee, and the chairmen of the various committees formed the General Relief Committee. Family tickets were distributed to the most needy, four soup kitchens were maintained to care for those who did not receive family tickets, coffee stalls were

opened for the morning picketers, and the "Strikers' Cross" was organized for medical relief. In the tenth week of the strike, when funds began to run low, the Italians, who had been without relief for a week, voted not to accept tickets for another three days. An instance of the sympathy which the strike aroused is that of an Italian in a neighboring city who, with a wife and six children to support, was injured by a fall. Friends collected thirty-three dollars for him, but he sent it to the Lawrence strike committee.

When at length starvation began to stare the strikers in the face, sympathizers in other cities offered to care for their children. The children were smuggled out of Lawrence in moving vans, strict secrecy being preserved through fear of police interference. Week after week this exodus went on.

An offer of arbitration was made, the arbitrator suggested being one of the best known manufacturers in the state, but the mill managers would neither consent to arbitration nor meet representatives of the strikers. At length it seemed as if the end had come, and the workers were on the point of surrendering. The police were parading machine guns about the streets, and the city marshal announced that he had withdrawn public protection from the strikers. Immediately thereafter one of the organizers was taken at night from his hotel room by a band of masked men, carried out into the country in an automobile, beaten severely with clubs, and threatened with hanging. Whether or not the

threat was in earnest, the ruffians were frightened away by the sound of an approaching car; their victim escaped and, half clad and injured as he was, wandered about until he found a farmhouse and was taken to a hospital. The news of this brutality so enraged the strikers that they resolved never to compromise, and a few who had actually entered the mills came out again.

By this time orders had begun to increase, and the mills, wishing to end the trouble, announced a 15 per cent. rise in wages, 2½ per cent. more than the workers had asked. Some of the largest establishments also consented to deal with the new union's shop committees. The strikers, after their sixteen weeks' struggle, voted to stay out one day more as a proof of their solidarity, and went back to work in a body with the consciousness of victory and faith in their new organization.

In the meantime, spontaneous strikes, most of them under the auspices of independent unions, had broken out in Passaic, New Jersey, and other textile centers. Paterson workers sent a delegation to the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' office and applied for a charter. The Amalgamated, however, decided that they did not wish to burden their existing offices with this immense new task, and so encouraged the organization of an international textile union with which they could cooperate. The result was a convention held in New York on April 12th, which founded the Amalgamated Textile Workers of America.

On account of their experience with the class struggle, the delegates did not have to be convinced of its existence. They adopted a constitution the preamble of which was borrowed because of its aptness from the constitution of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers.

This preamble is, perhaps, revolutionary doctrine, but it is not the sort of violent revolution which the press and administration of Lawrence thought they were fighting. Efficient organization and education are the main themes; there is nothing about revolt or coup d' état, but simply the expression of a purpose to make the working class ready, in the fullest sense, to assume control of production.

In its first six months the new union won strikes, not only in Lawrence, but in Passaic, Hudson County, and Paterson, New Jersey, and in New York City. At the end of them it had a total membership of 50,000, and a paid-up membership of 40,000. Although a number of locals formerly belonging to the United Textile Workers have come over to it, the larger part of its membership has come from formerly uncultivated territory, or from small independent locals.

A recent event of some significance is a simultaneous strike of textile workers and clothing workers in Utica, New York, under the auspices of the two Amalgamated unions. This event is merely symbolic, since there are few centers where the two industries exist together.

The aim to educate the working class and

strengthen the union as an instrument of service has already found expression in various ways. Three journals are published—a bi-weekly in English, and monthlies in Italian and Polish. A Young People's League with study groups in English and economics has been formed. In Lawrence the union has founded a cooperative bakery and a retail store, and others are planned.

The structure of the union is of course completely industrial. In places where an entirely new organization was effected, the basis is the shop committee, rather than the craft local, as in most older unions. Where the shop contains workers of only one craft, its committee naturally takes care of the craft interests; where it is composed of several crafts, a representative of each is elected to the committee. The chairmen of the shop committees form the executive board for the plant or the city, as the case may be. The workers of each city are organized into one local. In some places meetings of workers in the same craft throughout the city are held, but they are unofficial, thus reversing the old order in which the craft group was officially recognized and the shop committee had no legal place in the union machinery.

The structure itself insures a maximum of democratic control, but further safeguards exist in the constitution. Care is taken that representation in the conventions shall be proportionate to the size of the locals, and a referendum of the general membership is obligatory for election of the officers nominated by the convention, for amendments to the constitution, and for choice of a city for the convention. The initiative is allowed for a proposition to change the meeting place or to amend the constitution. The General Executive Board may invoke a referendum on any subject.

The struggle in Lawrence was merely an example on a large scale of the sort of opposition the union has met everywhere. In Paterson it has had difficulty in getting permits for meetings and in keeping its papers and headquarters out of the hands of the police. A hall which it finally leased for a term of years was bought by a prominent member of the Chamber of Commerce, who caused the fire exits to be boarded up so that meetings there would be illegal. Such obstacles, however, are usually overcome in the long run.

In the meantime the United Textile Workers have been progressing with their organizing campaign, especially in the cotton mills of the South. It is interesting to see that wherever the Amalgamated becomes strong, the employers urge their workpeople to leave it for the conservative union, but that where the Amalgamated has not penetrated, as in the South, the United encounters just as bitter opposition and finds as great difficulty as the radical union in establishing its right to free speech and freedom of assembly.

The competition between the Amalgamated and the United Textile Workers will furnish a valuable test of the effectiveness of the new unionism, as de-

veloped in the clothing trades, to accomplish the difficult task of organizing a great industry where large-scale production rules and capital is strongly in control. So far the old unionism has failed to make much headway in it, but the conditions are now more favorable than before, and it is certain that the employers, if they fear the growing strength of the radical union, will hasten to come to terms with the conservative one. Whether the vigor and democratic efficiency of the new union will suffice to overcome these obstacles remains to be seen.

The occasion of the Lawrence strike is an illustration of the comparatively weak points of the old unionism. A preoccupied concern with immediate policy, a lack of democratic connection with the mass of the workers, and an extreme readiness to assume hostility towards them in order to preserve the good will of the employer and the public official were there evident. Another illustration, perhaps a better one, is the subsequent strike in Paterson. There the workers strongly desired the 44-hour week, and voted to demand it—among them the members in good standing of the United Textile Workers. The demand was made in due order. The United officials, pursuing their usual policy of conciliation, agreed with the employers to submit the question to the National War Labor Board.

In the proceedings before the Board the officials assumed, as is their custom, that they represented all the workers, although as a matter of fact only a small number were members of the United Textile

Workers. The War Labor Board handed down a decision, early in the summer, granting the 44-hour week, but postponing its adoption until October. With this decision the workers were not satisfied, and a large number, members of the Amalgamated, voted not to accept it, but to strike for an immediate 44-hour week on August 4th. Since the Amalgamated had not consented to arbitration and had not been represented in the negotiations, this action involved no conceivable breach of faith.

As soon as news of this decision reached the United members, extreme dissatisfaction at once arose: it was apparent that the conciliatory action of their officials, adopted without the active assent of the members, had left them behind the rival union. Their officials saw the danger, and tried to reopen the case by begging the manufacturers, on the ground of the action of the Amalgamated, to grant the 44-hour week at once. The employers, however, as usual underestimating the danger of a successful strike, refused to do so. The United officials then appealed to the War Labor Board for a revision, but the Board naturally replied that the officials of the United in submitting the case had assumed responsibility for carrying out the decision, and that there was no sufficient ground now for changing the award. The United officials then adopted a threatening attitude toward their members, telling them that every means of discipline would be used to see that the award should be executed and that no strike should occur.

The Amalgamated members struck as they had voted to do, and it soon became apparent that they had the power to win. The United members, feeling that they had been led into a compromise which they did not sanction, struck also. The United officials thereupon expelled the members in question, thus vindicating their good faith with the employers and the War Labor Board by sacrificing the union. The strike was won, and of course most of the expelled members joined the Amalgamated.

Here was a case where the old union, relying on conciliation and governmental support rather than upon the strength of its own membership, was led into a compromise which the new union, by its aggressiveness and closeness to the rank and file, proved to have been unnecessary. The case is peculiarly interesting because all the parties acted in good faith throughout, according to their understanding of the situation. It may perhaps be said, on the one hand, that the officials of the United should have secured the sanction of their members for arbitration, or, on the other, that the members should have felt themselves bound by the action of their officials. But the significant fact is that such conflicts between the rank and file and the officials frequently arise in the old unions, and are almost a necessary consequence of their failure to provide for a fuller measure of democratic control. In any case if the United members had not struck, the prestige of their union among the other workers would have received a heavy blow which in the long

run might have injured it as much as their own defection.

If we can draw any inference from the Paterson strike, it is that when the economic situation of the workers is favorable, the structure and tactics of the old unionism are likely to give way in active competition with the new unionism. It is possible that when the situation is less favorable, the reverse would be true. The Lawrence strike, however, illustrates the danger of underestimating the power of the workers in conditions that seem highly unfavorable. A prediction as to the eventual success of either type of union would, if this analysis is sound, rest chiefly upon one's estimate of the ability of labor, in the long run, to rely chiefly upon its own economic power.

A powerful aid to the growth of the Amalgamated Textile Workers will be its amalgamation with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, decided upon at the 1920 convention of the latter organization. The young union has shown its vitality, and the older one is now ready to join with it formally.