The elusive Ellen: Reconstructing the life of Ellen Dawson and the world around her.

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Abstract: This thesis is a life and times biography of Ellen Dawson (Kanki), 1900-1967, a working class Scottish woman who became a leading communist labor activist in the United States. As a young textile worker in Barrhead, she was influenced by the events of Red Clydeside, perhaps the most turbulent period of labor unrest in Scottish history. After World War I, she and her family migrated to Lancashire, where she worked first as a spinner and then as a weaver. In 1921, she lead her family to the United States, where she went to work in a textile mill on the outskirts of New York City. In the mid 1920s, she was a leader in three of the most important American textile strikes of the period – Passaic, New Jersey in 1926, New Bedford, Massachusetts in 1928, and Gastonia, North Carolina in 1929. In 1928 Ellen Dawson became first vice president of the newly formed National Textile Workers Union, the first women elected to a national leadership position in an American textile union. She also served briefly on the executive committee of the Communist Party U.S.A., but was expelled from the party because her primary concern was with the plight of American textile workers, not party dogma. Because of her radical activities, efforts were made by the U.S. Labor Department to revoke her U.S. citizenship and have her deported. She was saved with the assistance of the American Civil Liberties Union. She abandoned her radical activities in the early 1930s, working as an anonymous weaver until shortly before her death in Florida in 1967. Through Ellen Dawson’s life, this thesis offers a personal account of the Scottish Diaspora and the influence of Red Clydeside on labor movements in other parts of the world. This is the first detailed account of her life.
THE ELUSIVE ELLEN:  
Reconstructing the Life of Ellen Dawson  
and the World Around Her

A thesis presented for the degree of  
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Master of Arts, Northwestern University  
Bachelor of Arts, Florida State University
Declaration:

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own composition and my own work. It has not been accepted in any previous application for a degree. All quotations have been distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of information have been acknowledged.

David Lee McMullen       Date

Author’s Style:

Because this is a transatlantic project, a decision had to be made with respect to consistency in spelling, grammar and punctuation. Because this thesis was written by an American, the author has elected to adhered to the writing customs of the United States, rather than those of Scotland. In the use of direct quotations, as is customary, the style used by the original author has been maintained.
This work is dedicated to

Georgia Catherine Boyette Clemons,
my grandmother,
a woman of Scottish descent who,
like Ellen Dawson,
worked her way through the first half of the Twentieth Century.

and to

Cindy Wilkinson McMullen,
my wife,
also a woman of Scottish descent who,

stuck with me through the ups and downs of this project.
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Research Libraries, Museums and Archives

Librarians may be some of the most helpful individuals in the world. This has certainly been my experience. To the individuals who helped me unlock the mysteries of the more than thirty libraries listed below, I offer a very special thanks.

In Scotland: The National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh; the General Registry Office of Scotland, Edinburgh; the Mitchell Library, Glasgow; the Special Collections Library, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh; the Renfrewshire Archives, Paisley; the Barrhead Public Library, Barrhead; the Queen Mother Library, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen; the Special Libraries and Archives, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen; and the City of Aberdeen Public Library, Aberdeen.

In England: The British Library, London; the British Library Newspaper Collection, Colindale; the Women’s Library, Metropolitan University, London; the National Co-operative Library, Manchester; the Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester; the Working Class Movement Library, Manchester; the Lancaster Public Records Office, Preston; the Rochdale Local Studies Library, Rochdale; the Rawtenstall District Library, Rawtenstall; the Whitworth Library, Whitworth; and the Whitworth Heritage Museum, Whitworth.

Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey; the J. Murrey Atkins Library, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, North Carolina; the Wilson Library, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; the Z. Smith Reynolds Library, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina; the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library, Charlotte, North Carolina; the Gaston-Lincoln Regional Library, Gastonia, North Carolina; the New Bedford Free Library, New Bedford, Massachusetts; the Passaic Public Library, Passaic, New Jersey; and St. Nicholas Roman Catholic Church, Passaic, New Jersey.

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Relatives of Ellen Dawson

For almost two years I searched in vain for relatives of Ellen Dawson. Then, in May 2003, thanks to the Barrhead and Neilston Historical Association and the Barrhead Community web site, **Marie Bradley Chack**, a distant relative of Ellen Dawson, found me. Marie and her mother, **Betty Taylor Vandersyde**, provided a wealth of information and assisted in locating other members of Ellen Dawson’s
family. Isabel Dawson, a sister-in-law, sent photographs, and Betty Dawson and her sister Anna Dawson Henderson, nieces, discussed their memories of Ellen Dawson with oral historian Hugo Manson, provided photographs and answered numerous questions by post. Sadly, a third niece, Rita Dawson, was unable to contribute because of failing health, but she tried.

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Together, we rescued Ellen Dawson from the dustbin of history. Together, we can be proud!

David Lee McMullen
Aberdeen, Scotland and
Charlotte, North Carolina
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Introduction

For most of her life, Ellen Dawson\(^1\) was an anonymous weaver, like thousands of other immigrant workers attempting to build a new life in America, but in 1926 this small, stoic woman emerged for a brief moment to become a prominent communist labor activist. Most notably, she was the first woman elected to a national leadership position in an American textile union. Then, in the early 1930s, as the Great Depression enveloped America, Ellen slipped quietly back into the shadows of anonymity, rarely speaking of her radical days and disappearing from the public record.

I discovered the elusive Ellen\(^2\) in John Salmond’s account of the 1929 Loray Mill strike in Gastonia, North Carolina.\(^3\) During the first two months of that strike, Ellen served as co-director of an organizing effort sponsored by the National Textile Workers Union, a communist labor union she helped to create. At the time of my discovery, I had just been accepted to the University of Aberdeen/University of North Carolina at Charlotte joint doctoral program in history, and I was searching for a thesis topic that would take full advantage of the transatlantic nature of the program. Scottish-born Ellen Dawson seemed an ideal candidate, since reconstructing her life would require significant research in both Scotland and the United States. While
Ellen appears briefly in the works of a few labor historians, no one had written much about her. I had the enviable opportunity of being the first historian to tell her story.

In the three years since I began researching her life, my fascination with the complexity of Ellen the individual and with the dimension of the world in which she lived has increased almost daily. Appearing publicly for the first time in 1926, she quickly became a true labor evangelist, a woman who could climb atop an improvised platform and, speaking in her native Scottish brogue, mesmerize an audience of textile workers with ideas of cooperation, social equality and peaceful civil disobedience. Fearlessly, for half a decade, in places such as Passaic, New Bedford and Gastonia, she was a leader in the workers’ struggle. She marched at the head of picket lines, often confronting violent attacks by police and hired thugs. In New Bedford, Massachusetts, when the local police chief asked how many times she had been arrested, she answered, “So many times I can’t count them.” It was a simple response, but one that demonstrated the spirit of this courageous woman.

Ellen lived through some of the most turbulent periods in Scottish and U.S. labor history, and it seemed obvious to me that her story belonged in the annals of twentieth century women workers. Her experiences provide a meaningful example of the numerous forces that influenced the lives of immigrant women workers during this period; experiences that can help today’s scholars understand why women like Ellen made the decisions that they did.

As a child, Ellen was born and raised in the working class poverty of one of Scotland’s earliest industrial villages, an environment where the theories of socialism and cooperation were discussed and tested in an effort to resolve the economic problems of the working poor. As an adolescent textile worker she was witness to the most turbulent period of labor unrest in Scottish history – Red Clydeside – a time
when radical ideas were freely debated and openly practiced by many of Scotland’s workers. As a young woman, she migrated first with her family to England; later she led the family to the United States. Her journey provides a unique and very personal snapshot of the Scottish Diaspora immediately following the end of World War I, as well as the role one Scottish-born worker played in American labor politics during the late 1920s. As an adult, she was one of the leading women in a group of radicals—headed by Albert Weisbord—that formed during the 1926 Passaic, New Jersey textile strike, continued through the 1928 strike in New Bedford and ended shortly after the 1929 strike in Gastonia. This group sought to organize unskilled textile workers, workers who were being ignored by the more established American labor unions. As an associate of Jay Lovestone, leader of the communist workers’ movement in the United States in the late 1920s, Ellen climbed briefly to a top leadership position in the American communist party, but was almost immediately expelled when she joined Lovestone in protesting the Soviet takeover of communist activities in the U.S. Finally, as an American worker during the years from 1921 to 1966, she witnessed a period in which the status of the average industrial worker in the United States was transformed from virtual slavery to a new reality that included improved wages, increased protection from unsafe working conditions, health care benefits, pensions and a government sponsored social safety net. Despite this rather fascinating life, Ellen received little or no attention from most historians, even those who recorded the events in which she was a leading participant. My curiosity was aroused; I wanted to know why Ellen had been ignored.

My initial intent with this thesis was simply to correct the injustice of omission, to include someone who had been forgotten. In the 1970s, women’s historians liked to call this the “add women and stir” approach. I wanted to collect the
surviving details of her life and present them in a meaningful narrative. I wanted to write a “New Labor” biography in the spirit of British labor historian E. P. Thompson. More than forty years ago, Thompson changed labor history forever when he asserted that there was value in reconstructing the struggles of individual workers like Ellen. As he noted in his classic work, *The Making of the English Working Class*,

Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience…

Our only criterion of judgement should not be whether or not a man’s actions are justified in the light of subsequent evolution. After all, we are not at the end of social evolution ourselves. In some of the lost causes of the people of the Industrial Revolution we may discover insights into social evils which we have yet to cure.7

Certainly Ellen was one of the losers. Her cause – American workers’ communism – was lost long ago. However, her dream of improving the lives of textile workers was valid and her experiences offer transnational insights into a very important period of labor history.

To be embarrassingly honest, I assumed the task of writing a biography was comparable to the challenge of putting together a jigsaw puzzle. All I needed to do was empty the pieces on a card table and with patience and perseverance they would ultimately find their proper place. Perhaps some biographers have the privilege of writing about individuals so well documented that they can actually pursue this strategy. Unfortunately, I quickly discovered that I had selected a puzzle with a great many missing pieces. After three years of research – on two continents, in more than thirty archives, libraries and museums – I have reconstructed the basics of Ellen’s life, but there is much that remains a mystery. Only scraps of information survive – assorted public records, random accounts of her activities, the autobiographies of a few associates, historical accounts of the events in which she was a participant, fading photographs and patchy memories recalled by distant relatives. I have collected more
than enough to confirm her worth as an historical figure, but not enough to reconstruct a complete life. There are, I believe, at least two reasons for this. First, from a general perspective, records associated with the lives of the “unimportant” and the “powerless” are all too often not included in the historical archives that provide historians with access to the past. And, from the individual perspective, it has ultimately become clear that Ellen consciously retreated from the public world, intentionally erasing her years as a communist activist with silence.8

To fill the archival gaps, I began exploring the communities where Ellen lived and worked – the environment in which she existed, the social and political forces that influenced her development, the events she witnessed, the individuals who served as role models, her day-to-day associates, and other meaningful contemporaries. My strategy was similar to the approach used by an archeologist to reconstruct an ancient community from an odd assortment of surviving artifacts. As James Deetz noted, “in the seemingly little and insignificant things that accumulate to create a lifetime, the essence of our existence is captured. We must remember these bits and pieces, and we must use them in new and imaginative ways…Don’t read what we have written: look at what we have done.”9

This “life and times” approach to the telling of Ellen’s story is appropriate because it opens the door to the different categories of analysis available for examining Ellen’s life. Herbert Gutman, considered by many to be the father of the New Labor History in the United States, pointed toward this wider view with his oft-cited example of the “Irish born Catholic female Fall River Massachusetts textile worker and union organizer involved in the disorderly 1875 strike,” noting that this woman could be examined from nine different areas of historical study, and yet no
single view would ever capture the “wholeness that is essential to understanding human behavior.”

I found Gutman’s example particularly appropriate because Ellen was almost everything he conjured for his example. She was a female textile worker, the granddaughter of Irish born Catholics workers, who was a labor organizer in the disorderly 1928 strike that started in New Bedford and spread to Fall River. In a way, I felt as if Ellen’s biography had been blessed by one of the founders of the New Labor History.

This broader approach allowed me to complete the first draft of my thesis. It provided an additional dimension, but still there was something lacking. As Donna Gabaccia, my American supervisor, observed, “Ellen remains elusive.” Clearly, I needed to consider more options if I was going to help readers grasp the significance of Ellen and her world.

Fortunately, I was able to learn from others who had encountered similar problems. Labor historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall faced the same challenge in writing about Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin. Hall’s response was to make the problem part of the story. “In the face of that vacuum,” she wrote, “I tried to address my dilemma in part by embracing it, by allowing it into the text.” Just as I have struggled to reassemble Ellen’s life, Hall worked to rebuild the relationships between several southern women. “I pieced their life together scrap by scrap…What I lacked -- what we still lack – is a single word, in their voices, about the inner history…its pains and pleasures, its trajectory over time.” This is exactly what I faced with the elusive and deathly-silent Ellen. Hall further explained that while the facts biographers are able to collect may not provide “clear windows on the past,” they do “license historical imagination. They propel us onto the fine line between fiction and history,
imagination and reason, dreams and waking thoughts, each seeming opposition required and defined by the other, all necessary to our impossible project: the sympathetic reconstruction of the absent past.”13 Hall’s approach offered a viable solution to the dilemma I faced in trying to provide a meaningful reconstruction of Ellen’s life and the world in which she existed.

At first glance, such an approach may seem inappropriate for a traditional academic work. There is, however, a small but directly applicable literature within the genre of feminist biography that supports such a methodology. Feminist biography is based on the premise that within every biography there is an internal, and often suppressed, autobiography. This internal autobiography is the experience of the individual who researches and writes the biography.14 From my own perspective, feminist biography raised several important questions. First, and most significantly, should my own experiences associated with this project be included in the thesis? If I excluded my experiences, did I become a scribe and not a scholar? Was the role of biographer, as I initially thought, simply to piece together a predetermined puzzle, making no decisions on how the pieces ultimately came together? The more I thought about these questions, the more I realized that creating a biographical account of someone’s life is not at all like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Every biographer makes countless decisions that directly influence the final image that is presented. Discussing these decisions within the text allows for a more objective presentation of the information, and for more meaningful comments by those who evaluate it. My thinking about feminist biography seems to be supported by Lois Rudnick, biographer of Mabel Dodge Luhan, who noted, “Our unmasking of our strategies and processes as writers of biography should lead to the creation of more authentic texts and to more probing and artful criticism of our work.”15
This approach seemed particularly relevant when writing the biography of a woman, because, as Rudnick observed, feminist biography developed as a distinctive genre. It “uncovered and restored ‘lost’ women, many of whom were not heroic in the traditional sense.” After all, heroes are masculine by the very definition of the word.\(^\text{16}\)

Further, as a man writing the biography of a woman, I recognized that I was immediately open to the fundamental criticism of not being a member of the club. Here is a new version of the old question raised within many fields of scholarship: Can a group be understood by someone who is not a member of the group? Personally, I believe the answer is yes, and that it has been demonstrated many times by numerous writers. Distance often provides greater objectivity. However, I also recognize that there will always be some who will challenge the outsider’s view. By exposing my thought process, and discussing my approach to the research, I believe I can help to neutralize this issue as well, so that others may better assess my analysis and objectivity. Thus, I made the decision to invite the reader of this thesis to join me on my search for Ellen. By doing so, I am able to share my thoughts on key questions, presenting the available options and explaining my decisions.

I then turned to the next questions. First, why was Ellen ignored by most historians? And second, why does so little of Ellen’s life survive in the public record? It is logical to assume that one of the primary reasons Ellen was omitted from our historical memory was because of her gender. Until the 1970s, women simply did not figure prominently in historical accounts. Gender alone, however, is not an adequate explanation. Writing about another woman textile labor activist, the elusive O. Delight Smith, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall noted, “The forces that conspired against her ranged from personal betrayal to political defeat to historians’ assumptions about
significance and marginality. Indeed, the preoccupations of scholars guaranteed that she, and women like her, would be trebly eclipsed, for she exemplified a brand of feminist progressivism that has been marginalized by historians of women, (and) of labor.17

As Hall suggests, exclusion is not the result of a single force, and such forces do not exist independently. They are interwoven into the multiple identities of each and every individual, and the associations that are created by those multiple identities. In Ellen’s case, I believe radicalism, class, ethnicity and religion are also important forces. It is here, into what Alice Kessler-Harris calls the “complex and frequently messy interaction of these components”18 that we must dig if we are to understand the reasons why Ellen was left in the dustbin of history.

Ellen’s radicalism provides a second explanation for why she has been ignored. Sympathetic views of American radicals, especially those associated with American communism, have long been taboo subjects within American universities. Few American historians have approached the subject objectively. Fraser Ottanelli is one of the few exceptions. He reconstructed the story of the American communist party in the 1930s and detailed the activities of several of Ellen’s associates. For the most part, however, communists such as Ellen are the victims of post Russian Revolution hysteria and Cold War politics, when all communists took the form of sinister villains seeking the violent overthrow of capitalist society and democratic government. There was no room for alternative views. As a result, it seems highly probable that records providing favorable pictures of individuals such as Ellen were destroyed. What scanty public records that survive are those that view these individuals through the eyes of their enemies. It is, after all, the “winners” perspective that survives in the public record, not that of the losers such as Ellen.
Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of terrorism as a replacement for communism as the antithesis of American capitalism has this begun to change. In an essay discussing her biography of Mary Heaton Vorse, a leading left-wing journalist of Ellen’s time, Dee Garrison noted that Vorse was “Erased from historical memory chiefly because she was a political radical of the female gender, (despite the fact that) she was deeply committed to realization of a world without war, privation, and hate…(Vorse was a woman) who changed her life in mid-passage, became radicalized, endured terror and pain to realize her ambition.” Vorse worked with Ellen in both Passaic and Gastonia, and clearly Ellen, like Vorse, was ignored because of both her gender and her radicalism. There is, however, an important distinction that must be made between Ellen and Vorse. That distinction is class. Unlike many of the upper and middle class women who participated in the radicalism of the 1920s, including Vorse, Ellen was further marginalized because of her class. She was a working class woman who, even after her marriage, had to work in order to survive. As such, her experience lacked the romanticism that surrounded radical women in the more economically advantaged classes, and her position as a worker made it extremely difficult for her to continue her work as an activist, or even to write about her experiences. She had not the time, the energy, nor the financial resources. Further, Ellen was a weaver, a job that was classified as unskilled, even thought it took her years to acquire the necessary training and experience to do the job properly. As such, she remained at the lower levels of the working class for most of her life.

Ethnicity is perhaps the messiest of the categories, at least with respect to understanding Ellen’s position in the world. She was Scottish, an individual who shared common ancestry with many native-born American workers. Yet she was an immigrant worker who lived in a community with more than thirty different
nationalities of immigrant workers. She married a Hungarian immigrant, and for more than thirty years, most of her adult life, she lived with an Hungarian surname -- Kanki. While many historians have focused on immigrant workers in the United States, few have studied Scots who immigrated into the United States during the twentieth century. Scots represented only a tiny percentage of immigrants to the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time when the majority of immigrants came from Eastern and Southern Europe. Even those scholars who do study immigrant workers are often confronted with the same basic challenge – few, if any, surviving records. This is further complicated by the fact that many documents created by immigrant workers themselves are in languages other than English and thus even less likely to survive.

With respect to religion, Ellen was born into a Roman Catholic family, died a Catholic, and lived most of her life as a devout Catholic. Her mother and the majority of her family were life-long Catholics, and her older sister Mary was a nun. The one question mark is what were Ellen’s religious beliefs during her days as a radical communist? This seems significant, since many communists of the period were atheists. To date, I have been unable to find a credible answer to that question. Regardless, culturally she was a Catholic, and this would have separated her from America’s Protestant majority, pushing her away from native-born Americans of Scottish descent, and pulling her toward her immigrant neighbors. Beyond this, most American labor historians have been reluctant to address the role religious faith played in the lives of the working class. I will confess that, at least for the moment, I am no exception.

Given these five different categories of possible analysis, my next question was which of these perspectives offered the most meaningful point-of-view for a
reconstruction of Ellen’s life? My conclusion was “all” and “none.” Each perspective – gender, radicalism, class, ethnicity and religion – is important, but to pick one would be to ignore the importance of the others. Thus, I began looking for a common thread that connected all five perspectives. The thread I discovered was power, or in Ellen’s case the lack of power. Throughout her life, she was on the weak side of gender, politics, class, ethnicity and religion.

Speaking of two equally radical women who lived during the same period, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall noted that, “they persisted on the margins, far from the centers of economic, political and culture power. They suffered for their beliefs.”21 Certainly this description fits Ellen as well, and it helps explains why the public record is so scanty. The powerless are rarely allowed to leave records of their lives. No one collected their thoughts. Their possessions are simply thrown away; rarely do families preserve the records. This is supported by my own frustrations in trying to gather information and insights from Ellen’s few surviving relatives. To them, except for a few fading photographs, she is hardly more than an enigma.

Mary Blewett, one of the leading scholars in the field of women’s labor history in the U.S., cited Herbert Gutman’s example of the Irish born textile worker, noting that “The multiple meanings of human identity also require a more inclusive use of the category of power to capture the tensions over changing relationships of gender, ethnicity, race, family, sexuality, religion, and generations, issues that remain central to the history of class and culture. Only then can the multiple but connected experiences of that Irish working woman be appreciated and evaluated.”22 I agree! Power provides the glue needed to hold all of the other perspectives together, at least when explaining a woman like Ellen. During her years as an activist, she struggled to take control of her own life, yet she was continually confronted with challenges
related to her gender, class, ethnicity and religion. Ultimately, her failure can be contributed to her inability to achieve the power necessary to successfully change the status quo.

Like many seemingly simple terms, power is, in reality, an extremely complex philosophical idea. It can be viewed from the perspective of individual relationships and it can also be seen as an independent force within a society or a culture. As Simon Blackburn noted, power “is the ability to achieve something, whether by right or by control or influence. Power is the ability to mobilize economic, social or political forces in order to achieve a result.” A more omnipotent view suggests that power is an essential element within all social and cultural relationships.

“Fundamental power is not exercised by individuals, but is a dispersed, impersonal aspect of society, and in particular is manifest in the modes of surveillance, regulation, or discipline that adapt human beings to the surrounding social structure.” This suggests that it is not necessary for the powerful to be conscious of their goals, or their actions. Often they simply respond to a real or perceived threat to the status quo. It is a knee-jerk response, a defense mechanism designed to halt, or at least slow, the onslaught of change. As a result, there is usually little or no serious evaluation of the proposed change, or consideration of the possible benefits change might bring. Here, I believe, one can begin to understand the significance that power, as a force within a society, has over human relationships, regardless of the perspective. Here too, one can recognize the “messy interaction” of these categories suggested by Alice Kessler-Harris and see the tides that create the ever “changing relationships” discussed by Mary Blewett. And we can begin to understand why the powerless leave so few records through which historians can access their stories and in turn tell those stories to present and future generations.
Ellen and her associates sought to build a force for change. They sought to challenge the power of those who held the workers down. They sought to empower the workers, but they failed. Ultimately, I believe it was this failure that forced Ellen to recognize her own powerlessness. It also motivated her to abandon the cause she fought for and to retreat into the safety of her family, her church and her waged work. Reluctantly, she reconciled herself to the restrictions placed upon her by the established power structure. As a result, she lived the remainder of her life in silence, accepting things she had once tried to alter. She became a silent witness.

Ellen’s failure does not mean that her life lacks significance. To the contrary, it is her lack of power that makes her such a fascinating case study, especially if we are willing to discard the conventionally accepted hero-model of biography. It is this very powerlessness, I believe, that makes her story worth telling.

Finally, I came to the point where I needed to establish a structure for the thesis. After considering several different approaches, I decided to divide the thesis into three major sections. The first section, Ellen Dawson, is a traditional biography of Ellen. It provides the facts surrounding Ellen’s life and seeks to build the foundation needed for the discussions that follow. The following two sections are divided by the Atlantic Ocean. The Making of a Radical focuses on Ellen’s life in Great Britain. The World of a Radical explores her life as a radical labor activist in the United States. My goal in separating these two sections was to provide balance to the two most important parts of her life. All too often biographies stop at national borders, pretending that there is little connection between the two sets of experience. In Ellen’s case, I believe her formative years in Scotland, combined with her experiences in England, significantly influenced her actions in the United States. And, her American activities provide the justification for studying her life in Britain.
The British section is divided into three chapters. **Barrhead** looks at the industrial village where Ellen was born and raised, seeking to identify the social forces that influenced her early development. **Red Clydeside** chronicles the labor history of the Glasgow region during the period between 1900 and 1919, perhaps the most turbulent in the history of Scotland. This chapter also includes brief biographies of Scottish labor activists whom I believe contributed to Ellen’s radicalization. **Migration** records the family’s migration to Lancashire. Although the family spent only a few years there, the experience is significant because this is the region of England where the Industrial Revolution began. This chapter also traces the family’s emigration to the United States.

The American section is divided into three chapters. **Passaic** examines the community where Ellen lived for more than forty-five years and the textile strike of 1926 where, as a worker, she began her career as a radical activist. **New Bedford** details her organizing activities in the 1928 strike there, where she transitioned from worker to labor organizer. **Gastonia** recounts her leadership in the first two months of the Loray Mill strike of 1929.

At several points in both the British and American sections, I have used the biography and collected poetry of Mary Brooksbank\(^26\) in an effort to better understand Ellen. Mary was a Scottish textile worker born in Aberdeen almost exactly three years before Ellen.\(^27\) Mary moved to Dundee, where she entered the textile mills as a young adolescent worker. Like Ellen, Mary became a communist labor activist. Unlike Ellen, Mary stayed in Scotland, where she wrote about her experiences. I believe that Mary’s voice provides meaningful insights that help to overcome Ellen’s silence.
This thesis ends with a **Conclusion** that provides personal observations and conclusions associated with my research and experiences. Finally, I have added a section of **photographs**. These visuals, I believe, are important records that help to tell Ellen’s story and provide additional information that can be found nowhere else. These are historical artifacts that help complete the portrait.

Ultimately, my goal for this thesis remains the telling of Ellen’s story. Certainly she was not the traditional hero, but her life had meaning. Her dream of improving the lives of textile workers was valid and her experiences offer transnational insights into both Scottish and American women’s labor history. And, as E. P. Thompson suggested, “we may discover insights into social evils which we have yet to cure.” Personally, I believe the life of Ellen Dawson does offer such insights, insights that can help current and future generations protect themselves from the suffering that she and countless other textile workers endured.
Ellen Dawson married Louis Kanki in 1935 and took his last name. All of her known radical activities occurred prior to her marriage, and all known historical references use her maiden name. Although her family and close friends often called her Nell or Nellie, she will be referred to simply as Ellen throughout this doctoral thesis because that is how she appears in the public record.

It was my partner, Cindy Wilkinson McMullen, who first noted Ellen Dawson’s Scottish connection.

John Salmond’s book, *Gastonia 1929* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), provides the most comprehensive account of the Loray Strike, an event that many consider to be the most notorious strike in the history of the textile industry in the southern United States. The cause of this notoriety will be discussed later in this thesis.

The most comprehensive account of Ellen Dawson’s life can be found in Philip S. Foner’s *Women and the American Labor Movement from World War I to the Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1980). He is the only historian to connect her participation in the three communist-lead textile strikes of the late 1920s in Passaic, New Bedford and Gastonia. He also notes her involvement with the Lovestoneites. Foner, who is one of the few American labor historians to research the American communist labor movement, mentions Ellen approximately half a dozen times in the forty-five pages he devotes to the three strikes. Even today, Foner remains a controversial figure because of his interest and often sympathetic view of communists such as Ellen. Although the quality of his research has been questioned by other scholars, my research within the original documents indicates that his accounts of these three strikes is accurate.

An undated and uncited newspaper article in the official scrapbook of New Bedford, Massachusetts mayor Charles F. Ashley (New Bedford Free Public Library, New Bedford, Massachusetts).

Economic migration was a multigenerational aspect of the Dawson family. Two of Ellen Dawson’s grandparents migrated to Scotland from Ireland during the middle of the nineteenth century. The other pair of grandparents migrated to the Glasgow area from rural areas of Scotland. During the twentieth century, several members of her immediate family migrated back and forth across the Atlantic.

Thompson, E. P., *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), pp. 12-13. It must be noted that from Thompson’s perspective, workers were almost always male, as he writes here. However, from my perspective, I see women workers as equally important and, because women were more often ignored in the past, I believe efforts to reconstruct their lives are essential to fully understanding working class history.

Ellen’s response was not unique. James Leloudis, one of the scholars who researched *Like a Family* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), a classic collection of oral histories of southern mill workers, found that many of the individuals interviewed for the book, individuals who had participated in some of the most violent textile strikes in the history of the southern U.S., refused to talk about what happened. In some cases, the worker developed a form of selective amnesia that erased the events from their conscious memory.


Donna Gabaccia pointed me toward Jacquelyn Hall’s essay, and we discussed this approach with Franca Iacovetta and Ruth Percy, who provided critical direction.

Hall discussed how she faced the challenge of trying to reconstruct the sexuality of southern writer Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin and her sisters Elizabeth Lumpkin Glenn and Grace Lumpkin. Interestingly, in 1932, Grace Lumpkin published *To Make My Bread* (New York: Macaulay Company, 1932), a novel about the Gastonia mill workers.


Rudnick, Lois, “The Life of Mabel Dodge Luhan,” Sara Alpern, et al, *The Challenge of Feminist Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 119. In this essay, Rudnick notes “the naivete with which reviewers write about biographies…What they fail to notice is that biographers are active agents. Like fiction writers and historians they create their subjects with a particular angle of vision and with a particular set of strategies that help determine the outcome.”
16 Ibid, pp. 118-119. Interestingly, in Greek mythology Hero was a woman.
20 In the United States there is a wealth of literature on Scottish immigration to Britain’s North American Colonies prior to the American Revolution. However, very little is available on Scottish immigration after the early nineteenth century. In Britain, there is a growing literature on the Scottish Diaspora in the Atlantic world. Marjory Harper’s Emigration from Scotland between the wars: opportunity or exile? (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) is perhaps the most relevant to Ellen Dawson.
21 Hall, “To Widen the Reach of Our Love.” Hall was writing about Lillian Smith and Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin, two women born in 1897 who challenged the accepted standards of Southern society.
24 Ibid, p. 296. Michel Foucault was a leading proponent of this view of power.
25 I must credit Henry Binford for my understanding of the importance of change within a community. It was under his direction as a graduate student at Northwestern University that I first began to explore the significance of change and my Master’s Essay there uses change as a central theme.
26 Siobhan Tolland, a scholar at the Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, introduced me to Mary Brooksbank and is researching Mary’s life. The two works of Mary are her autobiography, No Sae Lang Syne, A Tale of This City (Dundee: Dundee Printers, date unknown), and her collected poems, Sidlaw Breezes (Dundee: David Winter & Son, 1982).
27 Mary was born on December 15, 1897. Ellen was born on December 14, 1900.
Chapter One – Ellen Dawson:

“The Little Orphan of the Strikers”

Ellen Dawson was a woman of fascinating contradictions – small and frail, yet a fearless fighter; stoic, yet a charismatic stump speaker: devout Catholic, yet a dedicated communist labor activist. In many ways, her life is representative of millions of immigrant American workers. Born into working class poverty, she was a victim of social and economic inequities that valued the wealth and power of a few over the welfare of the many. Raised in an environment of violent labor unrest, she was nurtured with socialist ideas that offered alternatives to capitalism. Forced to abandon her native Scotland in order to survive, she migrated first to England and then across the Atlantic in search of employment opportunity. In the United States, she helped organize and lead unskilled textile workers against abuses perpetuated by conspiracies of industrialists, government officials and trade unionists. When her revolutionary efforts failed, she retreated into the safety of silence and anonymity. Beyond all this, and perhaps most importantly, this is the story of one woman and her struggle to make the world a better place.

Ellen’s life began during the closing days of the Victorian era, in a decaying, two-room tenement in Barrhead,¹ a grim, smog-filled industrial village on the southwestern fringe of Glasgow. It was three o’clock in the morning on Friday,
December 14, 1900, eleven days before Christmas in a Scotland where Christmas was not yet a workers’ holiday. The day was chilly, with winds near gale force. The morning was clear and dry, but by afternoon it had faded into dull and rainy, traditional weather for the approaching Scottish winter, a season when there are barely seven hours of daylight. Ellen was the fifth of at least ten children born to Patrick and Annie Dawson, a family that Ellen’s niece later described as “very, very poor.” If anything, that description underestimated their condition. Unquestionably, the Dawson family was at the very bottom of the working class, they were among the poorest of Britain’s working poor.

Ellen’s father, Patrick Dawson was born in Scotland around 1869. He was a strong, hard working family man. His politics were conservative, his Roman Catholic religion sincere, and despite the opinions his radical daughter would later espouse, he feared a world ruled by the Bolsheviks. He had a sense of humor, and must have been a congenial fellow to meet in a local pub. His country roots were evident in his trapping skills and the humorous way he teased his sons about their lack of such skills, noting that they would rather spend the evening in “a nice arm chair” than go out hunting during the “dark moon.” His parents, Edward Dawson and Mary Welsh, were both native Scots who were long-time residents of the area. They married in the Roman Catholic church in nearby Neilston Parish on July 8, 1866. Their Catholic faith suggests that their ancestors came from either the Scottish Highlands or from Ireland. The marriage was Edward Dawson’s second, his first wife, Mary McGovern, having died. According to the registration certificate of his second marriage, Edward Dawson was a thirty-two-year-old laborer working on the installation of Barrhead’s new sewer system, which began that same year.
was twenty-six and worked in the bleach fields, one of the lowest and most unpleasant jobs in the local textile industry. Both Edward and Mary were illiterate.11

Ellen’s mother, Annie Halford Dawson, was born in 186712 in the neighboring village of Nitshill.13 She was the oldest daughter in a large, but very poor, working class family. An independent and free-spirited young woman, she was a hard worker and a devout Roman Catholic. Although she never learned to read and write, it is clear that she provided the foundation for her family, even during the hardest of hard times. Annie’s parents were Edward Halford14 and Ellen Hurle,15 both born in Ireland in the early 1840s. They moved to Scotland as young children, their families forced from their native homeland by the famines that devastated Ireland between 1846 and 1850. Like the Dawsons, Edward and Ellen Halford were long-term residents of the area, living at Newton Place in nearby Nitshill. In 1891, the Halfords lived in a two-room house with nine of their children – Michael, Daniel, John, Joseph, Patrick, James, Hugh, Grace and Ellen, ages twenty-one to five. All of the children were born in Nitshill. At this point in time, the father and his four oldest sons worked to support the rest of the family. Edward and his son Daniel worked as masons’ laborers, Michael worked at the local chemical plant, John in a print field and Joseph as a baker. The mother did not work outside the home, although she later went back to wage earning work. Daughters Annie and Mary had already moved out on their own.16

Like her sisters, Annie Halford went to work as a local textile operative during her early teens, probably in the early 1880s. By the time she married Patrick, she had worked for a decade, reaching the position of power-loom weaver, near the top of the textile mill hierarchy. Achieving such a position is evidence of exceptional diligence and determination on Annie’s part, characteristics that she passed on to her daughter
Ellen, who became a weaver and was later described by her niece as “a very hard worker.”

Surviving evidence suggests that Annie, like Ellen, enjoyed an adventurous youth. In 1891, two years before she and Patrick were married, Annie gave birth to a son, Edward, and on her wedding day she was pregnant with her first daughter, Mary. Although her situation would certainly have been frowned upon by older members of her family, and hidden from the following generations, it was not that unusual for a working class woman of the time. Mill girls, as young women textile workers like Annie were often called during the nineteenth century, enjoyed an independence that came from earning their own wage. Most waited until their mid-twenties before they married and many enjoyed freedoms of which their mothers had never dreamed.

Annie’s sister, Mary Halford, is an example of the free spirit shown by many of these young women, as well as the social difficulties that ensued. Mary was nineteen in 1891, an unemployed print field worker. Single and pregnant, she was admitted to the poorhouse in the Abbey Parish of Paisley because she had no income, and her parents could not, or would not, provide assistance. During the next ten years, Mary was in and out of the poorhouse more than a half dozen times, giving birth to three children. Two of her children were born in the poorhouse, and her son, Andrew, died in the poorhouse at the age of three. During this period she contracted influenza and more than once abandoned her children to the charity of others. Not until 1901, at the age of 29, did she finally agree to the prosecution of her lover, William Elliot Shaw, forcing him to marry her and support their children.

As for Annie Halford, there is no record that she ever took public assistance, or needed to take legal action against her lover. Annie married Patrick Dawson on May 5, 1893. The ceremony was held in St. John’s Chapel, Barrhead’s only Roman
Catholic Church, and performed by B. Tracy, a local priest. The witnesses were Michael Murray and Maggie Dawson. Patrick signed his name to the wedding certificate, while Annie made her mark. Both Annie and Patrick listed their address as Main Street, Barrhead.

In the years between 1891 and 1900, Annie Dawson gave birth to four children. Edward, the oldest, was born in 1891, prior to her marriage to Patrick. It appears that Edward was named for one or both of his grandfathers. Mary, the first daughter, was born in 1893. David, the brother with whom Ellen had the closest relationship, was born on September 3, 1894, when the family lived at 277 Main Street in Barrhead, the oldest and one of the poorest sections of the village. Two years later, in 1896, Michael Hurle was born. By this time the family had moved to 238 Main Street, the same tenement where Ellen was born. Michael Hurle is the only child known to be given a middle name. Hurle was Annie’s mother’s maiden name, and one must wonder if this was an attempt to rebuild a bond with her mother, Ellen Hurle Halford, after a period of estrangement. Perhaps this is also why Annie named her next daughter Ellen. The four year gap, 1896 to 1900, between Michael Hurle and Ellen, may also indicate an unsuccessful pregnancy or the birth of an infant that did not survive. Records show that there was a Patrick Dawson born in Barrhead in 1898. He may have been a child that did not survive.

At the time of Ellen’s birth, her father worked as a laborer in the local Shanks’ Tubal Works, one of Barrhead’s largest industrial enterprises and a leading international manufacturer of bathtubs, washbasins, toilets and bidets. It was an unhealthy and physically exhausting job that contemporary observers described as brutal slave labor. Shanks’ attracted workers who were forced to take the worst jobs just to survive. According to James Maxton, one of Scotland’s leading socialists and
a resident of Barrhead, the foundry was a center of serious political debate and the source of his own conversion to socialism.\textsuperscript{26} Regardless of his political beliefs, it would have been impossible for Patrick to have escaped these discussions.

Ellen’s parents must have greeted her birth with mixed feelings. They were a family of seven, with four young children and a baby, living in a two-room tenement on Patrick’s wage as a foundry worker. With Edward, the oldest child, only seven, it would be another six years before the family would have a second full time wage earner, and by then there would be seven children, with another one on the way.

In 1901, both Edward and Ellen Halford, Ellen’s maternal grandparents, were in their mid-fifties and worked at the Nitshill Chemical Works.\textsuperscript{27} The fact that Ellen Halford had returned to work outside the home, in an area where most women did not do regular wage-earning work after marriage, is another indication of the family’s extremely low economic standing within the community. The Halfords still lived at Newton Place in Nitshill, with four of their children – Daniel, Patrick, Grace and Ellen, ages twenty-four to fifteen. The two sons mined copper in the volcanic hills of Renfrewshire, while the two daughters worked in local thread mills.\textsuperscript{28} Patrick and Annie Dawson do not appear in the 1901 Scottish Census. Without explanation, the census taker failed to collect information from individuals living between 203 and 239 Main Street in Barrhead. At the time, the Dawsons were living at 238 Main Street.\textsuperscript{29}

As for the day-to-day life of the Dawson family, few specific details survive.\textsuperscript{30} There are, however, several important observations that can be made about Ellen’s family during these early years. Annie Halford Dawson came from a large family. She had at least ten siblings, and ultimately at least ten children of her own. Patrick’s siblings have proven to be more elusive, but there are indications that he may have had at least one or more brothers or sisters. There were other Dawson families living
in Barrhead at the time, but their relationship to Edward and Patrick Dawson is unknown. Maggie Dawson was a witness at Patrick and Annie’s wedding ceremony, and she may have been his sister. Regardless, it seems clear that Ellen’s childhood included a large extended family, with numerous aunts, uncles and cousins. This, combined with the family’s cramped living conditions, meant that Ellen rarely lacked companionship, and would have certainly been privy to the countless conversations of older members of the family, many of which must have focused on the social and political events and ideas of the day.

The details that survive from this period of Ellen’s life are the officially recorded events, such as the arrival of new siblings. On January 22, 1903, for example, Ellen’s sister Anna was born. At this point, the family was living at 33 Glasgow Road, in an area of Barrhead known as Dovecothall, which had its own branch of the Barrhead Co-operative Society\textsuperscript{31} and was closer to St. John’s Chapel.\textsuperscript{32} As Roman Catholics, the Dawson children attended the Roman Catholic school\textsuperscript{33} next door to St. John’s, until they were thirteen or fourteen. Then, they went to work to help support the family. This was an accepted practice for working class children in Scotland, and throughout Britain, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Death was also a very real part of working class life, and it took its toll on the family. On July 31, 1903, Ellen’s aunt, Ellen Halford, a nineteen year old thread mill worker, died of acute pulmonary phthisis, a lung disease that most certainly was exacerbated by working in a textile factory with excessive concentrations of lint in the air and where the humidity was kept intentionally high in order to reduce thread breaks.
On April 21, 1905, when Ellen was four, another sister, Grace, was born. The family had moved again, to 19 Aurs Road, back toward the center of town and near where Barrhead’s new electric tram power plant would soon be built. A year later, on January 29, 1906, Ellen lost the first of her grandparents, when her paternal grandfather, Edward Dawson, died. Edward’s death certificate indicated that he was sixty-two years old, although he may have been significantly older. At the time of his death, he was still working at the local water works, just as he had done for most of his adult life. The cause of Edward’s death was listed as “gangrene of the foot,” possibly the result of an on-the-job accident, and “exhaustion,” a telling comment on the realities of working class life in the industrialized world during this period. At the time of his death, Edward lived at 180 Main Street in Barrhead, just a few doors down from where Ellen was born. Her father, Patrick, was the family member who assumed the responsibility of registering the death with local officials. Edward’s funeral, like the funerals of other members of the Dawson and Halford families, was probably held at St. John’s Chapel in Barrhead. Unfortunately, the old church and all of its records were destroyed by fire during the 1950s.

On May 3, 1907, when Ellen’s brother Richard was born, the family was still living on Aurs Road. Two years later, on April 19, 1909, Mary Welsh Dawson, Ellen’s paternal grandmother, Edward’s widow, died of breast cancer in the poorhouse in neighboring Nitshill, near where Ellen’s maternal grandparents lived. Prior to moving to the poorhouse, she had lived at 254 Main Street, across the street from where Ellen was born. Once again, Patrick had the responsibility of providing the local registrar with the information concerning the death of his parent.

At some point during 1913 or 1914, around the start of World War I, Ellen entered the labor force. There is no record of exactly where she worked, but it most
certainly was in the local textile industry, following in the footsteps of her mother and her mother’s sisters. During this time, her two youngest brothers were also born, Joseph in 1913 and John, her youngest brother, in 1914.39

Records also indicate that during this period Patrick Dawson was a registered voter. Although misspelled, his name appears on local voter registration rolls for 1913-1914 and 1914-1915. The family was living back on Main Street at number 330.40 Two other Dawsons41 appear on the voter rolls, as does Patrick’s father-in-law, Edward Halford. The very fact that Patrick was registered to vote indicates an interest in politics that was growing among Scotland’s working class, part of a new political labor movement that would dramatically alter the British political landscape in the years immediately following World War I.42

During the war, on February 25, 1917, Ellen’s maternal grandfather, Edward Halford, died of heart disease in Nitshill. He was 74 years of age and it was his second oldest son, Daniel Halford, who came up from Kilmarnock to register the death.43 Ellen had several brothers old enough to participate in the war, but no record of military service has been found. Glasgow was central to Britain’s industrial war effort and so it is possible that they were not required to serve in the military. The war provided abundant jobs for both men and women during this period, but war profiteering exacerbated worker unrest, something that often required government intervention.44 The Dawson family, like many of Scotland’s workers, encountered significant difficulties during the war. As Patrick later noted, “the war…put us threw (sic) it one way or another. We have been one of the familys (sic) that has got no war welth (sic), but…plenty of war knocking about.”45 Although what the “knocking about” involved is not clear, it was certainly a very hard time for Ellen and her family.
The end of the war brought massive unemployment to Glasgow and Britain’s other industrial cities. As a result, survival became the primary concern for many of Britain’s industrial workers, and it initiated a mass exodus of Scottish and Irish workers.\textsuperscript{46} Ellen and her family struggled to remain in Barrhead, but the economic depression that followed the war ultimately forced most family members to reluctantly leave the village in search of employment. Close to the end of 1919, the family moved south to Lancashire in England.\textsuperscript{47} There they found employment in the village of Millgate, in the Whitworth Valley, midway between the villages of Shawforth and Facet, just north of Rochdale.\textsuperscript{48} It was one more relocation in the family’s multi-generational quest for economic stability. Four of Ellen’s eight great-grandparents moved from Ireland to Scotland in the mid-nineteenth century, and at least two others moved from a Scottish croft to an industrial village during the same period.

Why the family selected Millgate is unknown, although there appear to be connections between the two communities. In Millgate, the family lived in the Hey’s Buildings. In Barrhead, there is a Hey’s Street just off Main Street in the center of the village, near where the Dawsons lived, and in neighboring Springhill there was the Hey’s Bleachfield. Additionally, in the early nineteenth century, there were connections between the cooperative movements in Barrhead and Rochdale, and Millgate had its own cooperative society during this time as well.

In 1919, at least seven members of the family were of wage earning age. They included Ellen, who turned nineteen six days before the family arrived in Lancashire, her father, Patrick, her two older brothers, David and Michael Hurle, and her three sisters, Mary, Anna and Grace. Ellen’s mother, Annie, probably remained at home, caring for her three youngest children – Richard, Joseph and John – who were ages
twelve and under, although Richard went to work in a local textile mill before the family left Millgate. Annie may also have helped provide additional income by taking in laundry or doing other part-time domestic work in the community. When she entered the United States in 1922, she listed her occupation as domestic worker. However, having been a power-loom weaver before her marriage to Patrick, she may have worked in a local textile mill, leaving the younger children in the care of a neighbor or an older sibling.

One member of the Dawson family remained in Scotland and did not move to England. Edward, Ellen’s oldest brother, stayed in the Dawson home at 330 Main Street in Barrhead. Edward repaired boots, which indicates that he was not a factory worker and may well have been self-employed. He was married, and in December 1919, when the rest of the family first moved south, Edward’s wife, Margaret Mary (nee Taylor), was pregnant. In 1920, after the departure of the other members of the family, the couple’s four-month-old son, Patrick, died of pneumonia. It is clear that the Dawson family considered the move to England only temporary, and even after the family migrated to the United States, several individuals in Ellen’s generation, and the following generation, moved back and forth across the Atlantic.

Eleven members of the Dawson family, including Patrick and Annie Dawson, and nine of their children, moved into Numbers 30 and 37 in the Hey’s Buildings in Millgate on December 20, 1919. Why the Dawson family rented two dwellings is not clear. An examination of the rent records indicates that it was unique. Patrick Dawson was the only tenant found to have rented two dwellings in the Hey’s Buildings between 1919 and 1922. It may simply have been that a family of eleven people needed the space provided by two dwellings, or it may have been the result of a brief period of economic prosperity. However, employment opportunities in
Millgate proved to be only slightly better than in Scotland. As Patrick Dawson wrote to his son Edward in Barrhead, “trade is no better down here yet, at the same time I don’t think they are as bad as they are up in Scotland.” The Lancashire textile industry had a brief upturn immediately after World War I, but then collapsed in the early 1920s. As a result, the Dawson family, like thousands of other British workers, turned their sights toward the United States, joining the massive post-war migration of working-class families leaving Scotland and England.

Ellen and her older brother David were the first to leave Britain, sailing from Liverpool on April 30, 1921. Ellen was twenty and David was twenty-six. They arrived in New York on May 9, 1921, after nine days on the North Atlantic. They made the voyage aboard the *SS Cedric*, in the cramped and crowded third-class section of the ship commonly referred to as steerage. After being processed by U.S. immigration officials at Ellis Island, Ellen and David were met by their mother’s cousin, Margaret Curley, the individual who served as their American sponsor. Margaret’s husband John had emigrated to the U.S. in 1914 from Paisley and the Curleys also sponsored several members of the Halford family. Interestingly, on their arrival in the United States, Ellen and David expressed uncertainty about their future in America, first telling U.S. immigration officials that they did not know how long they would stay. When questioned, they said they intended to return to Scotland in six years. By contrast, all of the other Dawson family members who followed Ellen and David told immigration authorities they intended to become permanent residents of the United States.

Thus, on a mild and sunny day, with the temperature in the upper fifties, Ellen and her brother David, three-thousand miles from their native Scotland, left Ellis Island on a ferry, headed for their first home in the United States. It was with the
Curley family at 207 Randolph Street in Passaic, New Jersey, in the heart of one of America’s major textile centers. They had paid for their passage, they had fifty dollars between them, and they had a place to stay. Quickly, Ellen found work on the night shift in a local textile mill, probably at the Botany Mill.

Ellen and David were followed three months later by another brother, Michael Hurle, who first went home to Barrhead to visit his brother Edward, before he and a friend, Thomas Dougall, a twenty-three year old pastry baker, left for America. Dougall left his wife Elizabeth behind at 374 Main Street, not far from the old Dawson home at number 330. The two young men departed Glasgow on July 30, 1921 aboard the SS Columbia, arriving in New York on August 7, 1921. Michael’s older brother David met them at Ellis Island and served as Michael’s official sponsor into the United States. At this time, the young Dawsons were still living with the Curleys. Michael Hurle found work in his trade, which is not known, and according to his father got “well paid for doing it.”

Meanwhile, back in Millgate, the economic conditions worsened. Patrick’s health began to decline, the working members of the family had their work hours reduced to half time, and Mary lost more than a month’s work when the iron door to the cellar fell on her hand. The family received good reports from America, as Patrick told Edward in a letter dated November 7, 1921. “They are fairly enjoying the country. They say that it is the place to live in comfort if we were all together and that won’t be long if father’s helth (sic) would improve…we are fed up some of our family in one place and us in (another), for we have had plenty of that, but it can’t be helped it is our luck and we have got to put up with it. Surely thing (sic) will come to our liking soon.”
Unfortunately, Ellen’s father, did not make the journey. He died on June 19, 1922 at 31 Hey’s Building in Millgate. He was fifty-three and was working as a wooden box maker. The cause of his death was listed by Dr. J. F. O’Brien as stomach cancer, a disease that can be directly attributed to his work in the Shank’s foundry in Barrhead.  

Death struck twice that summer, because on August 23, 1922, barely two months after Annie lost her husband Patrick, she lost her mother, Ellen Halford, the last of Ellen’s grandparents. Ellen Halford died at her home in Newton Place, Nitshill, where she had lived for more than thirty years. She was seventy-seven years old and the cause of death was listed as heart disease.

With her husband and parents dead, and three of her children already in the United States, Annie sailed from Liverpool on October 14, 1922, aboard the SS Baltic. Traveling with her were her five youngest children, daughters Anna and Grace, and sons Richard, Joseph and John. David Dawson met Annie and the younger children at Ellis Island, served as their official sponsor and took them to their first home in the United States, 207 Randolph Street in Passaic. Although there is no official record, it is hard to imagine that, after a separation of more than eighteen months, Ellen did not accompany David to meet the family.

Ellen’s two oldest siblings did not make the journey. Edward, her oldest brother, remained in Barrhead with his wife Margaret. Mary, Ellen’s oldest sister, entered a convent in England. According to Mary’s niece, the order was either the Sisters of the Poor or the Sisters of Mercy. In later years, Mary moved to the United States and worked as a housekeeper for a priest, and Edward and his wife Margaret also joined the family in America in the early 1960s.
Passaic, New Jersey in the 1920s was similar and yet very different from Barrhead. It was an industrial community on the outskirts of New York City, the largest urban center in the United States, just as Barrhead was on the fringe of Scotland’s largest industrial city. While Barrhead had several different local industries and a relatively homogeneous labor force, Passaic was a major textile center and one of the most ethnically diverse communities in America. While the ethnic diversity must have seemed very strange to this Scottish family, the concentration of textile mills offered an ideal destination. According to the occupations listed on the immigration manifests at Ellis Island, almost every member of the Dawson family was an experienced textile worker. Ellen and her sister Annie were weavers, Grace was a cotton winder, and Richard was a cotton daffer. Older brothers David and Michael listed themselves as laborers, although both had worked in textile mills. Ellen’s mother said she was a domestic worker, but she had been a power-loom weaver. The two youngest children, Joseph and John, ages nine and eight, were listed as “scholars” in 1922, but by 1930 they were both working in local textile mills.

More importantly, the arrival of Annie and the younger children in Passaic gave the Dawson family the opportunity to have their own home again. Moving out of the Curley family residence on Randolph Street, the Dawsons found their own place to live at 194 President Street, in a densely populated neighborhood, a short walk from the Botany Mill, the largest textile factory in the area and the place where Ellen worked. This new neighborhood proves a clear indication of Passaic’s ethnic diversity. Living on the same block with the Dawsons were individuals born in Yugoslavia, Russia, Hungary, Austria, Germany and Poland. Their occupations were equally varied, including a steam fitter, butcher, cigar maker, plumber, carpenter,
salesman, office clerk and teacher. On President Street, the Dawsons rented half of a
house owned by a retired Russian immigrant named Solomon Alexander. In 1929, at
least seven members of the Dawson family lived in the house, along with six
members of the Alexander family.\textsuperscript{68}

During these early years in Passaic, the Dawson family adjusted to life in
America and Ellen worked as a weaver. However, in late 1925, Ellen’s life changed
dramatically. Starting in October of that year, the unskilled textile workers of Passaic,
under the leadership of a communist labor activist named Albert Weisbord, began a
massive strike against the Passaic area mills, a strike that ultimately involved more
than 16,000 unskilled textile workers.\textsuperscript{69} Botany was at the center of the strike and
Ellen quickly became one of the strike leaders.

As the sixteen-month strike unfolded, Ellen served as a member of the Botany
Worsted Mill’s strike committee and was secretary of the umbrella committee, the
United Front Committee of Passaic Textile Workers. After the American Federation
of Labor (AFL) took the lead in the Passaic strike, she became financial secretary for
the AFL’s United Textile Workers of America’s (UTW) newly chartered Local #1603
in Passaic. During the strike, she marched on picket lines that were often met with
violent confrontations with local police and thugs hired or inspired by local mill
owners. She traveled around the country in an effort to build support for the striking
workers among government officials and workers’ groups, while also helping to raise
relief funds for the strikers and their families. These activities helped establish her as
one of the leading women labor activists in the communist-led campaign to better the
working conditions of unskilled textile workers, especially women and immigrant
workers. When the strike finally ended, the workers of Passaic had gained the right to
have their union recognized by the companies, a first for unskilled textile workers in America.

It was during this strike that Ellen became known as “the Little Orphan of the Strikers.” Exactly how she got this nickname is unclear. The fact that she was single, fatherless, and just barely over five-feet tall must have contributed. Regardless, it was a title that was used in news articles about her for several years thereafter.70

Unquestionably, the 1926 Passaic textile strike changed Ellen’s life. It transformed her from an anonymous weaver into a prominent labor activist. Using her new position as an officer of the Passaic local of the United Textile Workers, she participated in several of the most famous events of the late 1920s. In 1927, for example, she joined in the campaign to save Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, two Italian immigrant workers convicted of the 1920 murders of a paymaster and a security guard outside a shoe factory in South Braintree, Massachusetts. Despite evidence that many independent observers considered inconclusive, the two men were ultimately executed. Their case attracted international attention, and numerous liberal groups sought to save them from the electric chair.71 Even after the two men exhausted all of their legal options, supporters continued to demonstrate for their release. Ellen joined other leading labor representatives in demonstrations in both New York and Boston during the final days before their execution.72

Ellen also participated in a variety of women’s rights activities. In 1927, she traveled to Russia – at the time, Russia was the only country in the world with a functioning communist government. As a member of the American Women’s Delegation to Soviet Russia, Ellen made the journey with leading women journalists, and women representatives of other prominent organizations.73
An account of the trip drew specific attention to the changes in women’s rights that occurred in Russia after the revolution of 1917, and how women in Soviet Russia had more basic rights than their American counterparts. “It is painful to patriotic Americans to recognize how far their country lags behind Soviet Russia in its treatment of women. Outside the field of suffrage, the American constitution fails to establish the equality of women.” While the rights of women in Russia were certainly exaggerated, the plight of American working women was not.

During 1928, Ellen was involved in the planning and implementation of International Women’s Day celebrations in New York City. Despite reports in several different publications before and immediately following the event, she later insisted that she was not a speaker at the event. Three days after the celebration, the New York Times printed a retraction, noting “Miss Dawson said yesterday that the report had caused her embarrassment as a member of the Textile Workers Association of Passaic. She denied having spoken at or having attended the meeting.”

Regardless, it seems highly probable that Ellen participated in the celebration. The most viable explanation for her denial is the increasing scrutiny being focused on her activities by the Untied Textile Workers, the union she represented at the time. The UTW was part of the male dominated, anticommunist American Federation of Labor, and the union did not look favorably on her left-wing activities.

Six weeks after the Times retraction, Ellen was involved in a second major textile strike – the New Bedford, Massachusetts strike of 1928, a strike that ultimately involved more than 30,000 workers. No longer a striking worker with a leadership role in a local strike, Ellen assumed the role of labor organizer. In New Bedford, she worked with all of the strikers, but especially with the women workers who were a majority of the textile workers in New Bedford. Ellen helped organize and direct
their activities, helped keep them motivated, and helped expand the strike to other textile centers within New England. She was what those opposed to the strike often called “an outside agitator,” but from the perspective of the New Bedford workers, she was one of them. She was a textile worker, an immigrant, and a woman who had fought the mill owners in the violent Passaic strike and won. In many ways, she provided New Bedford workers, especially immigrant women workers, with an important role model. They saw her as a courageous woman willing to stand up for what she believed. The depth of her involvement in the New Bedford strike, and her fearless attitude toward confrontations with the establishment, can be clearly heard in her response to an interrogation by the local police chief at the end of the strike. Asked if she had been arrested in New Bedford, she quipped: “So many times I can’t count them.”

The New Bedford strike pitted the skilled workers against the unskilled workers, and as a result exacerbated Ellen’s relationship with the United Textile Workers’ Union. The unskilled workers of New Bedford were united under the banner of the communist-led United Front Committees, the same group that led the striking workers during most of the Passaic strike in 1926. As a result, Ellen and the other communist activists came in direct conflict with the New Bedford Textile Council, which included skilled unions represented by the American Federation of Labor. This proved to be the final straw as far as the UTW national leadership was concerned.

On September 11, 1928, Ellen was thrown out of the United Textile Workers Union at the group’s annual convention. As the Daily Worker reported, UTW officials did not trouble themselves “to offer an explanation for their actions, despite the fact that Ellen and other communist associates (were) accredited delegates from
Locals…of the Passaic U.T.W.” However, Ellen and her associate Eli Keller were given four hours to defend themselves. “Instead of defending themselves…(they) launched into an attack against the U.T.W. officials.” The two branded the UTW’s action in New Bedford as “strikebreaking,” and insisted that membership in both the UTW and the communist backed Textile Mill Committee was appropriate. 78

The conflict between the skilled and unskilled workers was the key motivation for her removal from the United Textile Workers. “The expulsion of Keller and Dawson from the convention comes simultaneously with the bitter fight which the 28,000 New Bedford textile workers are waging against the U.T.W. to sell out the struggle which is now in its twenty-second week.”79 Regardless, Ellen’s removal was not the last word. In fact, it proved to be the beginning of a new textile union.

On the following day, Ellen and Keller were joined by four other UTW delegates – Gus Deak and John Di Santo, delegates from other Passaic locals, Philip Lipshitz of the Silk Workers and Sarah Chernow of the Knit Goods Workers. All six individuals announced “their complete severance with the reactionary U.T.W., and declared their intention of participating in the convention called by Textile Mill Committees for the establishment of a national union of textile workers.”80 The six said they felt forced to leave because they were “convinced that the U.T.W. is no more than a company union, serving the interests of the employers rather than those of the workers.” The group referred specifically to UTW actions against the communist activists, noting, “In the Passaic situation we cited the rejection by the U.T.W. officials of Albert Weisbord, militant leader of the Passaic workers and the failures of (Thomas F.) MacMahon (president of the UTW) to gain the confidence of the workers, because of his collaboration with the bosses and other strikebreaking agencies.” The group pointed to MacMahon’s address to the convention where he
called for collaboration with many of the very groups that had opposed the unskilled workers in both Passaic and New Bedford, specifically “church organizations, clubs, (and) manufacturers’ associations.” They also attacked him for the expulsion of Ellen and Keller, explaining that the two activists were “militant leaders of the Passaic struggle who have well proven their loyalty to the textile workers, (and their removal) is indicative of the drive…to rid the union of all honest, fighting elements.”

On September 22 and 23, 1928, the communist backed Textile Mill Committees met in New York City and launched their new union – the National Textile Workers’ Union of American (NTWU). Attended by 169 delegates, approximately one-third of them women, the delegates came from twenty-one cities, including communities in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island. The new union reported a membership of 18,320. “The delegates, however, claimed to represent 113,623 additional workers, or a total of 131,943.” Albert Weisbord, who was the organizer behind the convention and the new union, was elected national secretary. Ellen was named first vice president, the first women to be elected to a national leadership position in an American textile union. She was also one of three women named to the NTWU’s thirteen-member National Executive Committee. Joining Ellen were Sarah Chernow and Sonia Karess. Together they established a subcommittee on women and directed that every NTWU local have a women’s committee. Women’s issues were central to the new union, and under Ellen’s leadership the new union articulated a comprehensive agenda for the improvement of pay and working conditions for women in America’s textile industry. Specific goals included:

1. Equal pay for equal work.
2. Minimum wage for women.
3. Elimination of night work for women.
4. Prohibiting women from heavy and dangerous occupations within the textile industry.
5. Four months’ paid vacation for childbirth – two months before and two months after.
6. Allowing working mothers time off to nurse infant children.
7. Free childcare, under the supervision of the union.
8. Rest rooms for women workers.⁸³

The NTWU’s concern for the needs of women workers was unique at a time when the American Federation of Labor continually failed to address the specific needs of women textile workers. This concern for women, however, was highly representative of the communist workers’ approach, which saw working women as a massive and untapped resource for social change. Juliet Stuart Poyntz, director of Work Among Women and a close associate of Ellen’s, noted in a 1928 memorandum to leaders of the Workers (Communist) Party of America, that every means must be used “to win working women for the program of class struggle, and to draw them in as large numbers as possible into political activity.”⁸⁴

After the convention, Ellen returned to New Bedford, continuing her efforts in support of textile workers there and in Fall River. In December 1928, Ellen was arrested by Federal authorities in New Bedford in an effort to revoke her United States citizenship, which she had received earlier that year. As the American Civil Liberties Union reported, the government contended that because she believed in communism, she could not honestly have taken the oath to uphold the United States Constitution.⁸⁵

Deportation was a very serious threat. It was one of the most effective means the United States government had for eliminating foreign-born radicals who challenged the established system.⁸⁶ Deportation was also an intimidating force that helped to silence immigrant activists who remained in the country. In fact, an unnamed official of the Labor Department was quoted in a New Bedford newspaper
saying that he “would deport the Red Agitators.” In New Bedford alone, at least three of the strike leaders were ultimately deported, including one woman who was forced out of the country more than twenty years after the strike.

In February 1929, Ellen attended the Sixth National Convention of the Workers (Communist) Party of America, during a convention dominated by Jay Lovestone and his followers. At the convention, Ellen was named to the party’s Central Executive Committee, “one of the highest positions in the American party.”

At the end of March 1929, Ellen became involved in what was perhaps the most notable event of her career as a labor activist – the 1929 strike at the Loray Mill in Gastonia, North Carolina. As the first woman organizer to arrive on the scene, Ellen played a pivotal role in a strike that is considered by many to be the most infamous strike in the history of the Southern textile industry. Sent to Gastonia by Albert Weisbord to assist Fred Beal, with whom she had worked in New Bedford and Passaic, she arrived just days before the strike began. On March 30, 1929, she was the first speaker to address workers at a rally near the Loray Mill, one of the largest textile mills in the South. This Saturday afternoon rally was the union’s first public meeting in Gastonia.

The Loray Strike began on Monday, April 1, after mill bosses began firing workers who had been seen at the mass rally two days earlier. Beal called a strike and by the end of the day the mill was closed. Again, Ellen was a key speaker at a mass meeting of workers. As a reporter for the *Charlotte Observer* recorded, “The crowning speech was made by Miss Ellen Dawson, woman’s organizer and agitator.” Two days later the Observer published a three column photo of Ellen speaking to a crowd of strikers, along with a smaller head shot. The headline above the large photo read, “WOMAN AGITATOR SPURS STRIKE. The caption below explained,
“STIRS MILL WOMEN – One of the leaders in the Loray mill strike in Gastonia is Miss Ellen Dawson, who has been devoting her principal efforts toward stirring up the women of the community...she is shown addressing an audience in true ‘soap box’ fashion.” There can be little doubt that at Loray Ellen was at the peak of her career as one of the leading activists in the fight to organize the textile workers of America. Despite the subsequent involvement of other women activists in the Gastonia strike, women who represented a variety of organizations, Ellen had two unique characteristics that distinguished her from her colleagues. She was the only woman organizer with experience as a worker in a textile mill. In fact, at age 28, she was already partially deaf from having spent half of her life as a mill worker. In addition, her Scottish birth and accent provided a unique bond with Southern textile workers, a majority of whom were of Scottish descent.

Ellen’s success as an activist in Gastonia is evident in the fact that she was the first NTWU organizer to become a target for the forces opposing the strike. On April 18, Ellen was arrested on charges of immigration fraud. Her arrest rated a banner headline on page one of the *Gastonia Daily Gazette*. According to the news article, she “was arrested...just after she had finished a speech of most incendiary tone to a group of strikers in the Loray community.” *Labor’s News* reported, “Ellen Dawson, heroine of mill strikes in Passaic, Paterson and New Bedford, has been arrested in Gastonia on a federal immigration charge which was used against her in New Bedford. The case in New Bedford was later dropped, but revived in Gastonia to embarrass the strike’s most effective women’s organizer.”

Ellen’s arrest was made by U.S. Deputy Marshal M.C. Coin, who served the warrant immediately after Ellen “finished an impassioned speech to the strikers who had assembled at the regular open-air meeting place in the rear of the demolished...
Loray union’s headquarters.” Her arrest, according to one Charlotte newspaper, “caused a wild commotion among the strikers attending the meeting, but Miss Dawson herself seemed little perturbed.” The marshal, who started to arrest her prior to her speech, had allowed her to finish her speech to the workers.

One reporter noted, “The young woman…is very small and of an aggressive temperament. In her talk preceding her arrest she explained that, ‘I’m not scared of policemen for I’ve been around so many of them’…She told the strikers not to fear policemen’s clubs knocking their heads. ‘I’ve had a lot of ‘em knocking mine.’” She ended her comments by urging the workers to continue “fighting for their rights regardless of what becomes of us who are organizing you.”

She was taken before a federal commissioner in Charlotte who ordered her held on $2,000 bond, less than the $2,500 requested by the federal prosecutor in New Jersey. She was accompanied to the hearing by Tom Jimison, the strikers’ local attorney, and Carl Reeve, representing the International Labor Defense organization. Reeve told reporters, “It’s just a frame up…She has been charged with exactly the same thing at New Bedford, where she helped in the strike there last year, and nothing ever came of it. The case, in fact, was dropped because of lack of evidence.”

According to Thomas Arrowsmith, assistant U.S. attorney in Trenton, New Jersey where the charges had been filed, the government believed she had “another woman misrepresent the length of time she had been in this country when she obtained her citizenship papers. She obtained her papers in Passaic County Court by producing a witness who testified she had been in this country for the required five years. The government maintained she had been here only one year.” The charges were completely fallacious. Ellen had entered the United States on May 9, 1921.
and received her U.S. citizenship in the summer of 1928, after living in the country for more than seven years.\(^{104}\)

After the hearing, and before she was put in jail, Marshal Coin took Ellen out to dinner, explaining that he made it a practice never to “put anybody in jail hungry.”\(^{105}\) Two days later, the Charlotte newspaper ran a photograph of Ellen in jail.\(^{106}\) The headline above the photograph read, “STILL BEHIND BARS.”\(^{107}\) She was bailed out that evening and immediately returned to Gastonia where she continued her organizing activities with the Loray Mill strikers.

On April 24, Ellen was arrested, this time outside the Loray Mill, leading striking workers on the picket line. The only person in the picket line arrested, “she was carried to the police station and almost immediately released on her own recognizance.”\(^{108}\) On April 25, she was once again arrested, this time with Carl Reeve, because they were identified as the picket line leaders.\(^{109}\)

At the end of May, Ellen left North Carolina and returned to New Jersey to face the immigration charges. Her early departure from Gastonia proved fortuitous from her perspective, because it came approximately a week before the Gastonia police chief was killed at a tent city housing striking workers and their families.\(^{110}\) As a result, unlike her colleagues who remained in Gastonia, Ellen escaped being charged with the murder. According to one account, she may have sensed the impending doom that would quickly draw the eyes of the world to Gastonia and the plight of the Loray workers. Fellow activist Vera Buch (Weisbord) later wrote, “full of smiles, (Ellen) bade us goodbye. I couldn’t help thinking, did she have to be so completely joyful to get out of it? Could there not have been one moment of regret, one thought for those left behind? Every departure brought its trauma, where so few were willing to come. I used to have dreams at times of myself left all alone there, all other staff
members having fled.” Ellen returned to Gastonia at least once that summer, but only briefly. Her attention was focused on other activities.

During the Trenton trial, she was defended by ACLU attorney Isaac Shorr of New York City. Shorr said that the charges had been “trumped-up” by Charles Wood in a conspiracy with the American Federation of Labor. According to The (New York) World, “Wood, whose official task is to meet labor leaders and capitalists and hear all sides of industrial disputes,…has been particularly active during the last year in battling the more radical leaders.” The newspaper went on to explain that,

The first record of Wood’s active campaign against Miss Dawson is contained in a letter from Wood to H. P. Woertendyke, Divisional Director of Naturalization in Newark, dated Oct. 27, 1928. In that letter he admitted that Miss Dawson had been in the country long enough to obtain her naturalization, but said that he believed one of the witnesses she had used to prove she had been here for the proper length of time had not actually known her for that period. Most of the letter, however, was devoted to detailing Miss Dawson’s activities in the cause of labor as an argument for action against her.

Wood’s letter was sent approximately six weeks prior to her first arrest on federal immigration fraud charges in New Bedford, during early December 1928.

On October 23, 1929, Federal District Judge William Clark ruled in Ellen’s favor, saying, “I won’t allow my court to be used to persecute any one regardless of their…affiliations. I feel there has been a mistake in this case, and if this defendant was sent to jail a great injustice would be done.” The judge then ordered Wood to appear in his court to explain his actions. Because of Ellen’s involvement in the Gastonia strike, and considering the fact that Judge Clark issued his ruling just days after the conviction of Fred Beal and six others for the murder of Gastonia Police Chief Aderholt, the following remark must have been directed toward the North Carolina judicial system. Clark said, “Differing from some southern judges, I do not consider her political opinions material in a prosecution.”
As for his comment connecting Wood and the American Federation of Labor, ACLU attorney Shorr said, “I cannot prove it, but I know it is so because I know Wood’s connections. He is one that uses the Department of Labor to carry out the purposes of the American Federation of Labor.”\(^\text{116}\) Wood’s actions in New Bedford and Gastonia support Shorr’s allegation.

Finally, as the American Civil Liberties Union later noted, “One of the toughest jobs confronting the representatives of civil liberties is to get any redress whatever for victims of official lawlessness...Among the numerous actions brought in 1930 and 1931 unhappily no success can be reported. But the intangible effect of these actions in restraining (government) officials may have been considerable.” The ACLU singled out the government agent who sought to have Ellen deported. “Conspicuous among these actions was a demand on the Secretary of Labor for the discipline and removal of Charles G. Wood, red-baiting agent of the Bureau of Conciliation, who used his position to break left-wing strikes and to void contracts with left-wing unions, identifying his activities with professional patriotic societies.” The ACLU further noted how, “He also sought to secure revocation of the citizenship of Ellen Dawson, left-wing strike leader. For this he was scored (sic) by Federal Judge Clark in Newark. The Department of Labor disavowed certain of his activities, but he continued them ‘personally.’”\(^\text{117}\)

As a result of Judge Clark’s decision, Ellen’s U.S. citizenship was confirmed and she escaped the deportation suffered by countless other immigrant activists during the period.

Having barely missed being charged with murder in Gastonia and having survived the immigration fraud charges, Ellen found herself under attack from the new leadership of the Communist Party. As a supporter of Jay Lovestone, Ellen had
been named to the party’s Central Executive Committee in February 1929. In March, when Ellen headed south to Gastonia, Lovestone had gone to Russia where he hoped to resolve problems with Joseph Stalin, the Soviet dictator. By the time he returned to the United States in June, he had been stripped of all his power and expelled from the party. As Ted Morgan, Lovestone’s biographer explained, Lovestone “was a career Communist, which was not unlike having had a career at General Motors or the Republican Party. Promotion depended upon pleasing the head office. Cliques competed for advantage. Management was recruited on the basis of dependability rather than brilliance.”

During his trip to Russia, Lovestone committed the worst of all offenses, he made Stalin angry. As a result, Lovestone was exceedingly fortune to escape with his life. As Morgan noted, Lovestone’s “biggest mistake was that he thought the Comintern was a debating society, that he could go to Moscow and deal with Stalin as an equal, as if they were the captains of rival debating teams. He learned the hard way that a branch office cannot dictate to headquarters, that a soldier in the field cannot oppose his own high command, and that the Comintern was not a seminar but one of the levers of Stalin’s rise to power.”

Ellen, as a supporter of Lovestone, suffered the same fate. She quickly lost her position on the Executive Committee of the party and was expelled from the National Textile Workers’ Union. As Lovestone himself noted in a letter to the membership of the Communist Party USA, “The biggest crime of the new ‘Leadership’ is the carrying of the Party fight into the mass organizations and in such manner destroying them…This motto of ‘Get rid of the Lovestonites’…must be stopped before it is too late.” By mass organizations, Lovestone was referring to unions and other organizations that attracted large numbers of supporters. In making
his point, he specifically pointed to the expulsion of Ellen as one of the leaders of the textile union.\textsuperscript{122}

Ellen wrote about her expulsion from the National Textile Workers’ Union. Her account of the NTWU convention provides a meaningful picture of the transition that was affecting the communist movement in the United States. “The recent convention… is a good example of how an organization with the greatest possibilities for growth can be crippled and paralyzed by false policies and destructive methods. It is a real warning to all…revolutionary workers of what is ahead for us…The ‘new line’ of the Party (has) already done great damage to the Union.”\textsuperscript{123}

One of the critical changes noted by Ellen was the way convention delegates were selected. Rather than being a worker-driven organization, the NTWU was transformed into a tool of the Communist Party USA. As Ellen explained, “The Convention was prepared on a narrow factional basis. No attempt was made to stimulate the initiative and activity of the workers and to elect delegates from below. On the contrary the mechanical hold of the Party was paraded at every opportunity and ‘control from above’ was the order of the day.” The new leaders of the union did not tolerate any dissent. “In getting delegates to the Convention all efforts were made to keep out…everybody…who was suspected of having an opinion of his own or expressing any criticism.”\textsuperscript{124}

These new leaders of the National Textile Workers Union also reflected a lack of worker participation – not one of the new leaders was an active textile worker, and only one had any experience working in a textile mill, and that had been many years earlier. Instead, they represented various groups under the control of the Communist Party. “Hardly any of those who really participated in the militant textile struggles of the last four years (Passaic, New Bedford, South) are now in the leadership.
Neither Weisbord,\textsuperscript{125} nor Keller, nor Dawson, nor even Murdock (sic) is on the big council. The new secretary of (the) Union…never worked in a textile mill in his life.”\textsuperscript{126}

Ellen did not go quietly. At one point during the convention the new leaders attempted to have her physically removed from the convention by what she called their “strong arm squad.” Their efforts to evict her from the convention were unsuccessful, but her efforts to speak to the convention were equally unsuccessful. Comparing her experiences of being expelled from two different unions, Ellen noted, “It is interesting that this is the second textile convention from which…I have been ‘thrown out.’ We were expelled from the convention of the United Textile Workers in 1928, just before the formation of the N.T.W.U. But there were given the floor for four hours to defend ourselves.”\textsuperscript{127}

Throughout the convention, Ellen and the other supporters of Jay Lovestone, were continually accused of being “renegades” and “right-wingers.” In fact, as Ellen noted, “Thruout (sic) the whole Convention…(we) were bitterly attacked…this seemed to be the main task of the convention.” Looking back at her final NTWU convention, Ellen’s focus remained on the plight of the textile workers. “The miserable conditions of the textile workers in the United States, their lack of organization and the continual betrayals of the A. F. of L. burocrats (sic) makes the development of a militant union movement among them absolutely necessary.” From her own experiences she noted, “The workers are becoming more and more ready to struggle. In the past the National Textile Workers Union accomplished very much in the face of the greatest difficulties in supplying real leadership to the textile workers.” Ellen believed that the new leadership of the NTWU “constitutes a great menace to the Union. It must be overcome if the Union is going to develop.”\textsuperscript{128} The basic
problem identified by Ellen – lack of worker involvement in the union -- was never overcome, and the National Textile Workers’ Union ultimately faded into history, never achieving the goals that its original founders – the Passaic activists – envisioned.

Before the year was over, Lovestone and two hundred of his most loyal followers began the formation of their own party, a group of dissenters who pledged to fight “the anti-Leninist party-wreckers.” By October, the newly formed Communist Party of the U.S.A. (Majority Group) elected a national council and began production of their own publication, *Revolutionary Age*. Ellen was elected to the council and also served on the editorial board of the publication.129

Lovestone’s new party was a majority group in name only. Membership never exceeded five hundred. In 1941, Lovestone’s little party folded when he joined the American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations. He had been introduced to George Meany, head of the AFL-CIO, by his rabbi, David Dubinsky, who reportedly told Meany, “The son of a bitch is okay, he’s been converted.”130

How long Ellen remained active with the Lovestoneites is not clear. She is included in a group that Robert J. Alexander says probably remained with Lovestone until 1941.131 However, there is no evidence that she was involved with the group after 1931. Prior to that point, she was actively involved in a variety of activities. She represented the group at the 1930 May Day Unity Celebration in New York, helped to form a Textile Unity Committee, raised funds for the group, wrote articles for *Revolutionary Age*, and spoke to groups in the Passaic area.132 Although the exact date is not clear, it appears highly probably that Ellen’s life as a radical activist ended at some point during the early 1930s,
The last known reference of Ellen working as a communist activist was on May 9, 1931, when *Revolutionary Age* reported that she spoke at a local banquet of the Majority Group. The meeting was at the group’s Passaic headquarters, located at 63 Dayton Avenue – just a few doors down from 25 Dayton Avenue, the first offices of the United Front Committee, opened by Albert Weisbord at the beginning of the Passaic textile strike of 1926.

In 1931, the Great Depression was well underway and by 1935 one out of every four workers in the United States was unemployed. No longer a member of the Soviet controlled Communist Party USA, it appears that Ellen, like so many American workers of the time, focused on survival. From the available records, it is clear she continued working in the Passaic area until her retirement in 1965. During this thirty-five year period, she married, endured the death of her mother and her older sister, Mary, assisted several of her Scottish relatives in moving to the United States, and returned to her native Scotland on brief holidays. During this time, the American economy and the life of the average worker changed as well. Under the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, workers were guaranteed certain basic rights which had previously not existed and a social safety net was established for older workers. During World War II America’s industrial base was revitalized, the economy boomed, and for the remainder of Ellen’s life, the economic standing of textile workers in the United States improved.

Like her earlier years, her later life remains sketchy. The key events have been found, but what her day-to-day life was like stays shrouded in mystery. Her memories were rarely shared; her experiences were seldom discussed. If she wrote about her radical days, nothing has been found. She simply labored as a weaver and returned to being an anonymous American worker.
On April 27, 1935, Ellen married Louis Kanki at St. Nicholas Roman Catholic Church at 153 Washington Place in Passaic. The service was performed by Father William V. Devine, and the witnesses were Ellen’s brother Richard and Louis’s sister Margaret. It was a first marriage for both of them.\textsuperscript{133} At the time of the wedding, Ellen lived at 506 Harrison Street in Passaic, just three blocks from where her family first settled at 194 President Street. Louis Kanki lived across the Passaic River, at 127 Jewel Street in Garfield, still only a short walk away from President Street.\textsuperscript{134}

Laszlo “Louis” Kanki was more than three years younger than his wife. He was born April 10, 1904 in the town of Mor, west of Budapest, in what was then Austria-Hungary. His ethnicity was Magyar Hungarian.\textsuperscript{135} On June 15, 1905, Louis’s father, Gyorg Kanki, a 32-year-old laborer, migrated to the United States aboard the \textit{SS Slavonia} from the port of Fiume, Carnaro, Triesti, Austria. He arrived at Ellis Island two weeks later, on July 2, 1905. There he was met by his brother who lived in Passaic.\textsuperscript{136} The following year, the two-year-old Louis followed his father with his mother, Gyargyne, who was 28 at the time, and his four-month-old sister, Margit. They too left from the port of Fiume, departing on October 18, 1906 aboard the \textit{SS Carpathia}.\textsuperscript{137} Gyargyne, who was only four feet, eleven inches tall, arrived at Ellis Island with her two small children on November 6, 1906. According to U.S. Immigration records, she had $6. Records also indicate that she could read and write, something Ellen’s mother Annie never learned to do. The father, Gyorg, met his family at Ellis Island and took them to their new home at 139 President Street, just a few doors away from where Ellen and her family lived during most of the 1920s.\textsuperscript{138} How Louis and Ellen met is unknown, however, they were neighbors on President Street during Ellen’s earliest years in the United States and she walked past his home on her way to work at the Botany Mill. They also may have met on the job, both were
weavers, or as part of the various union activities in which she was involved. She was, after all, a prominent figure in Passaic during the second half of the 1920s. However, no record has been found of Louis being involved in any communist labor activities, and so the couple may not have met until after Ellen’s days as a communist activist were over.

After their marriage, Ellen and Louis moved to 148 Ackerman, Apartment # 2 in Clifton, where they lived until after World War II. The apartment, according to Betty Dawson, a Scottish niece who visited the couple in New Jersey as a child, was small and drab, probably not very different from the homes Ellen had known her entire life. “It was a flat, kind of dull. I didn’t get an impression of light.” Louis was a laborer, working in 1946 for FWCO at 662 Main Avenue in Passaic. Betty thought his job had something to do with coal, but his death certificate indicated that he was a weaver.

On September 28, 1936, seventeen months after Ellen’s wedding, her mother, Annie Dawson, died at the age of 69. On October 1, 1936 she was buried in St. Nicholas Cemetery in Lodi, New Jersey. The burial plot was purchased by Ellen’s older brother Michael Dawson, and would ultimately be the final resting spot for four Dawson women.

Throughout her life, Ellen maintained contact with her Scottish relatives. Several moved to New Jersey, where she helped them find employment, and others moved back to Scotland. David Dawson was one who returned to Scotland before the start of World War II, and even though Ellen encouraged him to return to the United States, he remained in Scotland for the remainder of his life.

During World War II, Ellen collected outgrown clothing from her nieces and nephews in the United States and sent the clothing along with badly needed items of
food to family members living in Scotland. Ellen’s niece Betty Dawson later recalled how exciting it was to receive a package from her Aunt Nell\textsuperscript{143} in America, noting that “She was very good in that way… sending parcels here during the war.”\textsuperscript{144}

In her later years, Ellen rarely talked about her days as a radical labor activist,\textsuperscript{145} nor did other members of the family speak of her activities. In Scotland, Betty Dawson said her Aunt Nell “never talked about her past life.” As for her own parents, Betty said they “didn’t talk about unpleasant things in front of the children… All we heard was that she was under suspicion of being part of the communist party and that she went to meetings and spoke at meetings.”\textsuperscript{146}

On February 25, 1943, the Chicago Field Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation generated a report on Ellen. It detailed her radical activities through 1929, but ended there. The opening paragraph of the report was highly censored when it was released under the Freedom of Information Act. Even after an appeal was filed, the FBI declined to explain why the report was generated, citing the need to protect (1) their internal agency practices, (2) the privacy of FBI special agents, and (3) confidential informants.\textsuperscript{147} Albert and Vera Buch Weisbord were living in Chicago at the time, so it may have had something to do with them. It is a mystery that has yet to be solved.

Around 1950, two of Ellen’s Scottish nieces – Ellen Dawson\textsuperscript{148} and Rita Peacock – came to stay with Ellen and Louis. Also making the trip was Rita’s husband Alec Peacock. “Ellen got jobs for all of them in a textile mill.”\textsuperscript{149} During the later years of her life, Ellen was still working in the textile industry, commuting in the 1950s from her home in Clifton to a tweed factory in neighboring Hackensack, New Jersey.\textsuperscript{150}
During these later years, Ellen traveled to Scotland several times to visit her family, especially her brother David. “She’d come over for three week holidays,” Betty Dawson recalled. On one such visit, Betty said her once radical Aunt Nell “was critical about the way I dressed…my high heels, etc.” Betty said her Uncle Louis came to her rescue. “When she criticized my shoes, he stood up for me and reminded her that the Queen Mother wore high heel shoes.”

This reference to the Queen Mother is particularly significant, since she and Ellen were both born in Scotland during 1900.

Betty Dawson was fond of her Uncle Louis, “He was a rough diamond. I liked him,” she said. Photographs of Kanki during the time clearly show him to have been a physically fit and handsome fellow. As for her Aunt Nell, Betty was not as kind. Betty described her as “Cold, not my favorite aunt…always very stern looking…wasn’t very pleasant…She thought she was the head of the family.” As for the relationship between Ellen and Louis, Betty said, “I think they were probably happy.” Betty also indicated that her father, David Dawson, remained close to his sister Ellen. It was a bond that certainly must have dated back to their voyage together on the SS Cedric when the pair crossed the Atlantic in 1921.

On December 29, 1960, Ellen’s older sister, Mary, who had entered a convent in England when the family moved to the United States, died in Newark, New Jersey and was buried beside her mother in St. Nicholas Cemetery in Lodi, New Jersey.

At some point, probably after the death of her mother in 1936, Mary had left the convent and moved to America, working as a housekeeper for a local priest.

In the early 1960s, between 1960 and 1963, Ellen’s oldest brother Edward and his wife Margaret moved from Scotland to New Jersey to live with Rita and Alec Peacock. They died in New Jersey in the late 1960s.
In 1965, Ellen finally retired after more than half a century on the job, having worked in textile mills in Scotland, England and the United States. “She was,” her niece recalled, “a very hard worker.” She turned 65 on December 14, 1965 and became eligible for full Social Security benefits. Having fought so hard for worker benefits in her younger days, Ellen must have taken some ironic satisfaction in her government sponsored retirement benefits.

At retirement, Ellen was working as a weaver with Samuel Hird and Sons in Garfield, New Jersey. She and Louis were living at 42 Roland Avenue in Clifton, less than two and a half miles from President Avenue, where her family first settled in Passaic. In the fall of 1966, she and Louis went to Florida for the winter. They stayed in a quiet, uncongested community on the southwest coast, populated in the winter by retired northern workers. It is an area where the sun sets over the water, as it does along the seaside resorts outside Glasgow. It must have been a comfortable place that brought back memories of Scotland.\textsuperscript{156}

At 4 a.m. on April 17, 1967, Ellen died suddenly at her Florida home – Route 3, Box 1436, Punta Gorda, in an unincorporated area known as Charlotte Harbor. She was sixty-six years old. By the time the doctor reached her, she was already dead. Her exact cause of death will not be released by the State of Florida until 2017, however, according to her niece, Ellen “died of a lung complaint contracted during her years working in the mills.”\textsuperscript{157} Like too many industrial workers, Ellen’s death was probably the result of the unhealthy working conditions that were so common in textile mills. Sixty-four years earlier, Ellen’s nineteen year old aunt, Ellen Halford, died of a similar illness.

On the following day, her body was returned to New Jersey, and on April 20, 1967, she was buried in St. Nicholas Cemetery, beside her mother Annie and her
sister Mary. A high funeral mass was performed at St. Nicholas Roman Catholic Church in Passaic at 9:30 a.m. Visitation was held the previous day between 2 and 5 p.m. and 7 and 10 p.m. No record remains as to who may have attended. Gus Deak, who worked with her during the 1926 strike, still lived in the area, and others from that time may have been there. Many members of her family were still alive and most were probably in attendance. They included her brothers Edward and Michael Dawson, both still living in Passaic; her brother Joseph, who lived in Garfield, her brother John, who lived in Littleton, New Hampshire; her sister Annie Dawson Jones, who lived in Passaic; and her sister Grace Hernsdorf, who lived in Wayne, New Jersey.\textsuperscript{158}

When the news of Ellen’s death reached her brother David in Scotland, he broke down in tears. His daughter Anna said it was the only time she could remember seeing her father cry.\textsuperscript{159} No mention of her radical past was made in her obituary. The headline simply read, “Mrs. Louis Kanki, Scotland Native.”\textsuperscript{160}

On July 14, Ellen’s younger sister Annie Dawson Jones died in Clara Maas Hospital, and on July 17, exactly three months after Ellen’s death, she was buried in the St. Nicholas Cemetery beside her mother and two sisters. Michael Dawson was listed as her next of kin.\textsuperscript{161} The four women share a single marker with a cross surrounded by flowers carved into the headstone.\textsuperscript{162} The name “Dawson” appears in large letters. In small letters near the base are carved, “Ellen Kanki 1900-1967, Annie Jones 1903-1967, Mary 1893-1960, Mother 1867-1936.” The four women are the only Dawsons known to be buried in St. Nicholas Cemetery in Lodi. The cemetery, now heavily crowded, clearly demonstrates the ethnic diversity of Passaic and its workers, with names from Eastern and Western Europe, the British Isles and Latin America.
Louis Kanki lived for almost thirty years after Ellen’s death. He remarried, outlived his second wife, Estelle, and died in St. Petersburg, Florida on November 19, 1996 at the age of 92. According to his caregiver, Judith A. Schupbach, Louis lived his final years alone, in an apartment at 5915 18th Street North. According to Schupbach, he never mentioned Ellen, or her radical activities, and there was nothing associated with Ellen among his possessions at the time of his death. Ellen had completely disappeared from his life.
Barrhead will be discussed at length in the Chapter 2 – “Barrhead.”

General Registry of Scotland: Births 1900.


Given the high level of infant mortality in Barrhead during this period, it is highly possible that there were other children that did not survive.

Betty Dawson, oral interview.

Patrick Dawson, letter to Edward Dawson.

Edward’s parents were Michael Dawson, a crofter, and Agnes or Anne Dolan. General Registry of Scotland: Marriages, 1866; Deaths 1906. According to the marriage record, Edward was born around 1834, however, his death record indicates that he was born around 1844. Considering that this was his second marriage, the 1834 date is more likely the correct date.

Mary’s parents were Richard Welsh and Bridget Park or Burke. General Registry of Scotland: Marriages, 1866; Deaths 1909. According to the marriage record, Mary was born around 1840, however, according to her death record, she was born in 1844. Given the normal age of marriage during this time, the 1840 date is probably more accurate.

All references to Edward Dawson’s employment show him as working with the local water works.


The year of Annie’s birth remains a question. On her gravestone, 1867 is the year listed for her birth, however, based on the age listed on her marriage record, she may not have been born until 1869 or 1870.


Edward’s parents were Edward Halford and Mary Ann Smith, General Registry of Scotland: Deaths 1917.

Ellen Halford’s father was Joseph Hurle, a farmer. Her mother is unknown. General Registry of Scotland: Deaths 1922.

General Registry of Scotland: Census 1891.

Betty Dawson, oral interview.

Maggie Dawson may have been Patrick’s sister, although this has not been confirmed.

General Registry of Scotland: Marriages 1893.

Edward’s relationship to Ellen was confirmed by the Manifest of S.S. Columbia, August 7, 1921. His birth year was confirmed by his grand niece, Marie Bradley Chack in an e-mail dated May 25, 2003. No official record of Edward’s birth has been found. The absence of an official record of his birth supports my belief that he was born before his parents were married in 1893. This theory is also supported by the fact that in 1891 both Annie and her sister Mary Halford were no longer living at home with their parents in Nitshill, although there were older male siblings still living with their parents.

General Registry of Scotland: Births 1893 and her gravestone, Lodi, New Jersey.

General Registry of Scotland: Births 1894.

Working conditions at the Shanks’ foundry will be discussed more fully in the next chapter – “Barrhead.”


General Registry of Scotland: Census 1901.

General Registry of Scotland: Census 1901, Village of Nitshill.

This unexplained gap was found by reviewing microfilm copies of the original census sheets on file at the Barrhead Public Library. Edward and Mary Dawson, Patrick’s parents, were also omitted. They lived at 180 Main Street in 1906 and 254 Main Street in 1909. They may have been living in the missing section during the recording of the 1901 Census as well.

Day-to-day life in Barrhead will be discussed more fully in the next chapter – “Barrhead.”

The Barrhead Co-operative Society was an important institution in the village and will be discussed at length in the next chapter – “Barrhead.”

General Registry of Scotland: Births 1903.
The old school was still standing during my visit to Barrhead in 2003. It was being used for the administration of local social services. There is a new Roman Catholic School built on an old industrial site. They could find no records related to Ellen Dawson. Most church and school records were destroyed by fire in the 1950s.

This information was provided by the church secretary on a visit to Barrhead on January 15, 2003. A new church was built approximately a quarter of a mile west of the site of the old church. The surviving cemetery was in disrepair and no Dawson or Halford graves were found.

The others are James Dawson, a laborer residing at 58 Graham Street, Barrhead, and William Dawson, a marble cutter, residing at 32 Gertrude Place, Barrhead.

Britain did not have universal male suffrage until after World War I.

The economic problems and the resulting labor problems will be discussed in the next section.

The migration of the Dawson family from Scotland to England and on to the United States will be discussed in the fourth chapter – “Migration.”

The New York Times provides the most prominent example. It used this title in an April 19, 1929 article concerning Ellen’s arrest on charges of immigration fraud during the Gastonia Strike.

Many still believe that Sacco and Vanzetti were innocent victims. Future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter noted in a March 1927 article in the Atlantic Monthly that the long delays and numerous disclosures turned the case into an international cause célèbre.

Ellen’s participation in New York City demonstrations and her journey to Boston with other labor activists were reported in the August 11, 1927 New York Times.

Others on the trip included journalists Mary Windsor, associate editor of Equal Rights, and Rosa Laddon Hanna, a freelance writer, as well Ella Rush Murray of the National Association for the
Advancement of Colored People, Lucy Gwynne Branham of the American Society for Cultural Relations with Russia, and Harriet Silverman of the Workers’ Health Bureau.

The account noted the failure of the U.S. Constitution to guarantee the social equality for women, pointing to inequities in divorce, guardianship of children, and control of earnings and businesses. It was published in the March 1928 edition of *The Voice of Working Women*, the publication of the Federation of Working Class Women’s Organizations and the February 1928 issue of *The Working Woman*, the publication of the New York Working Women’s Federation. The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation identified both as communist organizations. The quotation is from the FBI File on Ellen Dawson (February 25, 1943) A copy was obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. The original publications have not been found.

The New Bedford, Massachusetts strike of 1928 will be discussed at length in chapter six – “New Bedford.”

Ashley Scrapbook.


...
Gastonia Police Chief Orville Aderholt was killed when police raided the tent city. Although Fred Beal and several others involved with the strike were ultimately convicted of the murder, many questions remain concerning Aderholt’s death. This will be discussed more fully in chapter seven – “Gastonia.” For more detail, consult John Salmond’s book, *Gastonia 1929*.

Charles G. Wood was the U.S. Commissioner of Reconciliation and a former New Bedford newspaper editor. He was in New Bedford when Ellen was charged with immigration fraud, and was in Gastonia during the weeks prior to her being charged a second time.

The World, October 24, 1929.

The terms “New Leadership” and “New Line” refer to the direction and leadership of the Communist Party USA after the expulsion of Jay Lovestone and the takeover of the party by the Comintern.

Lovestone Letter to CPUSA Membership, CPUSA Files, Reel 138, dilo 1820.

*Revolutionary Age*, January 15, 1930.

Albert Weisbord had been removed as NTWU secretary prior to the convention. Keller was selected to replace him, but refused to obey the orders of the new leadership. He too was removed.

*Revolutionary Age*, January 15, 1930.

Six years later, the *SS Carpathia* would be the ship that rescued the survivors of the *SS Titanic*.

SS Carpathia Manifest, November 6, 1906.

SS Slavonia Manifest, July 2, 1905.

Within her family, Ellen was known as Nell or Nellie.

Dawson, Betty, oral interview.

Having survived possible deportation in the late 1920s, Ellen’s silence may have been motivated by fear. This certainly could have been true during the “red scare” following World War II and the Cold War years.

Dawson, Betty, oral interview.

Ellen was a very common name in the Dawson and Halford families. Ellen Dawson herself had an aunt named Ellen.


Dawson, Betty, oral interview.
Dawson, Betty, oral interview.
St. Nicholas Cemetery Records, Deed 1288, Section M., Lot 734.
Ibid.
Ibid.
St. Nicholas Death Register, 1967.
The grave is located at the back of the inner circle drive, behind and to the right of an above ground tomb for the “Family of Samuel Raineri.”
Louis Kanki Certificate of Death.
The Making of a Radical:

Ellen Dawson’s Life in Britain --

Barrhead, Red Clydeside and Migration

Oh, dear me, the world’s ill divided,
Them that work the hardest are aye wi’least provided.

-- Mary Brooksbank¹
Chapter Two – Barrhead

As we seek to overcome the elusiveness of Ellen Dawson, a logical first step is for us to take a closer look at the world in which she lived. By understanding the social forces that shaped her early life, we can better understand her actions during later years. I believe Barrhead provided the foundation for Ellen’s activism. The hardships she endured, as a child and a young worker, fortified her with the strength and the courage required to challenge the established system. The spirit of cooperation that was institutionalized within Barrhead during those years helped to built a sense of community that she took with her to the picket lines of America. And, as a working class village, Barrhead provided Ellen with a perspective of the world that was based on class, rather than ethnicity or race, helping her better understand the doctrine of the communist workers’ party in which she was a leading participant and allowing her to communicate more effectively with diverse groups of workers in the United States.

Looking back, Ellen’s early years in Barrhead appear to be highly representative of working-class life throughout industrial Scotland during the years before and during the first world war. It was a time when the great mass of urban workers lived on the edge, trapped in a routine of near-slave working conditions, with only a few simple pleasures at best. It was a world where the irregularities of life
were usually those caused by accident, illness and death. Unquestionably, it was a world that offered few opportunities to break free of this monotonous cycle.

I began my examination of Ellen’s hometown of Barrhead in 1900 by looking first at the larger world, because this was an era very different from our own. Ellen was, after all, a child of a new century, born when the British Empire, of which the workers of Scotland were a vital part, was still one of the most powerful commercial and military forces in the world. It was also a time when the established order was under siege, when numerous special interest groups pushed hard for change: women in Europe and America campaigned for equality with men; workers throughout the industrialized world fought for fair and equitable treatment from their employers; migration continued to offer countless individuals their only viable chance for economic survival; reform-minded members of the middle-class experimented with new methods for resolving social ills; and technology promised to resolve the world’s problems.

In 1900, people were impressed with the technological achievements that had been made during the nineteenth century, a period that they often labeled “A Century of Progress.” The telephone, the automobile, electricity, and the airplane were all new in the years surrounding Ellen’s birth. Consider the following lists of comparisons presented by one Scottish newspaper that was read in Barrhead. It detailed how dramatically the technology had changed between 1800 and 1900. In the field of transportation, the world moved from the horse to “the bicycle, locomotive and automobile.” Writing progressed from the goose quill pen to “the fountain pen and typewriter.” In the art world, the painter’s brush was joined by “the lithograph, the camera, and colour photography.” Clothing production changed from the hand loom to “the cotton and woolen factory.” The article noted that the number of known
chemical elements grew from twenty-three to eighty-eight. In communication, “beacon signal fires” were replaced by “the telephone and the wireless telegraph.” And, in the field of medicine, “unallieviable pain” was replaced by “aseptics (sic), chloroform, ether and cocaine.” The actual list was much longer, but this sample clearly demonstrates both the optimism and pride individuals of the period had for the advancement of technology. However, the article also ended with a rather insightful warning. “The above summary of scientific progress shows the one side of the shield, but it neglects the other. The development of science has brought us face to face with many social problems, which must be solved under pain of extinction.”

Clearly, the author recognized the uncertainty of the time and the challenges presented by rapidly changing technology. It was technology, after all, that dramatically changed the lives of the individual, moving workers from the farm to the factory.

Such issues were of little concern to Patrick and Annie Dawson. The Dawsons, like the vast majority of working-class families of the period, were trapped in a day-to-day, hand-to-mouth existence where survival was often their only objective. As a result, the joy the family should have felt at Ellen’s arrival was certainly tempered with the financial burden presented by yet another hungry mouth to feed.

If Patrick Dawson read the Glasgow newspaper on the morning of Ellen’s birth, he learned “of a very serious disaster to British arms in South Africa.” It was the middle of the Boer War. He read that Queen Victoria, in the sixty-third year of her reign, had taken a carriage ride from Windsor Castle with the Duchess of York; two hundred lives were lost when an overcrowded Chinese river steamer capsized; and parts of Glasgow, the heart of industrial Scotland, were inflicted with a “vile stink…of what seemed to be sulphuretted hydrogen (that was) positively
overpowering.”³ There was also a report concerning the annual meeting of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies at the Exchange Station Hotel in Liverpool, where a prominent speaker expressed her opinion “that the militarism of the country was one of the greatest hindrances to the cause of women’s suffrage.”

Finally, Patrick probably would have skipped over the newspaper’s only full page advertisement. The ad offered the twenty-five volume *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for £24,⁴ something parents were encouraged to purchase to aid their children’s education and future success in the world. For a laborer like Patrick, £24 was approximately half his annual income, and even a penny, given the expenses associated with a new baby, was probably too dear for him to have spent on the purchase of a morning newspaper.⁵

Moving from this snapshot of the larger world, I began to focus on Ellen’s birthplace. Barrhead, I quickly discovered, was not the romantic Scotland of Highland warriors and imprisoned queens. It was the product of Scotland’s Industrial Revolution, one of numerous villages⁶ begun in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to provide housing for the families who were rapidly abandoning generations of agricultural labor for the promise of a better life as workers in Britain’s new factories. In these villages, workers learned the essentials of the factory, where work was often nothing more than the endless repetition of a few simple tasks, repeated in concert with the tireless movements of power-driven machines. Days were governed by the clock; workers were expected to arrive at a set hour and work according to the dictates of an employer’s time schedule, which granted few and infrequent escapes from the monotony of manufacturing. It was a period of transition when men, women and children moved from the croft (farm), where they had enjoyed at least some degree of independence and self-sufficiency, to places such as Barrhead
where almost every aspect of their lives depended upon their weekly wage. It was also a period when married women, who had been more equal partners with their men in the day-to-day workings of the croft, became dependent upon the wages of others, most importantly the wages of their husband and their older children.

Barrhead was one of Scotland’s earliest industrial towns, begun in 1780 by a partnership of merchants from nearby Glasgow and the more distant Lancashire in England. In the eighteenth century, water was the primary source of industrial power in most British towns, and for that reason the partnership built a cotton mill on the River Levern, creating a new town for the mill workers. It was this town that provided the foundation for the village. In 1827, the Glasgow Free Press noted how rapidly the village was transformed in a period of just thirty years. Once a tiny village with a single textile mill and a population of thirty families, it had grown to include six large cotton mills, at least three print fields, two weaving factories and numerous bleach fields. In addition, the number of local schools had grown from one to at least six, and the number of public houses (pubs) increased from one to thirty.

This rapid growth continued through the end of the nineteenth century. A description of the village from the time of Ellen’s birth indicates that it was a rather grim, smog-filled environment. The 1903 Royal Directory of Scotland explained that the town was “lighted by gas…and is the centre of a manufacturing and thickly populated neighborhood. . . . In the district are several large bleach fields, a number of extensive calico printing establishments, and mills for cotton spinning and power loom weaving, besides collieries (mines), engineering works and iron foundries.”

Even the kindest comments, which began with a description of Barrhead’s “old-world streets and low-built dwellings… (juxtaposed) with the more imposing business premises and dwelling houses,” went on to note that the addition of “handsome
and...substantial buildings in Barrhead may not mean that the civic architecture of the
town has much to be proud of.\textsuperscript{11}

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the village of Barrhead was part of the
larger Glasgow metropolitan area, an industrial center that included neighboring
Paisley, one of Scotland’s largest textile centers. In 1900, Glasgow was Scotland’s
most populous city, having grown by more than 85,000 during the final decade of the
nineteenth century, reaching a total of 571,615. Glasgow was also Britain’s third
largest industrial center, the core of a metropolis that reached out across the counties
of Lanark and Renfrew. Lanarkshire, which included Glasgow, grew by more than
200,000 people in the 1890s, reaching 1,339,237 by 1901. Neighboring
Renfrewshire, which included Paisley and Barrhead, grew by over 140,000 during the
same period, reaching 268,980. Paisley’s population more than doubled during the
period, growing from 42,478 to 99,899. Barrhead\textsuperscript{12} reported steady growth during
this period as well. In 1891, the population was 8,215; in 1901 it had grown to 9,855;
and by 1911, it had reached 11,387. This steady increase clearly reflects the
magnitude of the population shifts caused by Britain’s continuing industrial growth.
In the final decade of the 1800s, the population of Scottish towns increased by 18.6
percent, while the population of rural areas decreased by 4.6 percent, a trend that had
been progressing for at least a century.\textsuperscript{13}

This migration from farm to industrial village is clearly evident in Ellen’s
family. Although they moved during the middle of the nineteenth century, at least
three of Ellen’s four grandparents were born to farm families, and yet by 1900 not a
single agricultural worker could be found in her extended family.\textsuperscript{14}

The families of Ellen’s maternal grandparents, the Halfords and the Hurles,
moved to Scotland to escape the Irish famines of the late 1840s, when millions of
families abandoned their homes in Ireland and moved to other countries within the English speaking world – places such as Australia, Canada, England, Scotland, New Zealand and the United States. These displaced individuals were participants in a desperate struggle for survival, as they escaped the devastating reality of starvation and death in their native Ireland. More than eight million men, women and children migrated from Ireland during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Brenda Collins noted, emigration became a natural part of life for the Irish. Of the eight million Irish refugees, one in twelve moved to Scotland.15

In the first third of the nineteenth century, Irish immigrants had begun settling in Glasgow and the area west of the city and south of the River Clyde.16 This is not surprising, because it was a region where there was economic opportunity. New factories attracted semi-skilled and unskilled workers. In turn, this large and ever increasing reserve of cheap labor attracted the additional capital necessary to create more factories. By the late nineteenth century, in the years following the Irish famine, there were more than 200,000 Irish-born Scots, approximately 6.6 percent of the total Scottish population. In Renfrewshire and Lanarkshire approximately fifteen percent of the population was of Irish birth.17 These Irish-born and first-generation Irish-Scotts, such as Ellen’s mother, Annie Halford Dawson, encountered significant levels of discrimination in Scotland, just as most working class immigrants encountered in other parts of the world.

There can be little doubt that Barrhead was a workers’ town, where the vast majority of its citizens worked long hours. The primary occupations in the village, according to the 1901 census, were manual jobs. The single largest category was textiles, with almost a thousand workers. It was followed by 759 metal and machine workers, 464 construction workers, 367 domestic servants, 324 food and tobacco
workers, 288 transportation workers, 181 garment makers, and 175 commercial workers. Male workers dominated fields such as commercial, transportation, metal and machines, and construction. Female workers were a significant majority only in domestic service. Work was fairly balanced between men and women in textiles, garment making, and food and tobacco, with women leading in textiles and garment making. Of the 930 textile workers, 490 were women, making female textile workers the second largest gender-specific occupational category in Barrhead, trailing only metal and machine work\(^{18}\) with 758 male workers and only one woman worker. Only 1,265 of the 3,681 women in the parish were identified as working outside the home, while 3,142 of the 3,659 men in the community worked outside the home.\(^{19}\)

What does an examination of these key labor categories tell us about the community, its residents or Ellen? First, the large number of construction workers supports the idea that Barrhead and the surrounding area was an economically sound community with steady growth and job opportunities for those who were physically able to work. Second, a significant number of workers in domestic service, in a community with a small middle-class and non-existent upper-class, suggests relatively easy travel to other, more affluent communities outside the village. Barrhead was on the main railroad line between Glasgow and London, and during the first decade of the twentieth century it was connected to both Paisley and Glasgow by electric trams (trolley cars). In 1912, for example, a tram trip from Barrhead to Glasgow cost twopence.\(^{20}\) This suggests that some of Barrhead’s domestic servants probably commuted to work in Glasgow or Paisley. Third, men dominated the high wage/high status jobs within the community, skills that one would expect to be more highly organized and represented by trade unions, such as construction, metals and machines, and transportation. Fourth, women were responsible for caring for the family and the
domestic duties of life, since more than sixty-five percent of the women in the community were listed as “unemployed.” The term “housewife” was not an identification used by Scottish census takers of the time. By comparison, less than fifteen percent of men were classified as unemployed. It seems obvious that most married women depended on the wages of their husbands and older, unmarried children. Finally, of the women who did work outside the home, they were in occupations most closely tied to the work women had traditionally done in the home – textiles, domestic service and garment-making – often the low wage/low status jobs.

In Barrhead, Ellen’s father, Patrick, worked at the Shanks’ foundry, one of the most unpleasant jobs in the village. Foundry work -- as described by Jimmy Lindsay, who lived in Barrhead during World War I -- was “Slave labour! If you saw the conditions of these people working – it was unbelievable. I knew those that worked in the iron foundry. Your heart would break for them, seeing the way they had to work, and the conditions they had to put up with. It was just brutal work they had to do.”

According to Lindsay, the foundry workers made “cast-iron cisterns – you know, the overhead ones with the chain pull – they used to cast them in thousands and send them abroad.” The work was hard and dirty. “Cisterns were made in a box, with sand. They ran the sand into one box, then into the other – it was made in two halves – to make one pattern, and then they smoothed off the shell they’d made and they’d lift the holder of molten metal and put it on the top. They had two holes in the top, and they’d pour the molten metal into that. This was all done by hand.” The same process was used to make bathtubs, wash basins and bidets. “It was really brutal work...Before you went into the foundries you had to have plenty of fat muscles and not much brains in you,” Lindsay said.
The advantage of working in the foundry was the ability to earn higher wages, sometimes twice the local average, but it was piecework and the price was set according to the efficiency of the molding team. Those who worked hardest and produced more often found their income reduced. Lindsay noted, “There was no incentive to go ahead. So the result was you were inclined to set your target for the day and once that came you’d idle the time away until you’d get away, simply because you wanted to keep the price up for the job you were doing.” Another negative aspect of the job was that workers had to wait for hours at the furnace for the molten metal. “The furnace started up every day at seven o’clock in the morning. By the time the metal was ready for pouring it was maybe ten or eleven, but everybody was ready with their castings then… (as a result) there was a bit of dissension between (the workers). It got to such a stage that they were actually coming down there at four o’clock in the morning, climbing the fence to get in, so they could get the first metal.”

The very worst aspect of working in the foundry, according to Lindsay, was the lack of concern for the health and safety of the workers. “It was dirty work, inasmuch as there were no masks, and there was all this sand. Pneumoconiosis was rife. They just thought it was chest disease. The foreman had the power of life and death over them.” As Andy Wilson, who started in the foundry at the age of fourteen recalled, “Apart from fatigue and soreness the swallowing of dust particles was distressing, nostrils being choked constantly. The normal daily experience was to cough and spit for several hours after finishing – almost solid black clots.” Some workers rolled “their eyelids up on to a matchstick to rinse out tiny particles of brass.” As for safety regulations, there were none. “The moulding shop could never have passed the most basic, simple, rudimentary safety requirements.” Patrick Dawson
died in 1921, at the age of fifty-three, of stomach cancer, a disease that appears directly attributable to his work in the Shanks’ foundry.

When and where Patrick Dawson met his wife Annie Halford is unknown. She had worked for most of a decade as a power-loom weaver in a local textile mill before their marriage in 1893. Like a growing number of single women with a steady wage, Annie moved out of the crowded home of her parents and was living on her own, or possibly with Patrick, in the years immediately before their marriage. Given the birth of one child before their marriage, and the pending arrival of another on their wedding day, it is difficult to determine exactly when Annie stopped working and became a stay-at-home wife and mother. The usual course of events would have been for Patrick to marry Annie as soon as he established a regular income of a pound (twenty shillings) a week. It was the way things were done. Until their marriage, most young men and women lived at home and contributed to the support of their parents and younger siblings. As one contemporary noted: “Most Edwardian elders in the lower working-class...looked upon it as a natural right that children, after leaving school, should work to compensate parents for all the ‘kept’ years of childhood. Early marriage robbed them, they felt, of their just rewards.”

Once married, it was a common practice for women in Barrhead to give up their jobs and assume the domestic responsibilities for the family. As one local historian noted, women “did not go back to work even when their children were grown up. The situation was very different in the Lancashire cotton towns where married women had to work in the mills to support their families because there were so few jobs for men available.” This observation is supported by the 1901 census, which noted that most individuals in Barrhead remained unmarried until after the age
of twenty-five. Only in the over-thirty age categories did married individuals significantly outnumber the unmarried.\textsuperscript{32}

This voluntary departure of newly married women from the labor force is indicative of the male dominated societies common to Protestant and Roman Catholic communities of both Scotland and Ireland. It also helps to explain why male weavers tended to earn more than their female counterparts. A majority of women weavers of the period, like Annie Dawson who married at age twenty-four, were below the age of twenty-five. Male weavers often worked at the same job well into their fifties and sixties.\textsuperscript{33} It may have been what today is called the “ticking biological clock” that motivated so many women to marry and abandon the workforce of wage earners; there may have been other reasons. Regardless of the motivation that caused women to leave wage-earning work, longer tenure on the job was one reason why men were able to gain more skill and experience, a factor which contributed to higher average wages for male weavers and their dominant standing in the leadership of labor unions. Another was the idea of the family wage, which employers used as justification for paying married men more than women. It was thought that married men needed higher wages because they had a family to support. The injustice of such a theory is evident when closer examination of the practice reveals that it was seldom applied to the women who headed households, and that single men were paid the higher wage, even though they had no family to support.\textsuperscript{34}

As for newly married women like Annie, their lives changed dramatically when they assumed the dual roles of wife and mother. As one contemporary author noted, after interviewing numerous working-class women, “They tell you that, though they are a bit lonely at times, and miss the companionship of the factory life and the money of their own to spend, and are rather frightened at the swift approach of
motherhood, ‘You get accustomed to it,’ and ‘It won’t be so lonely when the baby comes.’” Then the babies begin to come and their lives change even more. “Women dread nothing…so much as the conviction that there is to be still another baby with its inevitable consequences – more crowding, more illness, more worry, more work, and less food, less strength, less time to manage with.”

Was there an viable alternative to marriage? The tale of one of Annie’s sisters, Mary Halford, is testimony to the difficulties that confronted young women who tried to follow a different path. Given the numerous stories of destitution which can be found in the Poor Books of Scotland, it is not surprising that some young working-class women turned to prostitution as a way of supporting themselves and their children. There is no evidence that Mary Halford took such a course, but those who did were often ostracized from the community. The money and possessions they earned from selling their bodies was tainted, and the health risks they took were extremely high. It was, after all, in the days before penicillin provided a cure for the more common venereal diseases.

How did Scottish communities address these basic social problems? One answer can be found by examining the public and charitable institutions that served the shire. In 1901, out of a total population of almost 269,000, Renfrewshire had forty-eight institutions caring for 4,703 individuals. This included 1,473 in fourteen nursing homes and orphanages, 1,154 in four asylums, 938 in two poorhouses, 565 in eighteen hospitals, 148 in six local jails, and 364 boys and 91 girls in four reformatories. It is clear that the social safety-net of 1900 was virtually non-existent. Of the services that were provided, a significant number were of a punitive or warehousing nature – such as prisons, poorhouses, reformatories, asylums, nursing homes and orphanages.
What little protection most workers had against the uncertainties of life came from their own meager wages. A priority for most working-class families was burial insurance, because death was an ever present reality. Families of the time paid weekly premiums of threepence for the father, twopence for the mother, and one penny for each child – a significant sum of money for a family living on twenty shillings per week. Tenpence, the amount the Dawson family would have paid after Ellen’s birth, was an annual expense equal to almost three weeks’ wages. As a contemporary noted, “If the sum of £11,000,000 a year…paid (throughout Britain during the years immediately prior to World War I) in weekly pennies by the poor to the industrial burial insurance companies were to be spent on better housing and better food – if, in fact, the one great universal thrift of the poor were not for death, but were for life – we should have a stronger nation.”

As for illness, there was little or no help. Few workers had any kind of health insurance. If the father or another wage earner became so sick that he or she could not work, the family had little choice but to absorb both the cost of the illness and the loss in wages. At times such as this, families depended upon their extended family and neighbors for help. For the Dawsons, their extended family included both Patrick and Annie’s parents, as well as numerous siblings living in the area. It also included their religious community. In 1903, Barrhead had five Protestant churches and one Roman Catholic Church. The more established and affluent members of the community were Protestant, while the ranks of the Catholics grew as a result of the migration of workers into the community from the Scottish Highlands and Ireland. In the first census of 1755, there was only one Irish-born Catholic woman in the parish, but by 1841 the Catholic community had grown large enough to build St. John’s Chapel, a building project which was strongly opposed by local Presbyterians. By
1900, St. John’s Chapel, where Patrick and Annie were married, was one of the two largest churches in the village.

At the time of Ellen’s birth, the Dawson family lived at 238 Main Street, in sight of the old Levern Mill and the Shanks’ Foundry. In fact, during all their years in Barrhead, the family never lived more than a short walk from the foundry and the old mill. Given the location, and because Catholics had few connections with the mainly Protestant property owners, the Dawson home was certainly of the old one- or two-room type dwellings that dated to the early days of the village. A description of life on Main Street, from someone who lived there during the time, offers a meaningful glimpse at what the area around the Dawson home was like. It also demonstrates how close the community was to its rural roots. “There used tae (sic) be a dairy beside us, and round the back was a byre (shelter), for the cattle. There was a piggery, and a midden (place for the collection of refuse), for the dung. They had anything up to six cows, and they let them out…the Water Road. They could take the cattle through the close (courtyard) if they wanted. But it was a dairy! On the Main Street!” The location described was within a block of the house where Ellen was born and from a time when the Dawsons lived in the general vicinity.

Later, the Dawson family moved to 33 Glasgow Road, in the Dovecothall area of the village. A member of the Wilson Family, who may have been a neighbor of the Dawson family, provided one of the most vivid descriptions of working class housing in Barrhead.

We were better off than the rest of the people living in the two-storey (sic) tenement. At the west-end side of the building we had our own small close, in the middle of which, on the left, was our front door, which led into a small, dark lobby facing doors on the left and right. Two rooms. But for a while, for some reason, we had an aunt and uncle staying in one room.

On the left there was a fireplace – a hob – black, with a deep-grated fire, ovens, with steel candles on either side and a large kettle and pans on the top.
Immediately to the left of the door was a large bed recess and in the exact centre of the room wall on the left was the sink and the windows looking onto the Glasgow Road.

When we could only use one room we slept six in a bed, with the youngest brother at the top, in front of my father, who slept with his arms around young Alex in case the wee fella fell out during the night.

…not much rain was needed to turn that open back-court into a bog. A morass. Drainage was non-existent. I think in the earliest days we were nearly all bare-footed, and being ankle-deep in cold, wet mud is quite demoralizing.

Even worse was the job of trying not to get your feet wet another way. The lavatory, that served one half of the building, was opposite the close back door. It was often out of action and the material it was supposed to consume could be found all over the floor, and often outside.

Eventually my father made some sort of receptacle which was placed in a small closet in our lobby for our use. It was looked after and emptied – I don’t know how – by my poor mother.

A similarly unpleasant picture was offered by Miss Allan, the Barrhead nurse, who visited hundreds of homes each year. “The majority of people have made a praiseworthy effort to maintain a high standard of cleanliness, even in the poorer quarters of the town where most of the houses were reeking with damp, infested with vermin, and showing every sign of dilapidation. Few repairs are done. Thus many houses are uninhabitable. In spite of this, however, so urgent is the housing problem that the dwellings are urgently sought after.”

Cramped and unsanitary living accommodations were a problem that plagued the community throughout the early part of the twentieth century. In 1901, the village of Barrhead was home to 230 families -- with an average size of just over five individuals per family. Of this number, 173 families lived in dwellings of two rooms or less; twenty-nine families lived in three room dwellings; and only twenty-eight families lived in homes with four rooms or more. Expanding the focus to Paisley, the number of families living in inadequate housing remained an equally huge majority. Of the 20,500 families living in Paisley, 14,483 families lived in one- or two-room dwellings. At the opposite end of the economic scale, sixty-one Paisley families,
certainly the very rich, lived in homes with twenty or more rooms. In 1891, Edward and Ellen Halford, Ellen’s maternal grandparents, lived with nine of their children in a two-room dwelling in Nitshill.

These cramped living conditions resulted in horrendous health problems. In 1906, Dr. Corbett, the Barrhead medical officer, delivered a lecture in Foresters’ Hall on the “Care and Feeding of Children,” noting the high rate of infant mortality in Barrhead. He explained that in 1904, almost fifteen percent of the children under the age of one had died, and in 1905 the number climbed to almost twenty percent. These figures compare to an eleven percent infant mortality rate for all of Scotland during the same time period. Dr. Corbett noted that the higher death rate was among the community’s poorest residents. “…infant deaths occur almost altogether amongst our poorer and probably most ignorant inhabitants, in one- or two-roomed houses, where the parents earned from 18s (shillings) to 30s per week…” The doctor diagnosed the problem as poorly educated parents feeding their infants adult food. “…the greater number of deaths were due to digestive disorders – diarrhoea, indigestion, colic, gastro-enteritis, wasting away, and various other forms of diseases of the stomach and bowels, brought on,…in most cases by parents giving the children food which they could not possibly digest.” Dr. Corbett explained “It was quite a common thing to see young children being given potatoes and gravy, bread and milk, porridge, broth and other things like that – things that were good and nourishing foods for adults, but were simply poisonous when given to young children.”

Dr. Corbett’s comments reflect middle class attitudes of the time that sought to blame the high death rate among children on the ignorance of the parents, rather than the reality of working class poverty. The adult foods he listed were probably not the reason for infant mortality. A study of the poorest working-class families of London
published in 1914 noted that working-class women normally nursed their babies for the first year. It is far more likely that the cramped housing and primitive sanitation systems available to the poor during this time were simply inadequate to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, diseases which the immune systems of older individuals were more capable of successfully fighting. Further, Dr. Corbett’s lack of insight into the problem helps to demonstrate the inadequate level of medical care available to most residents. It also suggests that many landlords were more interested in earning the largest profit possible than in providing decent housing.

While Barrhead bragged about its “modern, scientifically designed (sewer) works, begun in 1860s, (as) the envy of neighboring towns and attracting attention from all over Britain,” the Dawsons, like most working-class families before World War I, probably depended upon the more primitive back garden privy and chamber pot. As a contemporary scholar noted, “…overcrowding and overhousing are directly and indirectly productive of insanitary conditions, making disease less preventible as well as generally lowering the physical health and vigour of those who live, voluntarily or involuntarily, amid such environments.”

Despite this rather bleak picture, Barrhead was a community where individuals within both the middle-class and the working-class actively sought solutions to the social problems that faced their community and their society. The best example of a local reform movement was the Barrhead Co-operative. The socialist theory of cooperative living had long been popular in Britain. Most Scottish cooperatives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were based on the ideas of Robert Owen. Owen, as manager and part-owner of a cotton mill southeast of Glasgow, recognized the value of what he termed “human capital” and as Barbara Taylor noted, Owen “established a programme of work incentives and welfare
measures (including model housing, health facilities and free schooling for the entire factory population) which transformed the village of New Lanark into a triumph of social engineering – and one of the most profitable enterprises in the country.” His success in the management of labor brought him international acclaim in the business world. Owen, however, had even more extraordinary ideas to test. As he wrote, “I saw all the steps in practice by which the change could be made…that if (the population of the world) were treated, trained, educated, employed, and placed, in accordance with the most plain dictates of common sense, crimes would terminate, the miseries of humanity would cease, wealth and wisdom would be universal.”

Owen’s steps were built around the creation of cooperatives, an idea that would ultimately spark the creation of utopian communities throughout Britain and America, and would help lay the foundation for many of the ideas associated with modern socialism.

In Barrhead, experiments with cooperatives dated as far back as 1837, when a Chartist cooperative was formed in the village. In fact, by 1900, Barrhead enjoyed a certain level of notoriety for the strength of its cooperative endeavors. As the leading cooperative publication in Scotland of the period – The Scottish Co-operator – noted, “Barrhead is a working-class town claiming many distinctions, but chiefly famous in the eyes of co-operators for the sturdy character of its co-operation and as the birthplace of more than one co-operative institution, the ramifications of which now extend many thousands of miles beyond the little Scottish town.” In 1900, when Barrhead had approximately 9,000 residents living in the town and its two suburbs, Grahamston and Dunterlie, the Owenite-based Barrhead cooperative had 2,100 members, operated nineteen businesses, and owned 114 local dwelling houses. Barrhead-based cooperative businesses included a laundry that served customers...
throughout the Glasgow metropolitan area, a modern industrial bakery and a large mercantile store.\textsuperscript{54}

No Barrhead Cooperative Society membership records have been found, so it is impossible to determine for certain if members of the Dawson family were active participants. However, Betty Dawson, Ellen’s niece, believes the family were members. This is supported by a variety of evidence. Comparing the cooperative’s membership with the population of the community indicates that approximately one in every four residents was a member, a number that jumps to one in two when children are excluded. Recognizing that many single adults lived at home with their parents seems to indicate that most families had at least one cooperative member. In addition, one of the cooperative’s two retail outlets was located in the Dovecothall area of Barrhead, less than a hundred yards from where the Dawsons lived.\textsuperscript{55} Finally, as one local historian noted, “the society organised a gala day for all the townspeople for many years.”\textsuperscript{56} So, even if the Dawsons were not active members of the cooperative, they were certainly aware of its numerous community activities and were influenced by the opinions of its members.

One of the most significant aspects of the cooperative movement at this time was the social reform efforts directed toward enhancing the role of women in society. This is not surprising, since one important idea shared by many of the early utopian groups was reaching for, if not always grasping, greater equality among the sexes. As one early twentieth century columnist for \textit{The Scottish Co-operator}, a writer who signed his/her columns with only the initials A.B., noted, “The co-operative movement has done a great deal in the world in general, but in particular it has done more to bring out the women than any other movement of the century. Indeed, it has created a new woman – a woman with an ideal, that being the emancipation of her sex
in a rational and practical way.” Not defenders of the radical approaches taken by the
suffragettes who chained themselves to the gates of government offices and endured
imprisonment and forced feedings, Scottish cooperators such as A.B. counseled a
more cautious approach to the emancipation of women. Consider some of the writer’s
other comments on the role of women. “…the athletic woman, in reverting to the
merely primitive type (for muscle is the most primitive of all our faculties), loses
delicacy, individuality, spontaneity, impressionability – in a word loses temperament
– which is naturally woman’s most delightful attribute.” A.B. concluded, “If women
have energies to spend and seek for womanly occupation, they will not need their
bicycles to bring them to face with it.” These comments clearly ignored women
factory workers who were required to use their muscles in order to do their jobs, as
were the women who worked as domestic servants, and those who remained at home,
cooking, washing and caring for their families in an era before labor saving devices
were common to every home. In a third column, A.B. espoused a way women might
participate in the political process without the vote. “Understand me, ladies, that I do
not wish to create a political monster out of a woman, but simply appeal to you to
drop the old fashion (sic) notion that politics is a sealed book to women, and to use
your intelligence in advising your husband in this as you would in any other important
affair that affects the welfare of your home” 58

The perspective offered by A.B. demonstrates one of two different views
found within the cooperative societies – the middle-class, male perspective of the
leaders of the cooperatives and the middle-class, female perspective of the leaders of
the women’s guilds. The Women’s Co-operative Guild was an autonomous
organization, founded in 1883, that operated in association with the cooperatives. 59 In
1901, the annual meeting of the Women’s Guild of Scotland was attended by more
than two hundred delegates, each representing a local branch. “The class of women (attending these meetings) is not the class one sees at a women’s meeting where they have a titled lady presiding and a few in the audience as an attraction…(women who) have not to make an effort to find the time necessary;…and the outing is more a fashionable function than a serious meeting.” Rather, the Guild delegates were far more representative of the ordinary women of Scotland. “…a glance at the appearance of the average delegate at once speaks for itself, and one has the feeling that they are in the presence of women who are fully alive to the necessities of hard work and…that they are there in the true capacity of delegate to represent her sisters and not for diversion.”

Looking at publications such as *The Scottish Co-operator*, and Robert Murray’s *History of the Barrhead Co-operative Society*, the Women’s Guild may at first appear to be a middle class organization, because middle-class women held the leadership positions, but as Jane Grant has documented, “it was distinctly working class, grassroots, and…highly political.” While the leadership tended to be reform-minded, middle-class women, the vast majority of the guild’s members were not. In fact, as Virginia Woolf’s husband Leonard observed, the guild was “the greatest working women’s organization of modern times.” The reality of this working-class base can be clearly seen in *Maternity: Letters from Working Women*, published by the Guild in 1915 as part of their efforts to improve the level of medical care available to working-class mothers and their infant children. The book includes 160 letters from working-class women, all members of the Guild and most with family incomes of less than thirty shillings per week. The book also listed the occupation of the husbands. The list included foundry worker, stoker, weaver and colliery worker (miner) – all occupations found within the Dawson and Halford family. Ellen’s mother Annie
and the other Dawson women may well have been Guild members, but without the local membership rolls there is no clear evidence. At the very least, they were exposed to the various educational programs that the Women’s Guild offered to the community of Barrhead.

Of greatest interest, at least in understanding Ellen’s early life, are the educational activities directed toward the bairns (children) by the local Women’s Guild. The cooperative’s second annual children’s picnic on Saturday, May 26, 1900 was one example, and while Annie was pregnant with Ellen at the time, Ellen’s four older siblings – Edward, Mary, David and Michael – probably attended. A comparison of the number of children living in the village with the number of children reported to have attended indicates that few were excluded from such events. “The children, numbering 1,200, formed in procession, and headed by the Busby brass band, marched through the principal streets of the town to Fereneze braes (a hillside meadow on the outskirts of the village), where buns and milk were served.” During the day, “football, cricket, swings, and donkey races were indulged in, whilst many of the grown-ups tripped it gaily on the grass to the splendid music of the band. About 7 o’clock the children were again formed into order and marched home, everyone tired but happy.”64

There were many similar events, including “A cinematograph and gramophone entertainment…crowded with little ones. The picture displayed was of a high order, all the latest as well as some of the old favorites being put up on the screen, many of them being shown with musical accompaniment…” These events, at least in the minds of the leaders of the local cooperative society, had a purpose greater than just entertainment. The Women’s Guild conducted these programs for the “emancipation of the working-classes.”65 Another example of such an event included
a variety of entertaining presentations. “Miss M. Stewart sung (sic) two solos in a
cultured manner… Master Cameron, a youth of talent and muscle, delighted the
audience with a display of Indian club swinging and axe manipulation. Miss
Campbell danced the Highland Fling, a sword dance, and an Irish Jig ...(and) Harry
Adams, (a ventriloquist) introducing the usual gruff old man and the prim damsel,
was a great treat and had to be repeated.” But, the event was also educational, as the
reporter noted, for in addition to the show on stage, the children also received a
lecture concerning the need “to form character, of a noble and unselfish kind.”

These educational efforts, at least in the minds of the leaders of the Guild, had
a positive influence on the children. In an article detailing a children’s field day, it
was reported that “The children gathered in a large number at the Society’s premises,
a procession was formed, and, headed by a pipe band, marched to Dyce Farm. A
feature of the procession was the motto flags carried by the children, the one finding
most favor being ‘The Future Co-operators,’ all being anxious to get one with this
motto.” Regardless of the motivation of the children who wanted one flag over
another, which may have been for reasons other than a desire to be “future co-
operators,” it does seem evident that the children were learning the basic skills
associated with mass demonstrations, and given the skill she would later demonstrate
as a union organizer in America, it is not difficult to imagine a young Ellen, flag in
hand, marching triumphantly at the head of such a parade. In fact, Ellen was
responsible for organizing a field day in New Bedford, Massachusetts in 1928 that
was strikingly similar to the events staged by the Barrhead Co-operative Society.

Although this study of the Barrhead community during the first two decades of
the twentieth century unearthed only shreds of evidence related to Ellen as an
individual, it reveals much about the larger groups to which she belonged. Like most
of Scotland, the village adhered to a system in which the roles of men and women were clearly defined. Working-class women received minimal education. Ellen’s mother Annie, for example, never learned to read or write. Women worked in wage-earning jobs until they married, at which point they assumed the domestic responsibilities – cooking, cleaning, childcare, shopping and laundry – for the family. Most working-class men “displayed their virility by never performing any task in or about the home which was considered by tradition to be women’s work. Some wives encouraged…this and proudly boasted that they would never allow the ‘man of the house’ to a ‘hand’s turn’.” Ellen’s attitudes about marriage and the relationship between men and women were shaped by lessons such as these learned during her formative years in Barrhead.

Women who worked outside the home were mostly young and unmarried, normally working at occupations that were closely connected to traditional domestic roles, such as textiles, domestic service and garment making. It is within this group, however, that some women at least attempted to establish their own identity – be it at their own peril. The vast majority of working women remained in the home of their parents until marriage, under the protection and control of their father. Some, like Ellen’s mother, Annie, and her aunt, Mary Halford, ventured out on their own, their wages giving them a modest level of independence, something that most young women did not enjoy before the Industrial Revolution. In Barrhead, women who bucked the system too hard, such as Mary Halford, found life extremely difficult and were usually forced back into step with the social customs of the community. Like her mother and aunt, Ellen would emerge as an identifiable individual during her years as a young, unmarried woman. Marriage, however, would draw her back into anonymity.
Men lived equally restricted lives. They were the primary bread winners of the family, working at occupations that were traditionally masculine in nature – construction trades, metal and machine works, and transportation. At marriage, men assumed responsibility for earning a wage large enough to support the family, a task which was difficult in the best of times, often impossible in the worst. Most men worked until extreme illness, age or death removed them from the labor force. For example, Patrick Dawson died of work-related stomach cancer at the age of 53, his father, Edward Dawson, worked in the local water works until he died at the age of 62, when the cause of his death was listed as gangrene of the foot and exhaustion. Ellen, interestingly, did not relinquish her position as a worker when she married. Instead, she worked until age sixty-five and died within a few months of a work related illness.

Children were both a benefit and a burden to their families. In the early years of their lives children were totally dependent upon their parents for support, yet when they went to work, normally in their early teens, they were expected to contribute to the financial resources of the family until they married and started their own families. Ellen never had children of her own. This may have simply been the result of being in her mid-thirties when she married, or it may also have been a result of her childhood and having witnessed the burdens that children brought to a family.

For Ellen, growing up in a working-class family in the industrial village of Barrhead provided her with a clear understanding of the plight of workers in the modern industrial state and the unique challenges faced by women in such a society. There can be little doubt that her childhood included large doses of hunger, cold and want. It was an environment that instilled the basic skills needed to survive in the face of immense obstacles, skills that would serve her well in later years. As her
niece Betty later observed, Ellen was a very hard worker. Through the socialist ideas of the local cooperative movement, Ellen was able to imagine a better life, a better world – a place where people worked together for the common good. As Margaret Llewelyn Davies, president of the Women’s Guild from 1889 until 1921, noted in her introduction to the original edition of *Maternity*, “The roots of the evil lie in the conditions of life which our industrial system forces upon the wage-earners.”

Finally, I must add a point that comes from one of those mystical aspects of biography that traditional historical scholars will question. It reflects the personal relationship that evolves between biographer and subject, as explained by scholars such as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall. If there was any magic in the grime and soot of Barrhead in the first years of the twentieth century, it was locked inside the mysterious Arthur’s Cross, described as “an ancient Celtic cross like those in Ireland and Iona, dating from the time (around the sixth century) when Irish missionaries brought Christianity to Scotland.” The part of town where the cross stands is called Arthurlie, and local legend says that the legendary King Arthur once visited the Levern Valley where Barrhead is located. Regardless of the true origins of the cross, it is difficult to imagine a child growing up in the village, hearing the mystical tales of Arthur, who failed to touch Arthur’s Cross, hoping to absorb some of its magic. I suspect that a strong and courageous woman such as Ellen must have touched the cross for inspiration more than once.
Brooksbank, Mary, *Sidlaw Breezes* (Dundee: David Winter & Son, 1982), p. 29. Brooksbank was a contemporary of Ellen Dawson. Born in Aberdeen, she lived her life in Scotland, working as a textile worker and a communist activist. Where Ellen later retreated into silence, Mary was an outspoken social critic of capitalism throughout her life. This difference, I believe, reflects the vulnerability of immigrant worker activists in the United States, as compared with those who remained in their native land.

2 *The Scottish Co-operator*, July 12, 1901. The Co-operator was the publication of the cooperative movement in Scotland during this period. Barrhead was one of the leading communities in the Scottish cooperative movement and will be discussed more fully later in this chapter.

3 The cause of the air pollution was not explained. It was probably a normal occurrence in a city as highly industrialized as Glasgow, where there was with little or no environmental protection.

4 Under the monetary system used in Britain until the late 1960s, eight pence (d) equaled a shilling (s) and twenty shillings equaled one pound sterling (£). In 1900, one pound sterling was equal to five U.S. dollars, based on the exchange rate reported in the *Economist*, March 31, 1900.

5 *The Glasgow Herald*, December 14, 1900.

6 Industrial villages such as Barrhead were a common aspect of early industrialization. They were constructed throughout Britain and the United States, not only to provide housing for the earliest factory workers, but as a way for mill owners to maintain tight controls over their workers.


8 Lancashire will be discussed in Chapter Five – “Migration.”


12 Census records for Barrhead were tabulated in two ways. One focused on Barrhead the village, while the other incorporated the significantly larger Neilston Parish. When available, the village statistics are used. When they are not available, the larger Neilston Parish numbers are used.


14 It must be noted, as will be documented later, that the dividing line between rural and urban life in a young industrial village such as Barrhead was still muddy.


16 This is the region where Barrhead is located.

17 Devine, T. M., *Irish Immigrants and Scottish Society in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, pp. 48 & 100.

18 The large number of metal workers was due to the Shanks’ Foundry, an international maker of bathroom fixtures. It was here that Patrick Dawson labored most of his life. Working conditions at the Shanks’ Foundry will be described later in this chapter.

19 Scottish Census, 1901.


21 Lindsay’s comments come from *Housing the Heroes* (Barrhead: Community Council, 1983), an edited collection of oral histories published by the Barrhead Community Council, p. 68.

22 *Housing the Heroes*, pp. 68-69.

23 Ibid, p. 69.

24 Pneumoconiosis is a lung disease that was common among industrial workers during this time.

25 *Housing the Heroes*, pp. 70-71.

26 Work in a Scottish textile mill will be discussed in the next chapter – “Red Clydeside.”

27 According to the 1891 Census, Annie’s parents lived with nine of their children in a two-room house.


29 Patrick may have lived at home longer than Annie. His parents, Edward and Mary Dawson, lived on Main Street in the same area Patrick and Annie lived – both before and after their marriage. During part of this time, they may have all shared a single home. If so, it would have allowed Annie to work even after the birth of her first child. She could have left him in the care of his grandmother, Mary Dawson. This, of course, is all speculation, because no conclusive evidence has been found.


32 Scottish Census, 1901.
36 *General Register of the Poor*, Paisley, Record 4638. Mary Halford’s experience was discussed in the previous chapter. Unmarried, she and her children were in and out of the poorhouse for a decade.
38 Scottish Census, 1901. pp. 302 & 304.
40 A limited national health insurance scheme was introduced in Britain in 1911. It was not, however, until 1948 that the National Health Service was created. (British Public Record Office, National Digital Archive of Datasets, Health Departments: Administration History) (http://ndad.ulcc.ac.uk/datasets/AH/health.htm#Gen).
41 Reeves, *Round About A Pound A Week*, p. 69.
43 *Housing the Heroes*, p. 16.
44 *Housing the Heroes*, pp. 15-17.
48 Hughson, *Barrhead and Neilston in old picture postcards*, card 50.
53 This connection is based on a 1913 map of Barrhead published by the Director General of the Ordnance Survey Office, Southampton. This map has also been used to locate various sites discussed in this thesis.
54 Hughson, *Barrhead and Neilston in old picture postcards*, card 41.
55 I have read the works of A.B. in the *Scottish Co-operator* and I am reasonably certain the writer was a man, however, I found no clear evidence as to the individual’s gender. It was not uncommon at the time for newspaper columnists to write anonymously.
56 *The Scottish Co-operator*, Sept. 7 & 21, 1900.
58 *The Scottish Co-operator*, Oct. 18, 1901.
59 Grant, “The Woman with the Basket.”
64 Ibid, April 19, 1901.
65 Ibid, May 31, 1901.
66 1930 Census, Passaic, N.J.
69 Davies, *Maternity*, p. 4.
70 This bond between biographer and subject was discussed at length in the introduction to this thesis.
71 Burgess, *Discover Barrhead and Neilston*, p.4.
Chapter Three – Red Clydeside

From one perspective, Ellen’s formative years remain shrouded in almost total mystery, and yet from another perspective they are the most researched in Scottish labor history. Almost none of the personal details of Ellen’s life as a young textile worker in Scotland survives. We know where her family lived and the approximate time she entered the labor force, but not where she worked or what exactly she did from day to day. By contrast, the larger world in which she and countless other young women workers lived – the world of Red Clydeside – has been researched by numerous scholars. These historians provide us with a detailed understanding of these turbulent times, and the labor unrest that occurred in Ellen’s own backyard. Thus, to better understand the forces that shaped Ellen during these critical years, years so important to forming her personality and character, we must again look to the larger world. There, in that ferocious outpouring of collective action by the workers of Glasgow and the surrounding industrial communities, one can find powerful forces that directly influenced Ellen’s radical activities in the United States.

Although still elusive at times, Ellen was far more visible in America during the late 1920s. There she became a highly effective labor organizer, known for her courage on the picket line and her fiery oratory. Hard working, unselfish, and dedicated to the workers’ cause, Ellen demonstrated the skills of a seasoned activist. I
believe that Red Clydeside was Ellen’s classroom, and the activists of the period were her teachers. It was during these years that she entered the work force, was introduced to the realities of industrial wage labor, and began formulating her own attitudes and opinions as a worker. It was during this time that Scottish women emerged not only as rank-and-file workers, but as leaders within several major labor confrontations. And it was during this time that the workers confronted many of labor’s central issues. Ellen may have been only a silent witness to these events, but I find it impossible to believe that she, or any other young worker of the period, could have escaped the influence of such firebrand rhetoric and monumental events.

Looking at Ellen’s life in its entirety, Red Clydeside is clearly a pivotal moment. Without the experiences of Red Clydeside, Ellen would most certainly have been a very different person. For these reasons, I believe it is essential that we examine Red Clydeside from the perspective of Ellen Dawson.

Like other young women of her time and class, Ellen went to work at the age of thirteen, sometime during 1913 or 1914. As a young worker, she was influenced by the intellectual debate that filled the workrooms, public houses, schoolyards, tenements, wash houses and street corners of her working class community during the early twentieth century, discussions which often focused on the problems of the workers and the action workers and their families took to address those challenges.

Ellen was a blue-collar worker in a family of such workers. Her mother had been a power-loom weaver, her maternal grandparents worked in a chemical plant, her aunts worked in thread mills and at the bleach fields, her father worked in a foundry, her paternal grandfather worked at a water and sewer plant, her uncles were copper miners, her older brothers were laborers, and she worked in a local textile mill,
just as her mother and her aunts had done before her. It was a life of long hours, hard and monotonous work, and few rewards.

Mary Brooksbank, an Aberdeen-born woman three years older than Ellen, recalled her first days in a Dundee jute mill, writing, “Once in the mill you had to be smart to earn your seven and six (seven shillings, six pence a week). Dashing around the spinning frames, knocking off the ‘flup’, whipping off the full bobbins, and on with the empies (sic), tying the ends round the “flys’, tempering the ends – then on to the next frame. I ran round the frames with the sweat dripping off the point of my nose.”

Mary Brooksbank, like Ellen, was from a Catholic family and she remembered how she never liked working in the mill. “I learned the habit of self-discipline. My wishes, desires, hopes, ambitions, were dutifully suppressed in the interests of those I loved…On the way to the mill, as a good little Catholic girl, I said ‘Hail Marys’ to St. Anthony that my father would get work, that my mother would keep well and that I would be kept free from sin.” She later noted, “Oh, the irony of it all! My life at this time was spent from six a.m. to six p.m. at the mill, then for another two or three hours at the steam wash-house cleaning, washing and scrubbing. As can be imagined, this left no time for sinning!”

Looking at the enormous amount of labor unrest in Glasgow and the surrounding communities during the first two decades of the twentieth century, there can be little doubt that Ellen’s early years in the mill were some of the most turbulent in Scottish labor history. It was a time when few, if any, workers escaped the thunderstorm of revolutionary ideas that deluged working class women and men in that time and place. Although no record has been found of Ellen or her family taking a leadership role in any of the events discussed in this chapter, given the large number
of individuals involved in many of these events, it is likely that one or more of them were active participants. Regardless, there should be little doubt that Ellen, like countless other working class individuals, knew of these events and their leaders, talked about them, and was influenced by them. These were forces that helped to shape her political opinions concerning the rights of workers and a workers’ relationship with employers, the government, and with each other. These were forces that influenced her later actions as a labor activist in America.

To fully appreciate how the labor unrest in Glasgow and the surrounding communities influenced Ellen, and other young women like her, requires a brief geographical overview of the region, insight into some of the activists who influenced working class women in Barrhead during those years, and a survey of the most significant events.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Glasgow was the heart of a rapidly growing industrial metropolis. According to a 1910 description of the area written by a Cambridge University geographer, “there is probably no district in Britain where the variety of industries…is greater.” In addition to large coal deposits and a long-established textile industry, “the production of pig-iron, the rolling of steel, the firing of pottery, glassmaking, the building of bridges, the manufacture of chemicals, distilling and brewing, and a thousand and one other industries from the building of battle-ships to the making of clay tobacco-pipes.” One of the reasons for this early twentieth century industrial power base was the River Clyde, which flows westward through Glasgow toward the Atlantic Ocean. It provided an excellent port for importing raw materials and exporting finished products, and it gave the industrial region its name -- the Clydeside. Numerous heavy industries related to building ships and locomotives were active on the banks of the Clyde during this period. Paisley,
the heart of the local textile industry, was approximately seven miles west of
Glasgow. Barrhead was approximately seven miles southwest of Glasgow and
approximately three miles southeast of Paisley. While there are numerous other
communities in the region, I believe these are the three communities most relevant to
understanding Ellen.

Some historians, most notably Iain McLean, have suggested that during this
time the numerous communities within the region existed separately, with little or no
interaction. The evidence suggests otherwise. Public transportation throughout the
region was readily available and inexpensive, thanks to a network of trams that began
operation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *The Forward*,
Glasgow’s leading socialist labor publication during these years, *The Scottish Co-
operator*, and other reformist publications were widely circulated throughout the
region, and available at many local libraries. Reform-minded activists traveled
throughout the region, often speaking in several different communities in a single
week, as they distributed their literature. Finally, thanks to almost a half century of
mandatory education, a significant number of Scotland’s younger workers, such as
Ellen, were able to read the many newspapers and pamphlets that circulated among
them, something that had not been true just a generation earlier. For example, Ellen
and all her siblings were literate, while her mother never learned to read or write.

The labor and social unrest among Scottish workers during the period was not
isolated, but was inspired by a national debate that covered Britain. Robert
Blatchford’s Clarion Fellowship, had Glasgow area members and recruited with
flying columns of cyclists. Keir Hardie addressed audiences in Paisley in 1897 and
1906, and as one local historian asked, “surely it was not pure coincidence that those
were years of labour trouble in the mills?” In 1907 the Labour Party proposed its first
candidate, Robert Smillie. Smillie did not win, but he split the Liberal Party vote, thus throwing a safe Liberal seat to the Conservative Party.\textsuperscript{8} Despite this early failure, it was the beginning of a process that would see the demise of Britain’s Liberal Party, replaced by a national Labour Party after World War I.

In 1906, T. Gavin Duffy, a socialist lecturer speaking at the Barrhead Public Hall, pointed to the inequality of the British industrial system, noting “…that Great Britain was wealthier than any other country in the world. That…(British) workers…produced more wealth per head than the workers of France, of Germany, or even of the United States of America.” The problem was “if the British worker is the greatest wealth producer in the world he ought to live on a higher and more secure social plane than any other worker in the world…”\textsuperscript{9} But, as Duffy went on to explain, this was not the case.

Activists such as John Maclean\textsuperscript{10} conducted free classes on Marxism for workers in Glasgow and several other Clydeside communities. Mary Brooksbank recalled hearing Maclean speak one Sunday. “I was held spellbound by this man’s oratory…He spoke with such earnest and sincerity, his logic so clear and concise. I was absolutely fascinated as he quoted facts and figures, and also passionately condemned the capitalist system, which he proclaimed was the root of all wars, all poverty, and all the social evils that exist.”\textsuperscript{11} Certainly Ellen must have heard Maclean and probably had a similar reaction. Socialist education was widely available in Scotland, sponsored by groups such as the Clarion Scouts, Socialist Sunday Schools and the educational committees of the numerous cooperative societies. In fact, the idea of Socialist Sunday Schools began in Glasgow in the 1890s, seeking to provide an alternative to what was seen as the middle-class bias of the established churches. In 1912 there were fifteen Socialist Sunday Schools meeting in Glasgow.\textsuperscript{12}
For a young worker coming of age on Clydeside during the early decades of the twentieth century, there was a numerous and diverse selection of activist role models—suffragettes, cooperators, syndicalists, anti-militarists, pacifists, socialists, Marxists, and communists—all actively challenging the established order. For a young Barrhead worker like Ellen, the most influential activists must have included individuals such as James Maxton, a Barrhead resident and one of Scotland’s leading socialists; Mary Macarthur, a native of Glasgow, and perhaps Britain’s foremost women’s labor activist of the period; and John Maclean, from the neighboring village of Pollockshaws, a fiery Communist and Scotland’s best known radical.

James Maxton lived in Barrhead during most of the years that Ellen lived there. She would certainly have know him by reputation, and it is highly probable that she heard him speak many times. Interestingly, Maxton attributed his own conversion to socialism to pamphlets he “borrowed from … a semi-skilled worker in the big sanitary engineering works there… (The pamphlets) had been circulated round the (various departments)… and were very filthy, but still legible and to me inspiring.” Ellen’s father, Patrick Dawson, worked in the Shanks’ Foundry and Sanitary Engineering Works at the time and was probably exposed to the same pamphlets. In a 1921 letter from Patrick to Ellen’s brother, Edward, Patrick made reference to his belief that regardless of the difficult times the family was enduring in Millgate, life would be far worse if the Bolsheviks were in charge. This suggests that while he was more conservative than his daughter, he thought seriously about such issues.

As for Mary Macarthur, she provided Ellen with a role model. One eyewitness recalled, “Coming along the Embankment to-day, I found my way blocked
outside the Army Clothing Factory by a crowd of employees. There was a slip of a fair-haired girl, mounted on a chair, speaking to them with great fire and persuasiveness.” As Macarthur’s biographer, Mary Agnes Hamilton, later noted, “This little picture of the ‘slip of a girl mounted on a chair’ shows, in a flash, the new method. In addition to the ordinary routine meetings and the big public meetings arranged beforehand, she was ready to take, and make, any and every informal opportunity. She knew that if she could get at people she would make them listen – because she had something to tell them and could put it in terms they understood.”

Macarthur’s view of trade unionism was not mechanical. “It was the expression of a living faith in the power of men and women to do things together. Even when she talked to the simplest people in the simplest terms, fire and persuasiveness came from this bigger idea behind.”

Ellen later used a very similar style, a style that helped bring her to the forefront of the American labor movement during the late 1920s. As a Catholic, Ellen would not have been exposed to this evangelical style in church, so she must have learned it elsewhere. There is every reason to believe that a young Ellen saw Macarthur in action. Despite moving to London, Macarthur never forgot her roots. She returned to Scotland many times, actively campaigning for women workers, workers such as the thread mill “lasses” in Paisley and the jute workers of Dundee.

As a young Scottish worker, Ellen was not only physically within reach of a new generation of activists; her working life, and that of her family, was repeatedly shaken by a ferocious outpouring of collective action by workers throughout Glasgow and the surrounding industrial communities. The extent of this unrest was noted by John Maclean in a 1911 address to the Renfrewshire Co-operative Conference, a group that included the Barrhead Co-operative. “The times we are living in are so
stirring and full of change that its is not impossible to believe that we are in the rapids of revolution.” While such a comment may be viewed as wishful thinking on the part of a Marxist such as Maclean, it is supported by the fact that between 1910 and 1914 there were 261 recorded strikes in the region, often among the poorest workers – especially women – workers who were previously unorganized. The significance of these strikes can be seen in the fact that they represented more than six million lost workdays. Further, in the pre-war years membership in trade unions increased dramatically in Scotland, climbing from 129,000 in 1909 to 230,000 in 1914.

A survey of the most significant events occurring in the world immediately surrounding Ellen does offer a meaningful picture of this highly volatile environment and the diversity of issues being confronted by Scottish workers. The most important were: the thread mill strikes in Paisley and Neilston (which involved many Barrhead workers) and the decline of the paternalistic management system used by many of the textile companies; the Singer Strike of 1911 and the fight against “scientific management;” World War I, which unleashed a wave of anti-militarism and pacifism in the area; the Glasgow rent strikes of 1915 and 1916, which demonstrated the effectiveness of a campaign led by women; the 1915 Clydeside engineers’ strike and the response of the skilled male workers to the question of dilution – the use of unskilled workers, often women; and the 40-Hours Strike of 1919, which some observers believe brought Great Britain closer to a workers’ revolution than at any other point in its history.

The thread mills of Paisley and Neilston employed workers from numerous villages in the area, including Barrhead and Nitshill. The Paisley area textile industry was one of the oldest and most famous in Britain, begun during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and made famous by the Paisley shawl and the
weavers who created their distinctive designs. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the making of textiles in Paisley evolved from a cottage industry to a factory system. This industrial transformation helped Paisley’s dominant textile company – J & P Coats – gain a virtual monopoly over the thread manufacturing industry, with facilities on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean and a ninety percent share of the world’s production. Between 1897 and 1914, unrest among the thread-mill workers increased dramatically, challenging the long-established paternalistic management system used by mill owners and building a surprising level of class consciousness among this previously unorganized and historically docile workforce.

After the consolidation of the Coats empire in 1896, the company began shifting toward a more bureaucratic approach to labor management, taking advantage of new technology and slowly instituting some of the production efficiency techniques that became popular during this period. For workers, this often meant changes in the tasks they performed and reductions in their weekly wages. As a result, the Paisley area thread mills saw a series of spontaneous strikes, during the late 1890s and early 1900s, by women workers, usually over the issue of wages.

Siobhan Tolland, in her research concerning the life of Mary Brooksbank and the jute workers of Dundee during this period, suggests that one of the reasons why women workers were more apt to strike spontaneously, compared with their male counterparts, was because of the culture of Scottish women during the period. For women workers, strikes took on a carnival-like or party atmosphere. They involved music, dance, poetry and other forms of public celebration, similar to the children’s programs sponsored by the Cooperative Women’s Guild. This willingness to strike is particularly interesting, considering the fact that women workers in Dundee were often the primary breadwinners, as was the case with women textile workers in
Lancashire, but not with the mill workers in the Paisley area. Mary Brooksbank’s account of the opening moments of one strike supports Tolland’s theory. Mary recalled how young women textile workers danced around a policeman singing. “He took it in good part, and laughed with us,” she later wrote.

In November 1897, eight hundred female spoolers went on strike at the Ferguslie Spooling Department after new machines were introduced, a change that resulted in a reduction in wages. Ellen’s Aunt, Grace Halford, was a fifteen-year-old thread mill worker at the time and may have been one of the workers involved in this or one of the subsequent strikes. By 1900, Grace’s younger sister, Ellen Halford, had joined her in the thread mills. Ellen Halford’s life was cut short when, in 1903, she died of acute pulmonary phthisis, a lung disease common among textile workers of the time.

In 1900, copwinders and ring spinners went out on strike in separate actions. In response, the company fired strike leaders and threatened to discharge workers who attempted to organize other workers. In 1904, 200 hankwinders struck over a wage dispute and were quickly joined by 2,800 workers who left in a sympathy walk-out. In 1905, a walk-out by about a hundred hankwinders led to mass demonstrations throughout Paisley, a strike that brought out local men, women and children in support of the striking women workers. At the conclusion of that strike, Coats workers approached the Paisley Trades Council for help in forming a union. As a result, both the newly created National Federation of Women Workers, led by Mary Macarthur, and the Independent Labour Party, in which James Maxton was a leading activist, became participants in the next round of labor disputes.

In 1906, Archibald Coats abandoned plans for expanding the company’s Paisley facility because of what the company termed “interference by outsiders with
our Paisley workers.” *The Economist* in London observed, “The Socialist has been preaching, and the Labourist has been intriguing.” By this point, Coats’ profits were in the millions and shareholders were earning a consistent twenty percent annual dividend, often with a five percent bonus. With investors doing so well, workers were motivated to strike for higher wages and better working conditions. Coats, speaking at the Annual Meeting in 1906, responded, “I am expected to apologise for the profitableness of our business,” adding that “there is bound to be a certain number (of workers) who think they have cause to complain, and those are almost invariably the worst workers, who would not be able to make good wages under almost any condition.” His comment brought laughter and applause from shareholders attending the meeting.

More strikes occurred in 1907, when young male laborers went out in response to the introduction of new machines. They were joined by female cone-winders. Within a few days, the dispute escalated into one of the most disorganized and violent strikes of the period. Management refused to negotiate. Workers broke windows, the company called police to have the workers forcibly removed from the mill. Driven from the mill, woman workers battled with police in the surrounding streets, often using their foot-long hat pins to defend themselves. The Coats company closed its Paisley mills, idling 12,000 thread mill workers for approximately a week. This strike hardened Coats against the workers, and a strike the following year, according to the NFWW’s publication *The Woman Worker*, resulted in the firing of “every worker who had shown a spark of resistance to unfair treatment.”

Throughout the Paisley strikes, the question of paternalism remained a central issue. During the 1906 labor unrest, for example, *The Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette* printed a letter signed “A Mill Worker,” that encouraged mill workers to
oppose the union and recommended that they go to their masters “with that confidence a little child approaches its parents.” In this same vein, another group of workers issued a statement in opposition to the union and expressed their “confidence that the directors of the firm will continue to deal justly with them.”

In contrast, the Scottish Observer, another newspaper based in Paisley, attacked the sincerity of the paternalistic feelings that the Coats company claimed to hold for its workers, and demonstrated that there was support for the workers within the larger community. The paper observed that the Coats family was “moved with the sufferings of a heroine in a sentimental novel or a tale of slum-life in a book; but they overlook the…suffering heroines who are slaving daily, from morn till night, in an atmosphere worse than tropical – slaving (for) enough to eat and be clothed respectably…they are like bees in a hive who strive and toil to make a comb, which the enterprising bee-keeper comes and lifts in due season and eats himself.”

Perhaps the most important textile strike of the period, certainly from the perspective of Ellen, was the 1910 strike at the R.F. and J. Alexander and Co. plant in Neilston. The Alexander mill was not part of the Coats empire; it was owned by the English Sewing Cotton Company. Unlike earlier strikes, this was the first strike with viable trade union backing. From the beginning, it was supported by the NFWW, who had representatives at the mill daily, and the Glasgow Trade Council. It also attracted support from John Maclean and James Maxton. The strike began on May 25, as cop winders at the Alexander mill sought wage parity with wages paid at the neighboring Coats mills. Alexander refused to negotiate with the workers’ representatives, describing them as “outsiders.” On June 6, the company locked-out all the workers. Workers responded by breaking windows and mobbing the mill manager. On June 8, the workers convinced the foremen to join the strike. At this
point, the company offered to deal with the workers, but the workers insisted upon working through their trade unions. On June 10, five thousand people marched to the mill manager’s house in Barrhead, in a public demonstration that included banners, songs and pipers. The parade included workers, family members and local children. Ellen, who was nine years old at the time, may well have been a participant. The largest banner bore the slogan, “We want justice, fair conditions and a living wage.” Lacking the strength of a global corporate giant such as Coats, Alexander was ultimately forced to negotiate, and the strike was resolved by the arbitration service of the Board of Trade in Glasgow. As Bill Knox and Helen Corr noted, the Neilston strike “represented a leap forward in terms of class consciousness for, at the very least, it involved a break with paternalism and opened space for a counter-employer culture and language to emerge.”

The Singer Strike of 1911 was the largest confrontation between management and labor on Clydeside in the pre-war years of 1910 to 1914. It occurred when Ellen was ten years of age and nearing the end of her schooling. The Singer strike illustrates the harsh, anti-union bias held by many companies in the Glasgow area, where strikes were routinely broken by the use of force, intimidation and the importation of replacement labour. It also demonstrates the response of workers to the introduction by employers of American-inspired “scientific management” into the workplace,” also know as Taylorism. In the name of increased efficiency and maximized profits, scientific management usually involved changes in established work procedures, reduction of the number of workers assigned to a particular task, increased work loads and wage reductions. For most workers, it simply translated into more work and less pay.
On March 21, 1911, at the American owned and managed Singer sewing machine factory in Clydebank, twelve women, whose job it was to polish sewing machine cabinets, went out on strike when their working procedures were reorganized in a manner that increased their workload and decreased their wage. Conditions in the plant were ripe for a strike, and by the next day most of the plant’s eleven thousand workers had walked out in support of the women. An explanation of why so many workers were ready to strike was explained by the following eyewitness account of conditions inside the plant, as reported in the Forward: “In many of these departments foremen stand with their hands timing the men and girls so that the maximum amount of labour can be exacted from the operatives in return for the minimum wage…Wages are not reduced collectively…the wages of two or three are broken today; a few others tomorrow, and so on until all the workers have been reduced, and the game of SCIENTIFIC REDUCTION begins once more.”

What made the Singer strike unusual was the solidarity shown by the workers, uniting women and men of all occupations and most skills within the company, without regard to religion, a force which often divided Protestant and Catholic workers in the region. A primary reason for this cooperation was the support provided by two organizations – the Industrial Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) and the Socialist Labour Party (SLP). However, there was one group of workers that did not willingly participate in the strike. That group was the engineers, a group the SLP journal called “the blue blood of the working class, the aristocracy of labour, who added still further to their reputation which stinks in the nostrils of all honest men. After being virtually shamed out, they lived up to A.S.E. (Amalgamated Society of Engineers) ethics, deciding…by a large majority to kow-tow to the firm.” Engineers were among the highest paid and best organized workers in Scotland, the
workers who had the most to lose in a strike. Their reluctance played a key role in the failure of the Singer strike and offers evidence of the divide between skilled and unskilled workers. As the SLP went on to note: “In strong contrast with the fine spirit of loyalty displayed by the unorganized and ‘unskilled’ strikers is the pitiful part played by…the ‘skilled’ trade unionists…The majority of them stayed in altogether or only came out either because there was no work for them to do…or because they were shamed into it by the well merited stigma of ‘scab’ which was hurled at them by the indignant strikers.” After joining the strike, the skilled workers continued to distance themselves from the unskilled workers. “Members of the A.S.E came out…cursing the strikers as a mob, ignored the strike committee, and tearfully apologised to their officials for their actions, explaining that they did not come out on account of sympathy with the strikers but because their sentiment of self-respect was hurt by the odious monosyllable which greeted them as they entered the gate.”

In response to the strike, Singer shut down the plant and threatened to move production to its other European facilities. In addition, they intimidated workers by telling them they would be blackballed if they did not immediately return to work. When the workers did return, “a campaign of systematic victimisation was initiated by Singer and over 400 workers, including all the strike leaders and known members of the IWGB, were sacked.”

Like Coats, Singer was an international company, with facilities on both sides of the Atlantic. As a result, it could shift production to plants in other countries, effectively neutralizing the impact of a work stoppage at one factory or in a single country.

While the strike was ultimately a failure from the workers’ perspective, one point of particular importance to Ellen must be stressed. As noted by the Glasgow Labour History Workshop, “Contrary to male labourist myths, the women workers in
the 1911 Singer confrontation were neither weak, unreliable nor peripheral to working
class struggle. Indeed, women played a critical and active role throughout the
stoppage and were amongst those sacked and victimised in the aftermath of the
strike. It was, after all, twelve women who led thousands of Singer workers out on
strike. For Ellen, a young girl of ten and about to enter the work force, the story of
how women workers led such a massive strike must have been inspirational.

World War I began in August of 1914, immediately changing the lives of
Scottish workers as they were forced to shoulder the demands placed upon them by
the British industrial war machine. This is also the year Ellen, age 13, most probably
took her first job in a local textile mill. The anti-militarism and pacifism of many of
Scotland’s most prominent labor leaders – including Maxton and Maclean – created
numerous points of ideological confrontation for workers and the government.

Many workers greeted the beginning of the war with a sense of excitement,
optimism and opportunity. During the first weeks of the war, the British army had
more volunteers than it could process. As Gerard J. DeGroot noted, workers
volunteered for many different reasons. “The rush to the colours was not one
monolithic mass, but rather some two million separate individuals, each with a
different set of reasons for volunteering. In varying degrees, these recruits were
deferent, desperate, drunk, bored, destitute or deluded; many sought glory, others
were drawn by a patriotic duty, and many simply did what they were told.” As
Willie Gallacher, a labor activist from the period, noted in his biography, Revolt on
the Clyde, “‘What a terrible attraction a war can have! The wild excitement, the
illusion of wonderful adventure and the actual break in the deadly monotony of
working class life! Thousands went flocking to the colours in the first days, not
because of any ‘love of country,’ not because of any high feeling of ‘patriotism,’ but
because of the new, strange and thrilling life that lay before them.” War, however,
changed the men who served in the trenches of France. As Gallacher later wrote, “the
reality of that fearsome slaughterhouse, with all its long agony of filth and horror,
turned them from buoyant youth to despair or madness.”

Political organizations such as the ILP and the Socialist Labour Party
condemned a war they saw as imperialistic. The Women’s Peace Crusade organized
anti-war rallies on Glasgow Green during the years of 1914 through 1916. Perhaps
most dramatically, Emily Orr, a pacifist poet of the time, addressed the one most
important question – Why would workers defend a system that treated them so badly?
In her poem “Recruit from the Slums,” she wrote:

What has your country done for you,
Child of a city slum,
That you should answer her ringing call
To man the gap and keep the wall
And hold the field though a thousand fall
And help be slow to come?…
“What can your country ask of you,
Dregs of the British race?
“She gave us little, she taught us less,
And why we were born we could hardly guess
Till we felt the surge of battle press
And looked the foe in the face.”

The Glasgow Rent Strikes of 1915 were the first important point of
confrontation between the workers, or more accurately wives of workers, and the
government during the war. These strikes were a direct result of the start of the war
and the greed of profiteering slumlords. As Gallacher observed: “Wages which had
been inadequate before (the war broke out), rapidly became worse. From the very
first day the profiteers were on the job. ‘There’s profit in blood,’” Gallacher
explained, “Prices first, then rents. The difficulties of the house-wives increased
daily. In the workshops we agitated continually. Meal-hour discussion circles, with a
big sale of books, pamphlets and periodicals, had for long been a common feature in
most of the Clyde factories, but following the outbreak of war these increased vastly in range and importance.“47

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this profiteering was its acceptance by the British government. As Lloyd George48 admitted in January 1915, “The first interest of the taxpayer is that the supplies should be secured. With this object it may be to the public advantage to conclude contracts in the negotiations of which the prime necessity of securing expeditious and satisfactory delivery has been regarded as of more urgent importance that the actual terms of the bargain.”49

As the British industrial machine geared-up for the production of war materials, Glasgow became a primary center for the production of munitions.50 Thousands of workers were attracted to the area and this rapid growth placed an even greater strain on the already inadequate housing, especially in areas where war production was concentrated. Glasgow’s housing before the start of the war was bad. Working class families were crammed into tenements; density rates were the highest in Britain, sometimes with more than a thousand people living within a single acre. Many people lived in the “Backlands,” tenements built in the backyards of older tenement buildings. Such accommodations provided inadequate sanitation, living space, light and breathing room.51 In Barrhead, like many industrial villages throughout the region, there had long been a housing problem. Ellen’s family, for example, moved several times during her early years, living in some of the worst housing in the community. The war made things much worse. Barrhead dwellings that had been condemned in 1913 were reopened in October 1914, in order to provide housing for approximately eighty Belgian war refugees who were relocated to the village.52
Profiteering landlords throughout Clydeside saw this acute housing shortage as their opportunity to increase the rents they charged working class families, families who were already suffering from rapid price increases for food and other essential items. In Barrhead, for example, rents increased by 16 percent during the opening months of the war. In the prime munitions production centers, the rents were raised even higher. In Govan, for example, some rent increases were as high as 23 percent. Landlords took tenants who could not pay to court and had them evicted, often seizing all of their possessions as compensation for unpaid rents. Evictions became a common occurrence during 1915, even among women with husbands fighting and dying in the trenches. Such heartless and unpatriotic action on the part of greedy landlords helped to build public support for the tenants.

In response, women like Mary Barfour and Helen Crawfurd organized housewives in a massive campaign against the landlords. Aided by skilled factory workers, especially from the munitions and shipbuilding industries, and with the political support of the Independent Labour Party and the Cooperative Women’s Guild, they were able to unite more than twenty-thousand working class women and men in a campaign of withholding rent payments. Rent strike activists addressed crowds from the roofs of local washhouses, renters stopped making rent payments, and when the sheriff’s men tried to evict the tenants for non-payment, local women bombarded them with flour and peasemeal. Afraid that the rent-strikes might threaten war production, the government was ultimately forced to pass legislation that prevented additional rent increases in areas surrounding munitions factories, and returned rents to their pre-war levels until the end of the war. The ultimate success of the 1915 rent strikes, perhaps the only significant worker victory during the war, was
made possible by the women who organized and provided the leadership for the campaign.\textsuperscript{57}

The engineers’ strike over the question of “dilution” began in 1915 when skilled workers, often referred to as engineers, went on strike for higher wages, an action in response to the rising cost-of-living associated with the war. The strike ultimately involved more than ten-thousand members of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) and eight different manufacturing facilities on the Clyde. Although the strike failed, workers formed the Labour Withholding Committee (LWC), a group that represented the rank-and-file members of the union, workers who were dissatisfied with the decisions being made by trade union officials.\textsuperscript{58}

In response to this dispute, the British government became an active participant in the relationship between Scottish workers and their employers. Concerned that labor stoppages might interrupt the production of war materials, the government enacted the Munitions of War Act. The act dramatically reduced the rights of the individual worker, and significantly strengthened the authority of the government and employer over the worker. The three most onerous aspects of the act were provisions that made it a criminal offense for workers to: (1) leave their job without the written consent of the employer; (2) refuse to accept a new job assignment, regardless of the rate of pay; or (3) refuse to work overtime. Workers charged with violations of the Munitions Act were brought before munitions tribunals, courts that had the authority to fine and imprison workers who were convicted of offenses under the act. Most skilled workers saw the Munitions Act as an attempt by the government to take away their hard-won industrial rights, and among Clydeside workers it was known as The Slavery Act.\textsuperscript{59}
In December, 1915, relations between skilled workers and the government deteriorated even further when the question of dilution came to the forefront. Because of the massive increase in production required to meet the demands of the war, employers and the government sought to simplify production so that more semi-skilled and unskilled workers, especially women, could be hired. This *dilution*\(^{60}\) of the work force was seen by the skilled workers as a major threat to both their status as craftsmen and their long-term earnings potential.\(^{61}\) As R.J. Morris noted, “Men had learnt from long experience that the introduction of women to an occupation was associated with a tendency to lower wages…From such a perspective, keeping women out of an occupation was an essential part of defence against increased exploitation by the owners of capital.”\(^{62}\)

Under the banner of the LWC, which was reorganized into the Clyde Workers’ Committee (CWC), the skilled workers tried to fight the government over the issue of dilution. The government used the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), an act which made almost every form of opposition to government policy a treasonous act, as justification for deporting CWC leaders to other parts of Britain, effectively ending serious opposition to dilution by the engineers and opening the doors of munitions factories to women and unskilled men. This increase in available workers allowed the munitions plants to operate non-stop, and made women an essential part of the wartime workforce. Between July 1914 and January 1918, the number of women employed in Britain increased from 3,224,600 to 4,814,600, many in industries that had excluded women before the war. Women worked in armaments factories, while others did heavy labor such as building ships, stoking furnaces and unloading coal.\(^{63}\)
While much of the debate surrounding dilution ignored the rights of women and focused on protecting the existing rights of the skilled male workers, labor activists like Mary Macarthur recognized that dilution provided a meaningful opportunity for women workers. Macarthur concentrated her efforts on the section within the Munitions Act that required a worker to obtain a certificate of discharge from her employer before she could move to a new job. This article effectively prevented workers from moving to higher paying positions, something which would have forced employers to pay higher wages in order to retain existing workers and attract new ones. This requirement was especially hard on women, who normally had the lowest paying jobs. “In many cases women were regularly working between seventy and eighty hours a week, and this in factories and shops where there were no adequate sanitary or other arrangements for their comfort.” Macarthur confronted the government on what she believed was the central issue -- “If you say to the women, you are not to leave your employment, then you must make the conditions of that employment decent.” Thanks to her “bull-dog tenacity,” the government created the Labour Supply Committee, to which she was appointed. From that position, she was able to push successfully for a minimum wage for women workers and improved sanitary facilities for women.64

The 40-Hours Strike of 1919 was the most dramatic of the labor confrontations of the period, and it is the event that some believe was when the workers of Scotland came closest to open revolution. The end of World War I brought the sacking of thousands of workers, especially women who had been hired for munitions work. Mary Macarthur noted that by the start of 1919 more than 500,000 women workers in Britain were already out of work.65 Unemployment was compounded by the demobilization of soldiers returning from Europe. In response,
the leading labor organizations in Glasgow organized a strike to provide jobs for these ex-soldiers by reducing the work week to forty hours. They also wanted to prevent the re-emergence of an unemployed reserve, and thus help labor establish a stronger bargaining position with employers. By the end of January, more than seventy-five thousand workers were out on strike, representing engineering, shipbuilding, electrical supply and mining industries throughout the region. Flying pickets of ex-service men, organized by the CWC, enlisted the support of workers throughout the region. *The Strike Bulletin* printed by the Socialist Labour Party reported that in Barrhead “the sheet-metal workers are on strike. The others will come sure if they have the case put to them on the spot.” By the end of the first week, almost every trade on the Clydeside was represented in the strike.

Writing about this time, Mary Brooksbank noted, “short time and lock-outs became the order of the day…(and) it became apparent that the returning soldiers were not to be allowed to work in the country they had fought for. Unemployment grew, but these were different men from the young lads who had so bravely and unquestioningly gone off to war. They realised now just whose country it really was.”

The confrontation came to a head on January 31, 1919, when more than sixty-thousand workers assembled in George Square, in the heart of Glasgow. While strike leaders met with government representatives in the city chamber, violence broke out between police and demonstrators. As the *Evening News* reported, “The police found it necessary to make a baton charge, and strikers and civilians – men, women, and children – were felled in the melee that followed.” What started the battle is not clear, although historians at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow described it as “a vicious and unprovoked attack on the demonstrators.” Demonstrators, who
included recently released soldiers, fought back with the available weapons at their disposal, including “fists, iron railings and broken bottles.” The confrontation became known as “Bloody Friday.” In response, the government ordered troops with tanks into Glasgow, careful not to use local Scottish troops who might join the strikers. As one Scottish veteran, who had just returned from France and was garrisoned with the Seaforth Highlanders in Cromarty recalled, “We had no idea what was going on in Glasgow. But one morning the whole battalion was paraded and all men from Glasgow and district were told to come out to the front of the parade. We thought that this was us going to be demobbed (discharged), but instead we were kept in Cromarty, while the rest (around 700 men) were sent to Glasgow to shoot if it were necessary.” Ten days later, the strike was called off. The workers did not get a forty-hour week, but, based on a prior agreement, the work week was reduced from fifty-seven hours to forty-seven.

Late in 1919, Ellen and almost her entire family were forced to move to Lancashire in search of employment, an indication that they may well have been active participants in these events. If not, they certainly understood the plight of the workers who did participate.

In the following months and years, the workers’ cause in Britain became more political. Whereas before the war Conservatives and Liberals had been Britain’s two leading political parties, things changed dramatically after the war. In the 1920s the newly formed Labour Party replaced the Liberal Party as one of Britain’s two major parties. In the 1922 Parliamentary elections, Labour became the dominant party in Glasgow, jumping from a single seat in 1918 to ten seats in 1922. A key reason for this transfer of power was passage of the Representation of the People Act, providing for universal male suffrage and giving women over the age of thirty the right to vote.
Mary Macarthur noted what she saw as the most significant result of the war from the perspective of women workers. “Of all the changes worked by the war none has been greater than the change in the status and position of women: and yet it is not so much that woman herself has changed, as that man’s conception of her has changed.” However, with respect to Ellen, an earlier comment of Macarthur’s seems even more apropos. “One of the most hopeful signs…is the development of many women leaders from the ranks of the workers themselves – women who are imbued with the justice of a cause, and realising the great issues involved, have become enthusiastic missionaries, preaching the gospel…to their fellow workers in the factory, mill and workshops.”

Today, the labor turmoil that raged in Scotland during the early decades of the twentieth century remains controversial. Until now, the debate has focused on the influence these individuals and events had within Scotland, but as Terry Brotherstone suggested, in light of individuals such as Ellen, who took their experiences to other parts of the world, perhaps the debate needs to be expanded to include the unexpected and previously unexplored effects these individuals and events had on the world outside Scotland. Certainly, Ellen can be viewed as a disciple of Red Clydeside, as a women who carried the gospel of individuals such as John Maclean, Mary Macarthur and James Maxton to the United States and strikes in industrial communities such as Passaic, New Jersey, New Bedford, Massachusetts, and Gastonia, North Carolina.
Much of the initial scholarship surrounding Red Clydeside focused on the engineers’ strike of 1915, the question of dilution, and the 40-Hours Strike of 1919. In recent years, historians at places such as Strathclyde University have begun to expand the definition of Red Clydeside to include other major events between 1910 and 1919. Roots of Red Clydeside, edited by William Kenefick and Aruthur McIvor, (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd., 1996) and the Glasgow Digital Library, Strathclyde University, “Red Clydeside: A history of the labour movement in Glasgow 1910-1932,” (http://gdl.cdlr.strath.ac.uk/redclyde/rceevents.html) are two of the best examples. However, very little research has been done with respect to the role women played in the events of Red Clydeside, or how dilution affected women workers.


During this time, working class women did their washing at communal wash houses.


Robert Blatchford and Keir Hardie were two leading socialists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their activities and speeches were widely reported and influenced many of the labor activists of this period.


John Maclean (1879-1923) was perhaps the most famous labor activist in Scottish history. One contemporary called Maclean “the greatest revolutionary figure Scotland has produced.” [Gallacher, William, Revolt on the Clyde, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980), p. 22.] Like James Maxton, he was born in Pollockshaws, approximately three miles east of Barrhead. There he was active in the local cooperative society and in 1910 played a key role in organizing young women workers in the thread mills of Neilston. Maclean came into prominence among Glasgow’s labor activists in the years just before the start of the First World War, when he wrote a weekly column in Justice under the pseudonym of “Gael,” and conducted weekly classes on Marxism throughout the region. Hundreds of workers attended, and as Harry McShane later noted, “All the best elements of the working class movement, particularly the younger people went to them enthusiastically.” [Knox, William, Scottish Labour Leaders (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1984), p. 182.] Maxton, for example, was one of the tutors for Maclean’s classes. During World War I, Maclean was convicted of sedition after making anti-conscription speeches in Glasgow and served several months in prison. Then, following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, he was appointed Consul for Soviet Affairs in Great Britain and opened an office in Glasgow. Police soon raided the office and arrested Maclean on charges of mutiny, sedition and disaffection amongst the civilian population. At his trial, in true Maclean style, he declared, “I am not here as the accused, I am here as the accuser of capitalism, dripping with blood from head to foot.” [Brotherstone, Terry, editor, Accuser of Capitalism (London: New Park Publications, 1986). Not surprisingly, he was found guilty of the charges and sentenced to five years. Workers demonstrated throughout Britain against his imprisonment. In Barrhead, for example, the local chapter of the ILP voted 300 to 0 in support of a resolution demanding that Maclean be released. Maclean was ultimately pardoned by the King. Maclean rejected the pardon, saying that it was the workers who earned him his freedom and not the King. When Maclean died in 1923, more than 10,000 people attended his funeral in Pollockshaws. As Terry Brotherstone noted, Maclean was “a courageous supporter of the Bolshevik Revolution, and an uncompromising internationalist.” (Brotherstone, Terry, “John Maclean and the Russian Revolution,” Scottish Labour History Society Journal, Nov. 23, 1988, p. 26.)


“Development of a Socialist Infrastructure,” Glasgow Digital Library. The Glasgow Digital Library is based at the Centre for Digital Library Research in the University of Strathclyde to support teaching, learning and research. It can be accessed on the web at http://gdl.cdlr.strath.ac.uk/. It provides one of the most comprehensive collection of articles and documents related to Red Clydeside and other events related to Scottish labor history.

James Maxton (1885 – 1946) was Barrhead’s most prominent political figure. Born three miles away in the village of Pollockshaws, he moved to Barrhead at the age of five when his father was named headmaster of Grahamston School. After becoming active in politics during his university days, Maxton joined the Barrhead branch of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1904. Almost immediately he became one of the ILP’s leading propagandists. Rising quickly within the party, he served as chairman of the Scottish ILP from 1913 to 1919. A staunch pacifist, Maxton refused any
type of service that supported the war effort. In March, 1916, speaking on Glasgow Green against
the deportation of local labor leaders, Maxton encouraged workers to stop work in protest against the
government’s action, defiantly repeating his comments for the benefit of police officers who attended
the speech. He was arrested four days later on charges of sedition. At his trial in Edinburgh the
following month, he took the advice of his legal counsel and pled guilty to the lesser charge of
“attempting to impede, delay, and restrict the production of munitions.” He was imprisoned in Calton
Jail for approximately eight months, where he convinced several of his jailers to organize a chapter of
the Police and Prison Warders’ Union and to join the ILP. Still unwilling to work in support of the
war, he spent 1917 and 1918 helping construct barges for neutral countries and working in support of
causes such as the Women’s Peace Crusade. In 1922, as part of the reordering of Glasgow politics
which threw out the Liberal Party, he was elected to Parliament, a seat he held until his death in 1946.

Mary Macarthur (1880-1921) was born to middle-class parents in Glasgow. At the age of fifteen, her
family moved to Ayr, on the southwest coast of Scotland at the mouth of the Clyde. There she worked
as a bookkeeper in her father’s drapery business and as a freelance journalist. It was as a journalist that
she was first exposed to the trade union movement. As she later told an American newspaper
interviewer, “I went to a meeting (of shop assistants) at Ayr to write a skit on the proceedings. Going
to scoff, I remained to pray. I became impressed with the truth and meaning of the Labour movement.”
It was a life-long conversion. In 1903 Macarthur moved to London, where her potential was quickly
recognized and she was named secretary of the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL), a position
which put her into the middle of the women’s labor movement. In 1906, she established the National
Federation of Women Workers (NFWW), which according to Sarah Boston “organized more women,
fought more strikes and did more to establish women trade unionists than any other organization.”


Hamilton, Mary Macarthur (London: Leonard Parsons, 1925), p. 34.

Glasgow Labour History Workshop, “The Labour Unrest in West Scotland 1910-1914,” Kenefick,
editor, The Roots of Red Clydeside, p. 18.


During the nineteenth century, a philosophy of paternalism provided Paisley area mill owners with a
highly successful method for controlling their workers. Under such a system, employers created a
workplace in which the owner and his management representatives took on the role of a benevolent
father figure, responsible for making decisions that were in the best interest of the corporate family and
providing direction to the other members the family. The company often provided workers with a
variety of benefits in conjunction with their employment, such as housing, company stores, health care,
childcare and retirement pensions – all designed to strengthen the relationship between workers and
the company, and to re-enforce the idea that the company was looking out for the workers. In return,
workers were expected to be loyal and obedient. This paternalistic approach to the management of
workers was based on Christian traditions and replicated life in the days of cottage industry textiles,
when the head of the family, usually the father, managed family production and finances, directing the
wife and children in their day-to-day activities. Such a management system was particularly successful
in places such as Paisley, where a large majority of the workers were single, young women. From the
workers’ perspective, however, there were also significant disadvantages of working under such a
system. Benefits were often designed to tie workers to the company, helping to keep wages low and
making it difficult for workers to move to better jobs. Paternalism supported the myth that the rewards
of production were being equitably distributed among everyone associated with the company. The
reality was very different. With a workforce of young women, thread mill companies were able to
keep salary costs extremely low, because women workers were paid less than half what their male
counterparts received, and because most thread mill jobs were classified as unskilled. Their status as
unskilled workers can be questioned, since many positions required significant training. To become a
twister, for example, required twenty-one weeks of training before a worker was given a full workload.
By classifying workers as unskilled and keeping wages low, textile companies were able to keep
profits high.

Knox & Corr, “Striking Women,” Roots of Red Clydeside, William Kenefick and Arthur McIvor,

Tolland, “Mary Brooksbank.”

25 General Register of Scotland: Census 1901; Deaths 1903.
27 Clark, Paisley: A History, pp. 166-167. Several hours were spent in the Queen Mother Library reviewing original copies of The Economist trying to find the original quotation. Unfortunately, it was not found.
29 Mary Macarthur was in Paisley during 1907, representing the NFWW. Responding to a charge by the Paisley Gazette that she was attempting to “speak for” the women workers of Paisley, Macarthur said the workers “are perfectly able to speak for themselves. I only urge that they should do so with united voice and so be loyal to each other. I claim no right to speak for the women of Paisley, but I claim the right to speak to them. I claim the right to convey a message of comradeship and good cheer from the 80,000 women Trade Unionists whom I represent.” [Hamilton, Mary Agnes, Mary Macarthur (London: Leonard Parsons, 1925), p. 50].
30 The Woman Worker, June 5, 1908; Roots of Red Clydeside, pp.117-119.
32 MacDonald, The Radical Thread, p. 158.
34 As the members of the Glasgow Labour History Workshop noted in their essay on the Singer Strike in Roots of Red Clydeside, “Whilst some new skills were created in this process, more than ever, mass production under ‘Taylorism’ was dehumanizing and degrading the worker, who, in the interest of increasing profits, was seen as merely another element in the production process – as (Frederick Winslow) Taylor put it, the worker would be a ‘trained gorilla.’”
35 “The Singer Strike 1911,” Glasgow Digital Library. In the United States, this system of increasing the workload of workers was often called “speed-up” in New England and “stretch-out” in the American South.
36 Like the J&P Coats Company, Singer was an international company with production facilities on both sides of the Atlantic.
37 Forward, April 1, 1911; “A Clash of Work Regimes,” Roots of Red Clydeside, p. 195.
39 The Socialist, April, 1911; McLean, The Legend of Red Clydeside, p. 101. A very similar scenario was played out in New Bedford, Massachusetts when the skilled workers negotiated a settlement with the mill owners, undercutting the unskilled workers. This will be discussed more fully in the “New Bedford” chapter.
40 The Socialist, April, 1911; McLean, The Legend of Red Clydeside, p. 101.
42 Roots of Red Clydeside, p. 210-211.
46 DeGroot, Blighty, pp. 48-49.
48 David Lloyd George served as Minister of Munitions and later Minister of War, prior to becoming Prime Minister in December, 1916.
50 The definition of munitions used by the government during the war was extremely broad and included far more than just military weapons and ammunition. It encompassed everything that might be needed to support the war effort, including the production of food, clothing and fuel.
51 McLean, The Legend of Red Clydeside, p. 18.
52 Housing the Heroes (Barrhead: Community Council, 1983), p. 16.
53 Ibid.
54 McLean, The Legend of Red Clydeside, p. 22.
57 “Clydeside Rent Strikes 1915-16,” Glasgow Digital Library.
The issue of “dilution” carried with it a gender bias in favor of the male workers. Dilution implies a workforce that is less than it was before women workers were introduced.


63 “Clydeside Resistance to Dilution,” Glasgow Digital Library.


65 *The Strike Bulletin*, February 9, 1919; Smith, *The Story of the 40 hours Strike*.

66 “Flying pickets” were used to expand a strike quickly. Workers from one striking facility were sent to other factories to encourage workers there to join the strike. Also known as “Flying Squadrons,” this technique had been used by socialists in the years before World War I. It was used in the U.S. as well.


68 “The 40 Hours Strike 1919,” Glasgow Digital Library.


71 “The Battle of George Square (Bloody Friday) 1919,” Glasgow Digital Library.

72 Smith, *The Story of the 40 hours Strike*, February 1st.


75 Macarthur, “Trade Unionism,” p. 80.

76 This point was suggested by Brotherstone in a conversation on February 20, 2003.
Chapter Four – Migration

As part of the mass exodus of workers from Scotland’s industrial communities that occurred in the months following Red Clydeside, Ellen and her family migrated from Scotland to the county of Lancashire in the north-west of England in December 1919. It was yet another relocation in the family’s multi-generational quest for economic survival. Four of Ellen’s eight great-grandparents moved from Ireland to Scotland in the mid-nineteenth century, and at least two others moved from Scottish crofts to industrial villages during the same period. Millgate, however, provided only a brief stopover. After less than two years in England, the family abandoned their native land and emigrated on to the United States. In America, they settled in the ethnically diverse textile community of Passaic, New Jersey, only a few miles northwest of Ellis Island, the government center where a majority of immigrants were processed before they were allowed to enter the U.S.

Examining the economic conditions of Glasgow and Lancashire during the years surrounding 1919, it is evident why the family was forced to move. There was sufficient employment in Barrhead, Paisley and Glasgow during World War I, but after the war unemployment along the Clyde skyrocketed. As one Barrhead resident noted, “Among the first casualties of peace were the soldiers returning from war to find that there were no jobs; and women, who had worked through the war in
factories, suddenly paid off. By April 1919 the Paisley area (including Barrhead) saw its ‘normal’ figure of about 1300 unemployed (males) swollen by 1150 demobbed soldiers and almost 4500 redundant female workers.”3 This economic depression extended throughout the industrial base of Scotland. As Marjory Harper observed, “The depression (after 1918) was felt with varying intensity across the British Isles, with South Wales, Tyneside, Clydeside and Belfast probably experiencing the greatest hardship. Yet, although the expulsive catalysts of depression and lengthened dole queues affected the whole of Britain, they were particularly acute in Scotland, where the worst affected area was also the area of greatest population density.”4 This area was Glasgow and the surrounding region.

By contrast, the textile industry in Lancashire endured very different economic fortunes. The Lancashire economy was weak during the war, surged back immediately after the war, but then collapsed in the very early 1920s, forcing the Dawsons to migrate on to America. As John Walton noted, “The year 1913 was the high water mark of the Lancashire cotton industry. The First World War brought disruption to raw material supplies, production and marketing; its aftermath saw a short-lived but disastrous investment boom, fuelled by false expectations of returning prosperity; and this in turn worsened the impact of the sustained slump which followed, as established markets were irrevocably lost to overseas competitors.”5

The Dawson family’s departure from their Scottish home after World War I was not unique. Numerous forces were at work. As Harper explained, “the return to peace ushered in a renewed outflow that was to have notable demographic effects on the country…the volume of Scottish emigration during the 1920s – aggravated by a steady southward drift and the ongoing repercussions of heavy male mortality in the war, and combined with a relatively low inward movement” all contributed to
Scotland’s declining population during the post-war years from 1921 to 1930. “In that decade, despite a natural increase of 352,386 individuals, or 7.2 per cent, the actual population of Scotland as a whole declined by 0.8 per cent, from 4,882,497 to 4,842,980.”6 In 1919, Ellen and her family were simply a tiny group within the long-established and ever-continuing “steady southward drift” that has for centuries siphoned Scots from their native homeland.

Like Barrhead, Millgate was a small industrial village situated in a valley, amid rolling green hills, outside a large industrial center. Where Barrhead was outside Glasgow, Millgate was less than fifteen miles north of Manchester and perhaps four miles north of Rochdale, a textile community of approximately the same size as Paisley. Rochdale was where the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers started the British cooperative movement in 1844, a movement for which Barrhead was also well known. Millgate’s primary industries were cotton textiles and mining in the sandstone quarries of the Rossendale Fells, two industries that were equally important to the Barrhead economy. Additionally, both communities had established Roman Catholic churches and a significant number of individuals of Irish origin.7

Initially, Millgate must have provided sufficient employment, or the prospect of employment, for the working members of the family. By 1919, at least seven members of the Dawson family were of wage earning age. Unlike Barrhead and other regions of Britain, a significant number of married women in Lancashire worked. In 1920, female workers in the Lancashire cotton textile industry outnumbered male workers by more than three to two. Of this number, more than a third of the women workers were married – the highest number of married women workers in Britain.8 By employing more women than men, employers were able to keep their labor costs low because women earned less than half of their male counterparts. By employing
more married women, employers were able to reduce turnover, because married
women had far less flexibility to move from one job to another. As a result, men in
the region had greater difficulty finding employment. When they did find work, they
were often forced to accept below-average wages. This, in turn, forced more married
women back into wage-earning work in order to help support their families. It was a
system that worked to the advantage of the employers and the distinct disadvantage of
the workers.

Although Ellen worked first as a spinner and later as a weaver in Lancashire
for less than eighteen months, the experience would contribute to her ever increasing
knowledge of the textile industry, just as it helped to shape her attitudes toward the
role of the worker in a modern industrial society. Lancashire was pivotal in the
history of the Industrial Revolution in general and the textile industry in particular. In
his classic work of 1845, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Frederick
Engels observed that, “The history of the proletariat in England begins (in the late
eighteenth)…century, with the invention of the steam-engine and of machinery for
working cotton. These inventions gave rise…to an industrial revolution, a revolution
which altered the whole civil society.” That revolution took place in Lancashire.

As a result of inventions such as the jenny, spinning throstle, the mule, the
carding engine, and preparatory frames – all invented by Lancashire workers – the
new system of manufacturing spread throughout Britain. The Levern Mill in
Barrhead, for example, was built in 1780 by a partnership of Lancashire and Glasgow
capitalists. The rapid growth of the British textile industry during the late eighteenth
and early nineteenth centuries can be clearly seen in the import and export statistics.
“In the years 1771-1775, there were annually imported into England rather less than
5,000,000 pounds of raw cotton; in the years 1841 there were imported 528,000,000
pounds, and the import for 1844 will reach at least 600,000,000 pounds.” As for production, in 1834 the country “exported 556,000,000 yards of woven cotton goods, 76,500,000 pounds of cotton yarn, and cotton hosiery of the value of £1,200,000.”

The impact on Lancashire was enormous. “The chief center of this (the textile) industry is Lancashire, where it originated; it has thoroughly revolutionized this county, converting it from an obscure, ill-cultivated swamp into a busy, lively region, multiplying its population tenfold in eighty years.”

As for places such as Millgate, Engels noted, “The towns surrounding Manchester vary little from the central city, so far as the working-people’s quarters are concerned… The towns are purely industrial and conduct all their business through Manchester upon which they are in every respect dependent, whence (these surrounding towns) are inhabited only by working-men and petty tradesmen, while Manchester has a very considerable commercial population.” Describing towns such as Rochdale, just south of Millgate, he noted that despite populations in the tens of thousands, they “are almost wholly working-people’s districts, interspersed only with factories… The towns themselves are badly and irregularly built with foul courts, lanes and back alleys, reeking with coal smoke, and especially dingy.” Based on photographs from the period, this also describes Millgate during the years Ellen and her family lived there.

Millgate was never more than a tiny mill village, one of several such villages located between the larger communities of Bacup and Rochdale in the Whitworth Valley. Even when the Dawsons lived in the area, the distinction between the various villages was less than clear. On their Ellis Island immigration records, Ellen and her brother David listed their home in England as Shawforth, just north of Millgate,
toward Bacup, while their brother Michael, who arrived three months later, listed his
as Facit, just south of Millgate, near Rochdale.12

The Hey’s Buildings, where the Dawson family lived, were adjacent to the
Facit Quarries and the Millgate and Facit Cotton Spinning, Manufacturing and Mining
Company.13 The Millgate mill was the largest in the Shawforth/Facit area, operating
more than 21,000 spindles and more than 600 looms. It was one of seventeen cotton
spinning mills, two calico printing and dying mills and one sizer that operated in the
Whitworth Valley at the time.14 Although no employment records were found, it
seems highly likely that the waging-earning members of the Dawson family worked
in either the mill or the mining operation. According to local historians, many of the
local miners lived in the Hey’s Buildings during this time.15

Industry in the Whitworth Valley dates to the early seventeenth century. Coal
mining began in 1631, and local parish records from 1705-1707 list twenty-three
woolen workers living in the valley.16 In 1755, Parliament authorized the
construction of a turnpike road through the valley between Rochdale and Bacup, and
by 1800 the first textile mill was built.17 Industrial development increased rapidly, as
various modes of transportation connected the villages with the outside world.
Construction of a railroad through the valley was started in 1862 and by 1881 the
various villages were connected to Bacup and Rochdale. In 1885 a steam tram system
began operation in the area and by 1911 an electric tram service connected Shawforth
and Facit with both Bacup and Rochdale.18 In 1870, there were twenty-one mills
operating in the Whitworth Valley, and by 1878 the mills surrounding Bacup were
operating more than half a million spindles and more than thirteen thousand looms.19

Migration into the Whitworth Valley during the nineteenth century was driven
by the area’s two major occupations -- mining and yarn manufacturing – industries
that attracted a large number of Irish workers. In 1841, one-third of all Irish-born individuals living in England lived in Lancashire. By 1851, the total number of Irish-born living in Lancaster was more than 190,000. 

Although the Whitworth Valley never experienced the level of labor unrest that the Dawsons witnessed in Scotland, or that affected Manchester or the more populous regions of Lancashire during much of the nineteenth century, there was a history of labor disputes dating back to the early nineteenth century. In 1826, for example, weavers destroyed more than 150 looms in four Bacup mills as a protest against longer hours and lower wages, and flannel weavers in Rochdale went on strike in 1830.

As for the years close to when the Dawson family lived in the valley, the correspondence files of the Whitworth Branch of the Powerloom Overlookers’ Association indicate an ongoing series of labor disputes in the valley, including a spinners’ strike in 1918, and a weavers’ strike in March 1920, a strike in which Ellen may have been an active participant. The weavers’ strike was over wages and resulted in a five day lock-out of all the workers. The following month, on April 22, 1920, the overlookers walked out. As J.R. Hoyle, the Whitworth Branch secretary, explained in a letter to Mr. Duscbury, the general secretary of the union, “Our reason for tendering Notices is Unpleasant Working Conditions, not wages.” Hoyle said the overlookers’ concern was connected to an ongoing conflict with the weavers and that the mill managers’ response to the overlookers’ action was that “our reason is Humbug and Fault finding by listening to Petty tales from weavers.” In a letter to J. Brown, the Weaving Manager at the Whitworth Mill, Hoyle explained that “The men at your place report to me that they are being treated unfair in respect to the amount of mechanical work they have to do.” Finally, in a letter to Thomas Brindle, secretary of
the Overseers’ Club, Hoyle explained that the overseers had produced a leaflet outlining their grievances and explaining why they had walked out, adding that “we consider it a dirty action on the Masters’ part.”

What makes these letters of particular interest is the workers’ lack of cooperation. The spinners, weavers and overlookers each went out on strike at a different time. Clearly, they spent much of their time bickering among themselves, rather than supporting the efforts of workers outside their particular skill group.

During the months that Ellen lived in Millgate – from December 1919 until April 1921 – she worked first as a spinner and later as a weaver in a local cotton mill, probably the Millgate Mill adjacent to the Hey’s Buildings where the Dawsons lived. One observer from the period provided the following picture of what Ellen’s working life in Lancashire must have been like. “Many women and girls in the district worked in some branch of the textile industry. Of these, we accepted weavers as ‘top’ in their class, followed by winders and drawers-in. Then came spinners. They lacked standing on several counts: first, the trade contained a strong Irish Catholic element, and wages generally were lower than in other sections.” The mills were hot and humid. “Because of the heat and slippery floors, women worked barefoot, dressed in little more than calico shifts. These garments, the respectable believed, induced in female spinners a certain moral carelessness. They came home, too, covered in dust and fluff; all things which combined to depress their social prestige.” At the lowest level of the hierarchy were the women who labored in the dye works, “their work was dirty, wet and heavy and they paid due penalty for it. Clogs and shawls were, of course, standard wear for all.”

In trying to understand what Ellen’s life in Millgate must have been like and how her own individualism was being shaped during these years as she became a
working woman, I believe it is worth noting a popular literary genre of the period – the romantic tales of the “Lancashire Lass.” The genre began in the final decade of the nineteenth century and reached its peak in the years immediately following World War I. Extremely popular, thousands of these “mill-girl stories” were published in weekly publications of the period, usually written for a working-class audience, especially young working women such as Ellen. It is important to remember that Ellen, unlike her mother, could read and as a result was exposed to ideas which would have reached few working-class women of her mother’s generation. Billie Melman noted that the women in these Lancashire stories “came to epitomise a set of ‘authentic’ values of the British working class: a simplicity that is not simplemindedness, an unbending spirit, fierce independence and a defiant local chauvinism – curiously coupled with class allegiance.” As one of the more successful writers of the genre described a real-life, Rochdale-born, music hall performer in one his stories, “All the qualities are there: shrewdness, homely simplicity, irony, fierce independence, an impish delight in mocking whatever is thought to be affected or pretentious.” These are characteristics that could have been used to describe Ellen in the late 1920s.

The mill-girl stories also provide some insight into the massive change that was beginning to impact British society in the years following World War I, particularly with respect to the role of women. “As in any transitional age…there could be two responses to such significant changes: a conscious adjustment, or even deliberate assimilation, to the new way of life; or a withdrawal from the real world to the security of the old, familiar traditions.” For the older generation, the Lancashire mill-girl stories offered a retreat, but for younger women, such as Ellen, they defined a new role model, one that drew upon the old strengths – independence, shrewdness
and determination – in order to face the new challenges and take advantage of the new opportunities that were so much a part of the evolution of working women in the 1920s. The strength of the Lancashire Lass may have, unknowingly, helped this new generation of women define themselves.

With the economic collapse that hit the textile industry in Lancashire in the early 1920s, the members of the Dawson family were again forced to relocate. This time they moved to the United States, part of a massive post-war migration of working-class families. Ellen and her older brother David were the first to leave, sailing from Liverpool on April 30, 1921 aboard the SS Cedric. They were followed three months later by another brother, Michael Hurle Dawson, who made the journey with two other men from Barrhead. The three men departed Glasgow on July 30, 1921 aboard the SS Columbia. Then, on October 14, 1922, Ellen’s mother Annie sailed from Liverpool aboard the SS Baltic. Traveling with Annie Dawson were her five youngest children, daughters Anna and Grace, and sons Richard, Joseph and John. Patrick Dawson, Ellen’s father, did not make the journey. He died in Millgate of stomach cancer less than four months before Annie and the children departed for America. Ellen’s brother, Edward, and his wife remained in Barrhead. Her sister, Mary, entered a convent in England.

The courage and determination of young women like Ellen, who with David, her brother, led the family to the U.S., can be found in the words of another young woman, Agnes Schilling, who migrated, at the age of fifteen, from a Scottish town southeast of Glasgow, to New Jersey in 1922. As Schilling later recalled: “My whole idea was to get to the United States, and that I could work when I got here and help to bring my family eventually… so I was very insistent…it wasn’t easy for me to convince my parents, my family, everybody, that I was capable of going over and
taking care of myself, but I was determined, and no matter what obstacle came up I always found a way out of it. So I finally got my way.\textsuperscript{30}

It is not hard to imagine Ellen leading a similar campaign in an effort to motivate her family to move on to the United States. In fact, as niece Betty Dawson later remembered, Ellen “thought she was the head of the family and liked to be in control.”\textsuperscript{31} The economic reasons for going were clearly expressed by Margaret Kirk, a Glaswegian woman the same age as Ellen, who migrated to New York in 1923. “There was loads of work while the war was on. Shipyards were booming. As soon as the war was finished, everybody was getting laid off. There was depression in the country, and everybody wanted to come to America...that’s why so many people came from Scotland, because of the depression. There was no work, so they were gasping for a job. And America sent out signals that everything was wonderful here.”\textsuperscript{32}

Ellen was twenty, and David was twenty-six when they arrived in New York on May 9, 1921, after nine days on the North Atlantic. They made the voyage aboard the \textit{SS Cedric}, in the cramped and crowded third class section of the ship commonly referred to as steerage. Built in Belfast in 1902, the \textit{SS Cedric} was owned by the White Star and Dominion Lines, and was a regular on the Liverpool to New York passage, transporting Europeans, representing nations from throughout the continent, to their new homes in the United States. The \textit{SS Cedric} was 700 feet long, 75 feet wide, weighed 21,035 gross tons, and carried a crew of 475. It was capable of carrying a total of 2,875 passengers on the transatlantic voyage. This included 365 first class passengers, 160 second class passengers and 2,350 third class passengers.\textsuperscript{33}

According to other accounts of crossing the Atlantic aboard the \textit{SS Baltic}, Ellen’s journey was much like that experienced by countless European immigrants on
their way to America. The voyage, even in third class, provided a basic level of comfort that many immigrants might never have experienced prior to boarding the ship. Third class passengers shared cabins, third class passengers fed in large dining rooms, and had access to the essential amenities of life on a large ship. They were, as was the custom, segregated from the first and second class passengers. Third class passengers often entertained themselves with song and dance, making new friends and building a temporary community with other travelers from throughout Europe. When the weather was good, children played on deck and adults enjoyed the beauty and tranquility of the open ocean. When the seas were rough, seasickness was a common problem for passengers of all ages. Crew members, like most of the third class passengers, were workers, and this common bond helped to ease the trauma of the journey, as they often went out of their way to be of assistance. Even the ship’s captain visited with third class passengers. On many ships there appears to have been a real camaraderie among many of these transatlantic passengers, a bond shared by millions of immigrant workers in the United States. During this period, steamship lines competed for third class passengers, who contributed to the financial success of the companies.

One particularly interesting note with respect to Ellen’s crossing aboard the SS *Cedric*, was the birth of two babies, both daughters of Eastern European women. The babies were named Ettel Cedrica Ruwinski and Julia Cedrica Baloq. Their shared middle names reflect their special places in the history of transatlantic migration.

Arriving in New York, the first- and second-class passengers disembarked immediately. Third-class passengers, such as Ellen and David, were taken by barge or ferry to Ellis Island, where they were processed by U.S. immigration officials. Ellis Island was the primary point of entry for aliens coming to the United States, and
of the 805,228 who came to the United States in 1921, 560,971 went through Ellis Island. Processing was not a pleasant experience, in fact, as the man who was commissioner of Ellis Island when Ellen and her brother arrived observed, it was a “miserable place.”\(^3\)

At Ellis Island, immigrants were organized in groups of thirty, that being the maximum number of individuals that could be listed on a single manifest sheet -- and a tag, with their name and manifest number, was pinned to their coat. Filing off onto the island, immigrants were greeted by interpreters, who grouped them according to the language they spoke and guided them into the reception building. There were twenty-nine individuals in Ellen’s group, all English speakers. Ellen’s tag was numbered seventy-three for her manifest group and four for her position in the group. Her brother was one place ahead of her in the line.

Looking at Ellen’s group, there were ten domestic servants, seven laborers, three housewives, three tailors, three textile workers, one dressmaker, one teacher and one student. David and Ellen were the only Scots. There were twenty-one individuals born in Ireland, four in Wales and two in England. The high number of Irish born individuals is representative of the second- and third-class passengers aboard the SS Cedric. A review of the SS Cedric’s manifest from that voyage indicates that there were more than 1,250 immigrants from the British Isles, including more than 940 from Ireland, more than 230 from England, more than 50 from Scotland and approximately 20 from Wales. The next highest group was from Eastern Europe, with more than 300 passengers. The leading countries were Romania with more than 160, Poland with more than 70, and Czechoslovakia with more than 50. Fourteen other countries were represented among the passengers, but none with significant numbers. The large number of Irish-born immigrants reflects the depth of
Britain’s economic problems and its effect on the country’s most disadvantaged
workers. Some historians have offered other explanations for migration – adventure,
meeting family members, escape from persecution -- but when these explanations are
examined more closely, economic opportunity almost always remains a part of the
individual motivation. This was certainly the case with the Dawson family.

Three places ahead of Ellen in group seventy-three was a twenty-one-year-old
women from Rochdale, Mary Doherty, who had been born in Ireland and was
traveling alone to meet her mother in Baltimore. It seems reasonable to speculate that
Mary and Ellen may have built a friendship on the voyage, even sharing a cabin.
Certainly they must have reassured each other as they moved through the U.S.
immigration processing procedures, especially during the times when Ellen was
separated from her brother. The hours, and sometimes days, spent at Ellis Island
were, as many immigrants later noted, “very scary.”

Inside the giant hall of Ellis Island, its walls of white tile scrubbed clean, new
arrivals were divided by gender. They were forced to disrobe and shower while their
clothing was fumigated. They were then given a blanket and sent on for medical
examinations where doctors and nurses checked each immigrant’s scalp, throat, hands
and neck, looking for infectious diseases. Medical staff members also observed how
the immigrants walked with their luggage. Did they limp? Were they weak? Were
they easily winded? Finally, their eyes were checked. This was often the worst part
of the examination. Doctors might use a buttonhook, hairpin or a finger to open the
new arrival’s eyes. They were looking for trachoma, an eye disease that was common
in southeastern Europe, but rare in North America. Emigrants who had trachoma
were not allowed to enter the United States.
Aliens who failed these initial medical checks had their clothing marked with chalk and were held in a detention area until they could be given a closer examination. Chalk marks were usually single letters: B indicated a problem with the individual’s back, E indicated a concern about their eyes, H meant heart, and Sc was scalp. Women marked with Pg were thought to be pregnant. An X indicated mental retardation and a K inside a circle marked the recipient as insane. Immigrants who passed their medical screening, as Ellen and David Dawson did, were allowed to move forward to the next section of processing.41

In the Registry section, information provided by immigrants was checked against the ship’s records. Because of rumors that circulated among arriving immigrants about the type of questions asked, this was often one of the most feared parts of the processing. In truth, only a small number of individuals were detained at this point. Here, the two young Dawsons affirmed that they were neither polygamists, nor anarchists; that they did not believe in the overthrow of the government of the United States; that they had not been in prison or the poorhouse; and that they had not been previously deported from the United States. These questions were part of a standard list of questions that were asked of millions of immigrants, and were the result of a series of immigration laws intended to limit the number of individuals entering the United States and exclude certain groups considered to be undesirable. These laws began in 1875 with the Page Act, which sought to prevent prostitutes and certain classes of criminals from entering the country. In 1885, the Foran Act prevented employers from hiring working from abroad (contract workers). In 1891 the exclusionary list was expanded to include “all idiots, insane persons, paupers or persons likely to become a public charge, persons who had been convicted of a felony or other infamous crime or misdemeanor involving moral turpitude, (and)
polygamists.” And, in 1903, anarchists and persons advocating the overthrow of the American government were added.42

As a young woman, Ellen was also questioned separately by a matron to ascertain her moral character, and to make certain that she was not being lured to the United States to become a prostitute.43 As one immigrant to the U.S. later recalled, “America was very fussy about who they let in to the country…No woman could come to America in these days unless she had a sister claiming her or a brother claiming her, but he had to show that he was her brother…because they were afraid of prostitution or whatever it would be, but no girl could come in here without somebody claiming her.”44 On the manifest of the SS Cedric, a handwritten note clearly indicates that Ellen was David’s sister. David’s daughter, Betty Dawson, recalled her father telling her, “Someone had to meet them (young women and children) so they weren’t taken into the white slave traffic.”45

Looking at Ellen and David Dawson’s answers to the final questions on the immigration list highlights the uncertainty with which they approached their future in the United States. Unlike the other members of the Dawson family who followed, Ellen and David were the only ones who said that they did not intend to become U.S. citizens and that they were uncertain when they might return to Britain. At Ellis Island, someone wrote “six years” above the typed response of “uncertain.” This uncertainty was probably because they did not know what they would find in America, and having recently moved from Scotland to England, only to find the promise of economic opportunity wither before their eyes, they must have held serious doubts about what the future would bring.

Once they finished with the Registry questions, which normally took about forty-five minutes, and were approved for admission to the United States, they were
directed to the currency exchange, where they changed their British pounds sterling into dollars.\textsuperscript{46} Then, with their “Admitted” tickets in hand, Ellen and David moved on to Ellis Island’s last room. It was at this moment that the brother and sister, the first contingent of the Dawson family to arrive in America, must have shared a sense of joy and relief at having completed the processing ordeal, mixed with a feeling of anxiety and fear about the new country that opened before them. The final room was called the “Kissing Post,” because it was where new arrivals were finally welcomed by family and friends, the moment they knew they had been accepted into the United States. It was here that Ellen and David met their cousin, Mrs. John Curley, the individual who served as their American sponsor.

Thus, on a mild and sunny day, with the temperature in the upper fifties,\textsuperscript{47} the sister and brother, three-thousand miles from their native Scotland, walked onto the ferry and headed for their first home in the United States -- 207 Randolph Street in Passaic, New Jersey, in the heart of one of America’s major textile centers. They had paid for their passage, they had at least fifty dollars between them, and they had a place to stay. It would not be long before they had jobs in the local textile mills.

Three months later, on August 7, 1921, Ellen’s twenty-four year old brother, Michael Hurle Dawson, became the third member of the family to arrive in the United States. He had made the crossing with two other men from Barrhead, aboard the \textit{SS Columbia} from Glasgow. Thomas Dougall, a pastry baker, age twenty-three, left his wife at 374 Main Street, a few doors down from Ellen’s brother Edward, who was living at 330 Main Street. After arriving, he went to Brooklyn, New York in search of work. The other man was Thomas Robertson,\textsuperscript{48} a forty-one year old iron moulder who lived at 5 Bellefield Street. He may have worked with Patrick in the Shanks’ foundry. He left his wife in Scotland, searching for employment in Kearney, New
Jersey, a few minutes south of Passaic.\(^{49}\) Michael Hurle was met by his brother, David, and taken to Passaic. The following year, on October 22, 1922\(^{50}\), Ellen’s mother Annie, her sisters Annie and Grace, and younger brothers Richard, Joseph and John arrived on the *SS Baltic* from Liverpool.

Although only one member of the Dawson family sailed from Glasgow, they rightfully belong to the enormous wave of Scottish emigrants who crossed the Atlantic during the early 1920s. “Between 1921 and 1923 about 100,000 emigrants, primarily from Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire, sailed from the Clyde, most to North America. The United States was fairly well represented, with thirty-four sailings in 1921 (including the one that carried Michael Hurle Dawson) and thirty-seven in 1922, compared with twenty-seven sailings to Canada in 1921 and forty-five the following year. 1923 saw more emigrant departures from Scotland than any other year in the decade.”\(^{51}\)

One reason for the decline in emigrants after 1923 was the establishment of an immigration quota system by the United States. In 1921 the United States Congress passed a law limiting immigrants to three percent of people of each nationality already living in the U.S. This was based on the 1910 Census. The quota system targeted immigrants from regions outside Northern Europe, particularly Eastern and Southern Europe, Asia, and Africa. As a result, total immigration into the United States dropped from 805,228 in 1921 to 309,556 in 1922. The impact of the new system on Scottish immigrants is debatable. Marjory Harper noted that, “Scotland had filled its quota (for July 1, 1922 to June 30, 1923) by April 1923 (and) bookings from the Clyde to the United States were suspended until 1 July, when there was an immediate upsurge in activity, with 4,000 leaving in one weekend.”\(^{52}\) Another historian, however, points to the fact that the British quotas went unfilled in the later
part of the 1920s. The reality may have been that assisted passages and other incentives may have pulled the majority of Scottish emigrants to Commonwealth countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and the fear of not being allowed into the U.S. because of the quota system may have caused many Scots to select other destinations. However, the Scottish quota, because of several hundred years of Scottish migration to the United States, was one of the largest.

Looking back at Ellen’s early life, from her birth in Barrhead to her arrival in Passaic, there are several significant forces that I believe shaped Ellen into the woman who became a leading American labor activist. These forces included the poverty to which she was born and the economic hardships that she and her family faced during those early years in Scotland; Barrhead’s spirit of cooperation that gave workers the hope of a better life for those who were willing to work together; the labor unrest in the Glasgow, particularly the radical activists and dramatic confrontations that Ellen witnessed as a young Scottish textile worker; the struggle between skilled and unskilled workers, a selfish battle that often proved particularly detrimental to women workers; exposure to the greed and abusive actions of capitalists who sought to control their workers with paternalistic management, Taylorism, violence, intimidation and reprisal; the hardships of economic migration from Scotland to England and on to the United States; and Ellen’s close association with immigrant workers from throughout Europe during the transatlantic crossing, something that helped prepare her for the diversity of Passaic and instilled in her a sense of international community.

Finally, and this is another one of those observations that comes from the mysterious bond that develops between biographer and subject, it seems highly likely that Ellen took to America the attitudes and convictions epitomized by the Lancaster
Lass – authentic working class values, simplicity (not simplemindedness), unbending spirit, fierce independence and a defiant class allegiance.⁵⁴
This information, along with the death record of Patrick Dawson, survived solely because of the efforts of a group of older men, some in their eighties, who live in the Whitworth Valley. Together they organized the Whitworth Heritage Museum, a local history museum housed in an abandoned mill building in Whitworth, just south of Millgate. There they continue to collect a wealth of information concerning the area. The two specific records I used from their collection came from the Shawforth Council. When the Shawforth Council ceased operation some years earlier, council records were discarded. One of the members of the local heritage society literally climbed into a large dust bin to rescue these and other volumes. Perhaps more than any other single experience during my three years of research, this one shows how much sheer luck is involved in uncovering the history of workers such as Ellen Dawson. As historians, I believe that we all owe a debt to dedicated individuals such as the members of this local history museum.

This is supported by Patrick Dawson’s letter of 1921, which was discussed in the second chapter – “Ellen Dawson.”


Harper, Emigration from Scotland between the wars, p. 6.


Melman, Women and the Popular Imagination of the Twenties, p. 125.


Ibid, p. 43.

Ibid, pp. 75-76.


Lancashire Ordnance Survey, Sheet LXXX 4.


This point was confirmed by several members of the Whitworth Historical Society during a conversation on May 6, 2003.


Ibid.

Ibid, p. 36.

Ibid, p. 34.

Ibid.

Walton, Lancashire, p. 145.

Correspondence files, Whitworth Powerloom Overlookers, January 1914 to August 1920 (Lancaster Public Records Office, Preston, England).


In the American South, textile workers were often called “Lint Heads” for this reason.


The author is J.B. Priestley. The performer was Gracie Fields. The quotation is from his novel English Journey (Chicago: University Press, 1984).


Ibid, p. 131.

Ellis Island Oral History Project, interview EI-172, Agnes Schilling.


Ellis Island Oral History Project, interview EI-440, Margaret Kirk; Harper, Emigration From Scotland between the wars, p. 144.

www.ellisisland.org.
Cabins were small, interior compartments without portholes. They were outfitted with wooden bunks and provided accommodations for several passengers, often strangers who were assigned to live together during the journey.

Dinning rooms provided simple but generally nutritious meals based on the standards of the day, meals that were often far better than what many third class passengers had eaten in their native land.

Coan, Peter Morton, *Ellis Island Interviews* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1997), p. 112. Coan’s book includes an extensive collection of immigrant interviews. Although these interviews are presented as the actual interviews, Coan finally admits on page xxv that the interviews have been edited (highly edited from my perspective) and that the names of the individuals have been changed to protect the person’s privacy. A comparison of the original interview of Agnes Schilling, who Coan identifies as Marge Glasgow, indicates that the Coan interviews are factually correct, if not actual transcripts. For this reason, I have used his book for the purpose of general information only. I have been very careful not to quote directly from his interviews or use the fictitious names referenced in his book. I think Coan’s book is a meaningful contribution for the general reader. However, as I have done, historians must use it carefully and selectively.


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The World of a Radical:

Ellen Dawson’s Life in America --

Passaic, New Bedford and Gastonia

We are out for higher wages,
    As we have a right to do,
And we’ll never be content
Till we get oor ten percent
For we have a right to live
    As well as you.

-- Mary Brooksbank\(^1\)
Chapter Five – Passaic

Passaic, the Dawson family’s new home in the United States, was a community that attracted immigrants, and it is there, amid the diversity of this highly industrialized region of New Jersey, that the elusive Ellen began to emerge from the shadows of working class anonymity. Later, in places such as New Bedford, Massachusetts and Gastonia, North Carolina, she would step into the limelight of the American labor movement. Calling upon her Scottish experiences, she would become a champion of the unskilled textile workers, as comfortable on an improvised platform as Mary Macarthur, as dedicated to the cause as James Maxton, and at times as radical as John Maclean. Passaic gave her the opportunity she needed.

Passaic’s history dates back to colonial America. The earliest settlers to arrive in the area were predominately from Northern Europe, coming from the British Isles and Germany, including many Scots. The area’s first European settlement was established in 1693, although it was more than a hundred years before the area began to develop any local industry. In 1828 the first grist and saw mill was built on the Passaic River. Four years later, in 1832, the Dundee Manufacturing Company built the first textile mill. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, Irish Catholic immigrants began to arrive in the United States, flooding the major urban industrial centers of the Northeastern United States. As a result, Passaic’s first Roman Catholic church, St.
Nicholas, the church the Dawson family attended, was constructed in 1868. In 1871, the village of Passaic was incorporated. Local boosters proclaimed that “a spirit of progress had been rife in the place and had manifested itself in many public and private improvements of substantial and permanent character.”

By the early twentieth century, the Passaic community shared several similarities with both Barrhead and Millgate. Situated in the rolling hills of New Jersey, Passaic was an industrial community on the outskirts of a major industrial metropolis, less than a thirty-minute ride on the main line of the Erie Railroad from New York City. Passaic was also a community that attracted immigrants willing to take factory jobs at the lowest wage levels. However, unlike Ellen’s previous homes, which attracted mostly workers from Ireland and other parts of Britain, Passaic had a far more diverse European flavor. This ethnic diversity gave many of Passaic’s native-born residents an uncomfortable feeling. These individuals often felt threatened by poor immigrant workers who spoke languages other than English. In the 1920s, Passaic area mill workers spoke more than thirty different languages and represented ethnic cultures from throughout Central, Eastern and Southern Europe. In 1910, for example, fifty-two percent of the population of Passaic was foreign born.

Mill owners played a key role in creating this diversity, as they openly recruited workers of many different nationalities, believing it would prevent workers from organizing. As Albert Weisbord noted, mill owners employed “a man at Ellis Island for the special purpose of getting as many different nationalities and tongues into Passaic as possible…The bosses were afraid of the Bolshevism and unionism following if the workers should all speak the same language.” A similar account of this practice was provided by Henry T. Hunt, a New York attorney who represented the Passaic workers before the U.S. Senate Committee on Education and Labor. Hunt
noted how, “For years these…mills made a practice of sending agents to Ellis Island…to collect for them as many diverse nationalities as possible. That went on for a long time…The purpose of that, as I see it, was to prevent any joint action by these workers.”

Passaic’s European connection extended well beyond the workers. The area’s largest textile operations were owned by German companies. The Botany Worsted Mill, where Ellen worked, and the Garfield Textile Mill were established by the Stoehr family of Leipzig, a major European textile company with factories in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Holland and Latvia. The Stoehr family came to America after the McKinley Tariff Act of 1890 raised a protective tariff to some of the highest levels in U.S. history, making it impossible for European companies to market woolens profitably in the United States. The area’s second biggest textile company, Forstmann & Huffmann, had mills in Passaic and the neighboring communities of Clifton and Garfield. It was allied with Werdener Feintuchwerke, one of Germany’s largest spinning companies. Together, these two European companies employed more than ten thousand local textile workers, almost two-thirds of the workers involved in the Passaic strike of 1926.

As a community in 1926, Passaic had a split personality, divided as many American towns were at the time by the railroad tracks. One 1926 description provides insight into the two very different sides of the community. “On the west side is…a typical suburban development, in which comfortable homes stand in the midst of generous lawns, shadowed at this time of year (August) by the branches of well-protected trees. Here live men who have their offices in New York, as well as the merchants, business executives and managers, and professional men of Passaic itself. Here stand the largest and most prosperous protestant churches.” On the west side of
Passaic, the writer further noted, were the comforts “the American ‘commuter’ exacts in return for his inconveniences in living outside the community in which he works.” In 1920, according to the U.S. Bureau of Education, slightly less than ten percent of Passaic’s population lived in approximately half the total area of the city. It was this western half, devoted to the pleasant homes of the fortunate few.  

Ellen and her family did not live in the comfort of the west side, they lived on the east side of town, at 194 President Street, three and a half blocks from the Botany Mill, in an ethnically diverse neighborhood. Their neighbors, those living on the same block, included individuals born in Yugoslavia, Russia, Hungary, Austria, Germany and Poland. Their occupations were equally diverse, including a steam fitter, butcher, cigar maker, plumber, carpenter, salesman, office clerk and teacher. Each of the Dawsons, except Ellen’s mother, listed their occupation as mill hand. The Dawsons rented an apartment in a house owned by a retired Russian immigrant, Solomon Alexander. In 1929, at least seven members of the Dawson family lived in the house, along with six members of the Alexander family, in an area that matched the following description. “On the east side…almost half the population (is) crowded into one-sixth of the city’s area. It is a typical settlement of foreign-born mill workers. Drab houses are squatted as closely together as they may be placed; lawns and trees are few and far between; backyards are frequently hideous; the whole section is obviously devoted to just one purpose – that of affording shelter to a maximum of human beings at a minimum of cost.” The writer also noted how, “many of these houses have passed into the ownership of the workers themselves (The Alexander house where the Dawson family lived is an example of this transition.), showing that there is thrift here and the desire to ‘get ahead.’”
In addition, according to the U.S. Board of Education, almost two-thirds (64.8%) of Passaic’s residents were foreign born and more than eight-five percent (87.6%) of these immigrant workers lived on the east side of town. Almost one-forth (23.8%) of these immigrants were illiterate, as compared to just over fifteen percent (15.8%) of those individuals older than ten years of age in the city as a whole.

“Passaic was…reputed by the government investigators to be one of three cities in the United States having the largest percentage of illiteracy.” Among the Dawson family only Annie Dawson, Ellen’s mother, was illiterate.

Working conditions for Passaic textile workers were harsh, at best, and similar to those Ellen had encountered in both Scotland and England. W. Jett Lauck, a nationally known economist, testified before the United States Senate Committee on Education and Labor in Washington on May 26, 1926. Lauck detailed four major concerns facing Passaic workers. First, they were denied a living wage, or a wage sufficient to enable them to support their families decently or in health and with any degree of comfort. Lauck noted that more than seventy percent of the Botany Mill workers earned less than $1,200 per year, or $23 a week. This wage was more than $400 below the minimum wage needed to support a family, as established by National Industrial Conference Board, a national organization of employers. “As a matter of fact,” Lauck said, “the annual earnings of the workers in the Passaic mills are not sufficient to maintain a minimum standard of subsistence, or a bare animal existence.”

Second, the entire family, including children, had to work in order to survive. “The usual custom in Passaic is for the husband to work in the daytime, while the wife works during the night,” despite the fact that in New Jersey it was against the law for women to work at night. These working conditions were especially hard on pregnant women. Lauck noted that there were “many instances of babies being born in the
mills,” because women needed to keep working in order for their families to survive. Such conditions contributed to an abnormally high infant mortality – forty-three percent higher in Passaic than the overall rate for New Jersey. Third, physical conditions in the mill were abusive, unsafe, unsanitary and life-threatening. “The foremen are exceedingly brutal…facilities for men and women are unsanitary. Ventilation is bad. The results are preventable occupational diseases such as rheumatism, and tuberculosis…work is classed as dangerous, and most of the danger could be eliminated by a humane management. The mill owners…are completely indifferent to the welfare of the workers.” Finally, workers had no recourse, because they were denied the right to organize. “Industrial spies have been used to detect and thwart any attempts in this direction. Wage earners who have joined labor organizations have been blacklisted, discriminated against, and summarily discharged.”

Testifying the same day as Lauck was Gustav Deak, one of Ellen’s closest associates. They worked together at the Botany Worsted Mill and served together in the leadership of various labor groups during and after the strike. Deak addressed one of the central questions of the strike. What was the difference between a skilled worker and an unskilled worker? Deak explained that he started work at the Botany Mill at the age of 14. “I went there to work…because my father could not support the family, and I was forced to go into the mills.” Deak started at 10-cents an hour and in 1926 he earned 50-cents an hour after seven years in the mill. Asked if he was a skilled worker, Deak said, “No, unskilled.” Asked what he did, he responded, “I run a machine. It takes five months to learn to run a machine.” Despite five months of training, Deak was classified as unskilled, and as such he was one of the thousands of Passaic area textile workers who were ignored by the skilled unions of the American
Federation of Labor, the strongest and most accepted organization of trade unions in the United States.\textsuperscript{18}

In 1925, Ellen was an anonymous weaver tending looms at the Botany Worsted Mill in Passaic, but that changed very rapidly. As the opening sentence of her FBI file noted: “Ellen Dawson first gained prominence in connection with the Passaic Textile Strike…in 1926.”\textsuperscript{19} By the time the strike was over, she had served as a member of the Botany Worsted Mill’s strike committee, become secretary of the strike committee for the United Front Committee of Passaic Textile Workers, and after the American Federation of Labor took the lead in the Passaic strike, financial secretary of the United Textile Workers of America’s newly chartered Local #1603 in Passaic. During the sixteen-month strike, she was involved in a great many strike activities. She walked on picket lines, marched in public demonstrations, and felt the brutality of local police, mill thugs and vigilantes. She was actively involved in planning strike events and in programs for women and children. Ellen traveled to Washington to meet with various government officials, and to various other cities in the Northeastern United States, including Buffalo, Cleveland and Youngstown, to solicit support for striking workers and their families. Thus, during 1926, Ellen started her journey toward becoming one of the leading women labor activists in the campaign to better the working conditions of unskilled textile workers, especially women and immigrants.

There are no surviving records explaining why Ellen decided to become a communist. Perhaps, like many of her co-workers, she considered it to be the only viable course of action available at the time. For Ellen, however, I think there was much more to it than simply joining the mob. Communism was an ideology that Ellen was familiar with from her final years in Scotland, where she witnessed the
events of Red Clydeside and listened to the speeches of socialists like James Maxton and communists such as John Maclean. Once again, I believe the words of Mary Brooksbank provide some insight. Mary explained why she joined the British Communist Party in Scotland in the 1920s, writing: “I was utterly sincere, blind to anything in the way of self-interest, completely altruistic, and dedicated to the destruction of that system of Society which I now knew was the fundamental reason for wars, poverty, and all the social evils which I saw around me, all the dirt and bigotry called ‘Capitalism’, the greed, selfishness, petty meanness.”

From all indications, Ellen’s brand of communism was an idealistic form of working class communism that took a highly moral view of injustice and concentrated on the needs of the workers who struggled to survive at the very lowest economic levels of society. As Ellen herself later wrote, “The textile workers…are fighting for the most elementary, the most vital needs and interests that affect their lives day in and day out…(Membership in the union) must be open to all workers in the mills who are ready to struggle for a union, for higher wages, for better conditions, for better living standards, no matter what their other beliefs may be.” This, I believe, is an important distinction that separates Ellen from middle class activists such as Weisbord, as well as those who would take control of the American communist party in the 1930s.

Looking at this question, I was personally struck by a comment attributed to Joy Davidman, the American wife of C. S. Lewis and an American communist during the 1930s. She explained the distinction best when she said, “back then every one was either a fascist or a communist. The fascists wanted to rule the world, and the communists wanted to save it.” Ellen was clearly one of the communists who wanted to save the world.
Only a few details have been found concerning Ellen’s specific activities during the Passaic strike. There are several reasons for this beyond the normal difficulty of reconstructing the lives of working class individuals. Journalists of the time tended to focus on the activities of the men involved in the strike, often ignoring the activities of women. When writing about their own activities, radical activists often tended not to mention the names of their associates. In some cases this was done to protect their comrades, and in other cases it was an effort to elevate the importance of their own activities. This seems especially true with individuals such as Albert Weisbord, Benjamin Gitlow and Fred Beal, who will be discussed later, and whose accounts of various events have been used to help reconstruct the life of Ellen. Interestingly, many of the surviving details associated with her activities during the various strikes come from outside Passaic. This is probably because in Passaic she was one of sixteen thousand local workers on strike, and therefore less uniquely interesting than when she was in another community organizing the workers. This conclusion is supported by the fact that in New Bedford and Gastonia, where she was an outsider, more details concerning her activities survive. Regardless, it is known that Ellen held key leadership positions throughout the Passaic strike. Given such prominent leadership positions, it is logical to assume that she was an active participant in a great many of the decisions and events associated with the Passaic Strike of 1926. No evidence has been found to distract from this belief.23

The Passaic Strike lasted more than sixteen months, beginning on September 25, 1925 when Botany Mills announced a ten percent wage cut, and ending on February 28, 1927, when the striking workers of the United Piece Dye Works voted to return to work. At its peak, more than sixteen thousand Passaic area textile workers were out on strike. The strike was covered by major New York newspapers, the labor
press and newsreel photographers. A documentary film was made during the strike and distributed around the country to build support for the strikers. The strike attracted some of the nation’s most prominent liberal individuals and organizations. There were numerous battles between strikers and police, some violent and bloody. And, when the strike was over, a majority of the textile workers in the Passaic area had won the right to organize and have their union recognized by their employers.

Colonel Charles F. H. Johnson, head of the Botany Worsted Mill and “in many ways the most forceful man on the employer’s side of the struggle,” began the series of events that ultimately brought about the Passaic strike. On September 25, 1925, he announced that competition was forcing the mill to cut worker wages by ten percent. Initially, workers accepted the reduction and kept working. A contemporary description of Johnson reveals, “an interesting character…a monster in the eyes of masses of the strikers…a kindly gentleman who has evidently had a real sense of responsibility for his workers.” The writer seems taken by Johnson’s charm and suggests that, “Left to himself, it is possible to suspect that Colonel Johnson would approve a labor policy much more progressive…He is an industrial autocrat, to be sure, but a benevolent autocrat, and he would probably be willing to concede, under certain safeguards, the place of a labor autocracy of the conservative type of the American Federation of Labor and its subsidiaries.”

Like countless other managers, Johnson refused to deal with the communist leaders of the 1926 strike. “The one thing which Colonel Johnson sees in this strike is the red menace…(he) has been in Russia, has seen the present regime there in operation, is convinced that the Russian experiment is a complete failure, and is honestly apprehensive lest the same blighting experiment be tried in other countries.” Such anticommmunist rhetoric was a staple of America’s business
leaders, but their supposed willingness to work with American Federation of Labor was almost always a ruse to cover their refusal to deal with any labor organization, communist or not.

The first resistance to the ten percent wage cut came on October 22, 1925, when approximately four hundred workers walked out of the Passaic Worsted Spinning Company, a mill that had been founded by Germans, but purchased by an English syndicate during World War I. Up until this point, the workers at Botany, Garfield Worsted Mill, Pitkin Worsted and Gera Mills had continued working despite wage cuts.\(^{29}\) Five days later, on October 27, 1925, Albert Weisbord formally took command of the strike on behalf of the United Front Committee of Textile Workers and sent strikers to the Pitkin Mill to encourage a walkout there.\(^{30}\)

More than any other individual associated with the Passaic strike, Weisbord is the most universally remembered and it was in Passaic that he established a national reputation for himself as a radical leader. Hated by some, idealized by others, Weisbord was the public spokesman for the strike, a charismatic leader around whom the strikers rallied. From Ellen’s perspective, Weisbord was the individual most responsible for the formation of the small group of activists who would later provide the leadership for strikes in New Bedford, Massachusetts and Gastonia, North Carolina.

Five days older than Ellen, Weisbord was the son of a Jewish clothing manufacturer. Raised in Brooklyn, New York, he served in reserve officers’ training during World War I, but the war ended before he received his military commission. A Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the College of the City of New York, he first taught English and mathematics at a rehabilitation center for soldiers. He then went to Harvard Law School. “I never intended to practice,” he later told the Newark
Evening News, “I only studied law so as to better understand the system. I wanted to know all the tricks of the capitalists.” Active in the Socialist Party in the early 1920s, Weisbord resigned in 1924 to become a member of the Boston Chapter of the Workers’ (Communist) Party of America. Party leaders moved him to Patterson, New Jersey, hoping to use his oratorical skills to unify local textile unions. A zealot who often antagonized his Patterson comrades, the party moved him to Passaic in 1925 to lead the United Front Committee.

The United Front Committee of Textile Workers was, according to Weisbord, “an organization that has for its purpose the amalgamation of all unions in the textile industry on the basis of shop councils and mill committees. It…goes into unorganized territories creating united front committees from the workers themselves. It is not another union but strives to weld unions together.” In an industry where only a few of the most skilled workers were organized, dealing with mill owners one union at a time, the United Front Committee was an attempt to combine the bargaining power of all the workers – skilled and unskilled – for the benefit of all workers.

During the next three months – November, December and January – Weisbord and his associates began establishing the United Front Committee as a viable labor organization. They established an office at 25 Dayton Avenue in Passaic, a block away from the Botany Mill, giving the group a base from which to organize textile workers throughout Bergen and Passaic counties. One of the first challenges confronting Weisbord and the United Front Committee was the ethnic diversity of the Passaic textile workers and their lack of a common language. Meetings were held with the editors of local foreign language publications. Speakers were enlisted to address local groups in their native tongues – including Slavic, Polish, Hungarian and
Italian. These meetings resulted in larger meetings. Soon, hundreds of Passaic area
workers began to pay the fifty cents initiation fee required to join the new
organization. Once a member of the United Front, “workers were trained for the
fight which every one knew was coming. All the tricks of the bosses, their use of
force and fraud in all its variations and forms, were exposed to those local leaders on
whose shoulders the actual struggle would rest,” Weisbord explained. As a strike
leader, Ellen would have been a part of this training.

The confrontation between workers and mill owners started to heat up early in
1926. On January 21, the management of the Botany Worsted Mill fired a worker
known to be a member of the union. On the following day a union delegation went to
see Johnson, asking that the man be given his job back. Johnson refused, telling the
union delegation that the mill would fire any workers who were actively involved in
the union. On January 25, a committee of forty-five Botany workers assembled
within the mill and went to see Johnson. As Weisbord later explained, “not to beg for
reinstatement but to present their demands which were: 1. Abolition of the 10 per cent
wage cut in effect since October last. 2. Time and half for overtime. 3. No
discrimination against union workers.” This meeting was part of a carefully
orchestrated plan. As the delegation met with Johnson, workers in the plant stopped
their machines and waited. After the delegation presented their demands, Johnson
fired them and ordered them out of the plant. “Chief of Police Zober and many
policemen were there to see that the workers got out quickly. But the committee had
rehearsed and was prepared for the whole event. With a burst of force they flung the
police aside. Into every room they scattered with a cry of STRIKE! STRIKE! The
Passaic textile strike had begun.” As Weisbord recorded, “like a vast sea the workers
poured out of the mill and soon a great cheering picket line was marching in front of
the mill gates. The shock troops had gone into action. In two days the great Botany mill with over 5,000 workers was completely tied up.”

As a member of the strike committee, and a Botany weaver, Ellen was probably one of the forty-five workers who confronted Colonel Johnson. If she was still working the night shift, as she had when she first went to work in Passaic and as many women did, she would have joined the picket line when the shift changed that evening. From all available records, this was the first strike in which Ellen was involved. It was a new and exciting experience for her. Her feelings must have been very similar to those of Mary Brooksbank who remembered when she first went out on strike, in Dundee during 1912. “This strike gave me my first lesson in class warfare. Though I had not come to realise the full significance of the forces arrayed against us, I felt highly indignant that the police should follow us around. Like many others, I thought the police were there for the protection of the people, even though these people were on strike. I had a lot to learn!” As Mary noted, “I soon learned that only if you were a V.I.P. were you entitled to protection. However, if you were assaulted or murdered, the police would step in and appear busy, but only afterwards, of course! Private property takes paramount place over ordinary people.”

Ellen’s experiences with the police in the United States would prove very similar to those of Mary Brooksbank in Scotland.

Two days later, January 26, workers at the Garfield Worsted Mill went on strike. Three days after that, January 6, the Passaic Worsted Spinning Company was closed and by February 6, workers at the Gera Mills and the New Jersey Spinning Company joined the strike. At this point, the only major textile plant in Passaic still operating was the Forstmann & Huffman mill, the community’s second largest, with more than four thousand workers. Because the ten percent cut in wages was being
initiated one mill at a time, the Forstmann & Huffman workers were still working at the old wage rate. However, as Weisbord observed, “The mill…had reached that stage where it was operating on part time, to give the workers the “hunger cure,” thus showing that a cut was not far off.” As a result, striking workers concentrated their efforts on enlisting the support of the Forstmann & Huffman workers. Striking workers began to picket the mill, urging workers to join the strike. On February 16, six pickets were arrested for refusing police orders to leave. Two days later, on February 18, hundreds of striking workers demonstrated outside the mill, trying to stop workers from entering the plant. The strikers threw snowballs and garbage at the police, who charged the crowd, forcing them to scatter. Police then arrested several demonstrators. Other strikers marched to the local police headquarters, shouting for the release of their colleagues. A local judge issued a warning that if the disturbances continued he would be forced to ask the governor to call out the militia to restore order.

On February 23, 1926, the German owners of Forstmann & Huffman closed their New Jersey mills and left the country. By locking out its Passaic area workers, and shifting production to its facilities in Europe, Forstmann & Huffman had pushed the total number of striking workers beyond the ten thousand mark. By leaving the country, the mill owners made themselves unavailable to negotiate, but they also freed their workers from the company-sponsored union, granting them the opportunity to join the communist strikers.

During the following week, local officials sent mixed signals concerning how they were going to deal with the strikers. The Garfield City Council passed resolutions supporting the strikers and asking that local judges be more lenient in dealing with strikers. Passaic Police Commissioner Abram Preiskel issued orders,
endorsed by the local Chamber of Commerce, that significantly restricted the rights of strikers. Under these new rules, there could be no “meetings other than the regular strike meetings, no gathering in front of the mill gates, no intimidation of workers, no calling of such names as ‘scab,’ no unlawful statements during strikers’ meetings and (there must be) absolute protection of strikers, workers and mill owners.” Passaic Mayor John H. McGuire also made the first, although unsuccessful, attempt to arbitrate the strike.\(^4\)

On March 2, the first major confrontation between strikers and the police occurred. As reported in the *New York Times*, “Tear (gas) bombs, a dozen mounted patrolmen and sixty-five foot policemen were unable to disperse a crowd of 2,000 hooting, jeering textile strikers near the Botany Worsted Mills late this afternoon. As a last resort five fire companies were summoned and the crowd was broken up with six streams of water playing from powerful nozzles in the hands of firemen and patrolmen.” The *Times* also reported that “as the strikers fled in all directions they were followed by patrolmen with brandished clubs, who beat those who attempted to realign small ranks of picketers. Men, women and children were knocked down in the melee.”\(^44\)

This battle took place on President Street, the street where Ellen lived, and began after Weisbord delivered a speech attacking the police. Strikers – men, women and boys – filled the street, a block from the Botany Mill, and were immediately confronted by the police. The two groups were locked in a noisy but non-violent standoff for approximately ten minutes. Then, Passaic Police Chief Zober arrived by car, accompanied by several police officers. Jumping out of his car, Zober ordered police to “Disperse the crowd!” The mounted police officers pushed forward, the crowd of strikers refused to yield, and ultimately the officers were pushed back.
According to the *Times*, “Chief Zober flung out orders, and watched the ineffectual efforts of his men for some minutes. He drew a copper-colored metal sphere from his pocket and held it above his head as if to throw it, but hesitated. Three times he started the throwing motion, but did not release the missile. After the third feint he sent the tear (gas) bomb crashing to the gutter at the feet of the strikers.” The tear gas proved ineffective, as striking workers near the gas protected themselves with their handkerchiefs and the gas was blown quickly away by a heavy wind. “Chief Zober then turned in the fire alarm, and in a few minutes five companies clattered to the corner, coupled up the hose with street hydrants.” Without warning, the firemen then turned the heavy pressure streams of water on the strikers. “Six streams of water were directed in every direction, and men, women and boys fled pell-mell, followed by the policemen. Here and there a few made a stand as nozzles were momentarily turned away from them, but police clubs broke up the resistance.”

This is the point in time when the issue of the Communist Party’s involvement in the strike first became a public issue. The news article reported that agents of the U.S. Department of Justice were in Passaic investigating allegations that communists were involved in the strike leadership, and that mill owners had declared they would not negotiate with the United Front Committee because of their communist affiliation. Of course, the mill owners had refused to negotiate in the weeks prior to learning of the workers’ communist connection, and so the issue of communist affiliation simply provided the mill owners with a justification for their actions.

The next day, March 3, the confrontations between workers and local law enforcement escalated. Police attacked the strikers, using motorcycles to break up groups of men, women and children. Police also turned their assault on the media. The *Times* reported that “Newspaper photographers and motion picture camera men
were attacked by police,” noting that “Captain of Detectives Anthony Battello of Clifton had ordered his men to ‘get all the camera men’ as they were busily engaged in photographing the melee.” A news photographer for the New York Daily Mirror, Thomas Flanagan, was attacked first. “’There he is,’ shouted one patrolman. ‘Let’s get him.’” The photographer was grabbed by a motorcycle policeman on one side and by another policeman from the opposite side. A third officer closed in from behind. The photographer was then “beaten over the back and shoulders, his camera smashed.”46

Karl W. Fasold, a newsreel photographer from Pathé News, photographed the entire incident. After he was spotted by police, he was beaten by police and his camera smashed on the pavement. Harry Warnecke, a New York Daily News photographer, was attacked moments after he photographed the attack on Fasold. “Six policemen turned on Wamecke, tore the camera out of his hand, banging him over the knuckles with their sticks when he clung to the box. Fasold saw the valuable lens roll down the street. He sprinted after it, and just as he picked it up a policeman hit him over the fingers with a club, lacerating his hand. The lens fell to the ground and the policeman pitched it down the street.” Finally, police attacked Fox news reel photographer John Painter, who was “using a $2,500 Akely camera, (when he) was set upon from behind by patrolmen, who wrenched the tripod and used it as a lever with which to batter the camera to a mass of junk.”47

Following these attacks on the news media, the Clifton police denied that policemen had been told to attack the photographers, and Preiskel said he knew of no Passaic police officers involved in the attack. “He added that newspaper men and camera men proceeding with their duties would be unmolested, and (he) declared, ‘There must be no wanton destruction of property by the Passaic police.’”48
On March 4, hostilities cooled somewhat, but it was an uneasy calm in which strikers and photographers were taking no chances. As the *Times* reported, “today Passaic, Garfield and Clifton presented the picture of towns behind the fighting area at the front during war. While an airplane, carrying a news reel photographer, swooped aloft in wide circles thousands of textile strikers paraded past the mills, scores of them wearing trench helmets, and many equipped with gas masks strapped to their shoulders ready for instant adjustment if the police again used tear (gas) bombs.”

Photographers, who had been attacked by police on the preceding day, took no chances. “Tabloid newspapers of New York sent two cars specially fitted to cope with the situation presented by the hostility of police…One was an armored car of the type used by banks, and the other was a sedan of bovite metal with bullet-proof glass nearly an inch thick. The cars were covered with signs reading, ‘News photographers getting pictures at the Passaic front.’”

In Trenton, the New Jersey capital, Governor Harry Moore said he would not call out the New Jersey National Guard unless local law enforcement were unable to cope with the problem. “He opposed ordering out the militia unless a (state) of riot made it necessary, and said the police had the situation well in hand.” John Larkin Hughes, an American Civil Liberties Union attorney, initiated criminal and civil charges against Zober and two of his officers. “We are not interested in the strike as such, but we are interested in curbing the illegal violence of the Passaic police, and that the strikers have every legitimate right of free speech and peaceful assemblage,” Hughes told reporters.

What the reporter did not mention, because people living in the New York metropolitan area at the time would have known, was the weather conditions during these early days of the strike, including the day when the firemen turned their water
hoses on the strikers. It was below freezing. Oddly, there was a positive side to the hardship of dealing with the police and the cold weather; it contributed to a growing solidarity among the workers. “In mid-winter, despite heavy snow and sleet, pickets circled around the mill gates. Day and night, in sub-zero weather conditions, the strikers marched peacefully and with high hopes – singing songs and carrying their placards. The regular arrival of coffee wagons staffed by volunteers helped to keep spirits up: the strikers welcomed their presence as a demonstration of solidarity and friendship.”

The next major event, starting on March 10, was the walk-out of workers at the United Piece Dye works in neighboring Lodi, New Jersey. This brought the total number of striking workers to sixteen thousand. The New York Times reported that “A Justice of the Peace, three interpreters and twenty-five detectives were sent to Lodi...by Archibald C. Hart, Prosecutor of Bergen County. They were instructed not to be ‘too technical’ in making arrests for disorderly conduct and mass picketing.”

It is important to note that many of the dye workers, one of the least desirable jobs in the textile industry, were African Americans. “Interestingly, the...black workers...joined the strike eagerly. In other New Jersey communities in those years employers had used blacks as strike-breakers, but in Passaic blacks walked out and the other strikers welcomed them on the picket lines and in other strike activities.” Several things may have contributed to the color-blindness of the Passaic strikers. One, the communist movement at that time promoted worker solidarity, regardless of race or gender. In addition, because a large percentage of the Passaic workers were foreign-born immigrants, many may not yet have succumbed to the black-white racism so common among many native-born American workers. Finally, employers in the North, as opposed to the South, had been less aggressive in using black-white
racism to divide workers.\textsuperscript{56} It seems hardly a coincidence that this was the same day Weisbord received a threatening letter from the local Ku Klux Klan.\textsuperscript{57}

By mid-March, 1926, the battle lines were firmly drawn in a labor struggle that would last for another eleven months. During that time, there were numerous confrontations between strikers and the police. Strike leaders mounted a national media campaign to draw attention to the plight of the Passaic workers. They formed a relief committee, opened stores for the workers and mounted a national campaign to collect food and money to support the striking workers, sending strikers – including Ellen – to meet with labor groups in other cities in an effort to gain their support.

In July and August, Ellen traveled to several different cities, meeting with local labor groups on behalf of the Passaic relief effort. At Insurance Hall in Cleveland, Ohio, she and a fellow worker, Theresa Burke, “told of the terrible conditions of the textile workers before the strike and related the brutality and persecution of the police and mill-paid deputies – how they beat women and children on the picket lines and arrested over 400 strikers.”\textsuperscript{58} At Engineers’ Union Hall in Buffalo, New York, Ellen “reported on the strike and the brave fight carried on by the strikers against the mill bosses.”\textsuperscript{59} In Youngstown, Ohio, she traveled with John Di Santo, Ella Reeve “Mother” Bloor, and Burke. Each individual gave reports on the strike and discussed the fastest way of getting money to Passaic for the purpose of feeding the hungry children of the strikers.\textsuperscript{60}

Police attacks on the relief efforts of the strikers often stretched to the absurd and occasionally provided strikers with badly needed comic relief. When members of the local bakers’ union attempted to donate bread to the strikers, police arrested the delivery truck drivers for speeding, placed the two men in one cell and the bread in another. “When the news of the arrest of the bread got around there was much
laughter and joking. The legal defense committee promptly got the two men out of jail and proceeded to fight for the release of the bread.”

On several occasions, the strikers went to Washington in an effort to enlist the support of various federal officials. On March 17, Weisbord took a delegation to the White House to meet with President Coolidge. Denied access to the President, they were sent to the Secretary of Labor, who met with the group for two hours. Weisbord later told the news media that “he and his associates were greatly disappointed, and could not understand how the President could be too busy to receive them, when they had read only recently ‘about him receiving Charleston dancers, glee club singers and all sorts of other people who had no particular business to transact.’” President Coolidge, a Republican, was very pro-business. It seems doubtful that the Passaic delegation honestly expected to meet with the President. However, the attempt did provide media exposure.

It is not known if Ellen was part of this particular delegation. However, it is clear that she was a member of at least one later delegation to Washington that met with U.S. Senator William E. Borah about the possibility of a Congressional investigation into the events of the Passaic strike. In December, Ellen was a member of a delegation that included Mrs. Gifford Pinchot, wife of the Governor of Pennsylvania, Dr. Stephen Wise, rabbi of New York City’s Free Synagogue, Thomas McMahon, President of the UTW, Gus Deak, President of the UTW’s Passaic local, and several other prominent supporters of the Passaic workers.

Keeping the strike before the American public was a key strategy of the Passaic strikers. They enlisted the support of a variety of journalists, representing national and New York City publications, to spread their message. They also published their own account of the strike, titled *Hell in New Jersey – Story of the*
Passaic Textile Strike, and they produced a silent documentary motion picture – *Passaic Textile Strike: Organizing the Unorganized*. Both were distributed widely during the strike. As secretary to the strike committee, Ellen contributed to the writing of *Hell in New Jersey*. Further, I believe she is seen at least once in the documentary film. Despite continuing denials to the contrary, local police did not halt their attacks on the news media representatives. They believed that if they could silence the news media they could isolate the strikers. However, it was the police violence that helped to keep the media’s attention focused on Passaic.

In early April, local officials attempted to use an anti-rioting act passed by the New Jersey Legislature a quarter of a century earlier, following the assassination of President McKinley,\(^64\) in an effort to prevent striking workers from parading, picketing or publicly demonstrating in any manner. Local law enforcement used the act as justification to arrest anyone associated with the strike, anywhere they tried to meet.

On April 10, police raided the headquarters of the United Front and arrested Weisbord, refusing to allow him to meet with his legal counsel until the next day. When he was finally brought to court on a writ of habeas corpus, a week later in the neighboring community of Paterson, he was released on $25,000 bail. Moments later, he was arrested on a Garfield charge, and an additional $25,000 bond was ordered. Because he did not have the additional bail money, he was again imprisoned. He was charged with three indictments of "hostility to government” and a fourth of “inciting to riot."\(^65\)

On April 14, police arrested Norman Thomas, America’s leading socialist, as he sought to test the legality of the law when he spoke from land rented by the New York League for Industrial Democracy. “A crowd of 150 strikers gathered as Thomas
stepped on a tree stump and began to speak of the necessity for free speech. He urged
the strikers not to commit disorderly acts and said that the bail…fixed for Albert
Weisbord…was unjust and excessive. It was while he was denouncing excessive bail
as a ‘mockery of justice’ that…special deputies closed in on Thomas, ordered him off
the stump and…placed him under arrest.” Thomas was “arraigned secretly before
Justice of the Peace Louis Hargreaves, who fixed bail at $10,000. He was not
permitted to be represented by counsel, and Chief of Police John A. Forss refused to
tell lawyers representing the American Civil Liberties Union of his arraignment.
ACLU attorneys persisted and Thomas was released on bail the following day.66

Others arrested during this time period included representatives of the
American Civil Liberties Union and The Federated Press. Many of the special
deputies noted in the Times news article were recruited from the local citizens
committee and were also known throughout the area as “the vigilantes.” One neutral
group even suggested they change their name to “The Strike Breakers Committee.”67
According to Weisbord, the committee was “formed by the Reverend Talbott, the
clerical puppet of the owners. All of the boss organizations which had functioned
individually against the strikers now banded together in the Citizens Committee. The
Chamber of Commerce, the Lions Club, the K.K.K., the American Legion, the Elks
Club, etc., all joined the Vigilantes.”68 These were all established organizations
representing the native-born, middle-class of the community, men who supported the
mill owners. It is difficult, especially from today’s perspective, to believe that the
majority of these organizations – the Ku Klux Klan being the most notable exception
– would have been violent participants in events such as the Passaic strike. However,
actions like these were taken by similar groups in New Bedford and Gastonia as well.
In Passaic, “Red, White and Blue Societies distributed (copies of the U.S.
Constitution) to hungry strikers. The Chamber of Commerce shrieked about the Communism of…(strike) leaders. The American Legion began to club strikers in the street and opened up its own relief store.” In an effort “to prove it was the real friend of the strikers and not the Bolsheviks,” the American Legion offered food to striking workers on the following conditions: “1. That the striker went to church and confessed his sins. 2. That he repudiated Weisbord and the United Front leadership (including Ellen). 3. That he never would go on the picket line. 4. That he would state that if he got police protection he would go back to work.”

While Reverend Talbott spoke for the mill owners, other religious leaders in Passaic and the surrounding communities offered different opinions. For example, the pastor of Ellen’s own church spoke out against the strike leaders, but not the striking workers. Addressing “1,500 members of the Holy Name Society in the St. Nicholas Roman Catholic Church, of which he is pastor, Mgr. Thomas J. Kernan, looked upon as the leading Catholic clergyman (in Passaic), denounced the leaders of the textile strike as radicals who were using the workers merely to foment revolution.” Mgr. Kernan made it clear that he understood that many in the audience were either strikers, or individuals who were seriously affected by the strike. For that reason, he encouraged them to find a way to resolve the strike. “It is unfortunate that this strike has leaders from the outside,” he added. “These leaders are radicals who are using the people here as a means of starting a revolution. It is immaterial to them whether the strikers win or lose; as long as they can stir up revolutionary discontent.” I suspect that Mgr. Kernan would have seen Ellen, and other members of his congregation involved in the strike, as victims of the radicals, rather than as the villains.

Two months later, the newly formed Associated Societies and Churches of Passaic and Vicinity openly attacked the mill owners. An umbrella organization of
the churches and societies of local immigrants, it represented the Polish, Slovak,
Russian and Hungarian communities within Passaic. The group’s chairman, William
Vanecek, said:

The textile mills of Passaic and vicinity have...adopted a Kaiser-like attitude
toward the strikers of their mills...realizing that it is a fight between the...mills
on the one hand, against a struggle for better living conditions and democracy
on the other, (we) have dropped (our) policy of neutrality hitherto adhered to.
(We) are now allied with the strikers in their struggle.72

From Weisbord’s perspective, local religious leaders could be divided easily
into two groups. “The Protestant clergy, catering directly to the owners (most of the
strikers were Catholic; the office help and skilled workers, Protestant) were out and
out Fascists, working through one Reverend Talbott, with the Chamber of Commerce
and other bosses’ clubs.” As for the non-Protestant churches, “The Catholic clergy
and politicians were more sympathetic to the workers. Church business as well other
business was being hurt, and, what was most to be feared, the Communists were
winning over ‘their’ church people. So they made serious and conscientious attempts
to settle the strike. They created a Mediation Committee, headed by Judge Cabell,
which tried to bring the workers and the mill owners together.”73 Weisbord’s
explanation helps to explain the stand taken by Mgr. Kernan who supported the
strikers (members of his congregation), while attacking the organizers as “outsiders.”

Beyond the religious leaders, it is important to examine the role that women
like Ellen played in the Passaic strike. As one local historian, who worked as a strike
volunteer during the late Spring and Summer of 1926, noted, “The strikers’
extraordinary spirit and determination was due in great measure to the women who
both performed successfully as leaders and at the same time kept families united
under the duress that the strike imposed.”74 This tribute to the women workers of
Passaic is supported by Weisbord, who noted, “The women marched shoulder to
shoulder with the men on the picket lines and were in the heart of all activities of the union…Not only the women strikers, but the wives of the men, were drawn into the struggle… These ‘backward peasants,’ as the labor traitors (the American Federation of Labor) would say, became the greatest enthusiasts of all.”

One of the most famous incidents of the strike was the legendary action taken by Elizabeth Kovacs. One day when police were preparing to attack a line of striking pickets, “Kovacs, a striker pushing a baby carriage with her little girl in it, placed herself at the head of the line. This took police by surprise; they retreated and picketing proceeded peacefully that day. Everyone marveled at Elizabeth’s courage, and everyone knew that if a strikers’ meeting had had a chance to consider the action, it would have voted it down as too dangerous.”

Children were an active part of the Passaic strike. As a strike volunteer from New York, Martha Stone Asher, noted, “I accepted and had my first experience on the picket line at the Botany Mill. The police, who had attacked the line earlier that week, stood by watching us. Children accompanied their striking parents, and every time the kids teased the cops they looked as if they were ready to arrest the children. As I soon learned, singing and joking on the line helped to ease some of the tension and keep spirits up.”

Activities for the children were an important part of the strike committee’s program. Asher devoted much of her volunteer time with the children, working with at least one of Ellen’s close associates – Sophie Melvin (Gerson) – and perhaps with Ellen herself. Working with parents, they built and maintained childcare centers and “Victory Playgrounds” for the children. The goal was to keep the striking families involved and committed to the strike. As Asher explained, “All we had was a fund of ideas for creative play activity and for integrating children into the strikers’ cause.”
In one case, they changed the traditional game of *cops and robbers* into *strikers and bosses*. “The game called for equal numbers on each side, but when the kids chose sides nobody wanted to be the bosses. Then we had to choose a leader for each side, and it was hard to coax someone to be Colonel Johnson of the Botany Mill – everyone wanted to be Albert Weisbord.” These activities were very similar to the Barrhead Cooperative’s children’s field days, which provided both education and entertainment for the children of the local workers. Weisbord also made it clear that the children of the Passaic strikers were a key part of the fight. “What enraged the capitalists and the churches most was the fact that the union even organized the children of the strikers to defeat the bosses. The children were formed into special clubs and given special attention. In many ways the children were invaluable. They would ferret out where scabs lived and picket their homes. And many a scab quit work because his child came home with a black eye after a fight with some ‘Pioneers.’” At school, “children demanded to know why the schools did not open up free lunch rooms for the strikers’ children. At every opportunity the lies spread in the schools about the union were fought against and the truth told by the children of the strikers.” Given her experiences in Scotland, and the fact that she was later involved in similar programs in New Bedford, it is likely that Ellen was involved in the activities for the children. Given her leadership position on the strike committee, she may have helped to direct these programs.

The Passaic strike dragged on through the early summer. Then, at the end of July, after refusing several earlier requests, the American Federation of Labor finally agreed to become involved. On July 31, a mass meeting of twelve thousand workers voted to join the American Federation of Labor. A month later, on September 2, a charter was handed to the leaders of the newly formed Local 1603 of the United...
Textile Workers of America, an organization under the umbrella of the American Federation of Labor. Weisbord resigned as the leader of the strike,\textsuperscript{82} deferring to the leadership of Local 1603. As president of the local, Gus Deak became the new leader of the strike, and Ellen, as financial secretary, remained one of its primary leaders. Although Weisbord was officially out of the picture, Colonel Johnson still refused to negotiate, contending that the strikers were “no longer employed at the mills,” while Julius Forstmann, head of the Forstmann & Huffmann, said his company would negotiate only with representatives of the mill’s company sponsored union.\textsuperscript{83}

Finally, more than two months after the strikers had affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, and almost eleven months after the first Passaic workers had walked out, one of the smaller mills gave in to the workers’ demands. On November 11, the Passaic Worsted Spinning Company settled. According to the \textit{New York Times}, this was “the first time in the history of Passaic that one of the larger industrial concerns has formally recognized the American Federation of Labor and has conceded to its workers the right to collective bargaining.”\textsuperscript{84} A month later, on December 13, the strike ended at Botany, and two months after that, on February 14, 1927, the strike ended at Forstmann & Huffmann. Both mills recognized the United Textile Workers of America as the bargaining agent of their workers. The strike ended on February 28, when the last of the striking workers returned to work.\textsuperscript{85} For the vast majority of the Passaic textile workers, the war was over. For Ellen, Albert Weisbord and the other leaders of the Passaic strike, this was not the end, it was the beginning. In 1928, they would continue the fight in support of unskilled textile workers. This time, the fight would move to New Bedford, Massachusetts.

As a footnote, the perspective of Benjamin Gitlow provides one of the more fascinating commentaries on the 1926 Passaic strike. His recollections go directly to
the question: What role did the Communist Party really play in the strike? Further, he
provides meaningful insights into the personality and role of Albert Weisbord.

Gitlow was a leading American communist. In 1919, as head of the Retail Clerks
Union and as an active socialist, he helped found the Communist Labor Party, one of
the first two communist organizations established in the United States after the
Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. During the “Red Scare” that occurred after World
War I, Gitlow was one of the first communists convicted of “criminal anarchy” after
being arrested as a result of the Lusk Raids. Although he was represented by one of
America’s most famous lawyers, Clarence Darrow, he was sentenced to five years in
Sing Sing for his communist activities. Released from prison in 1925, Gitlow later
claimed that he, not Weisbord, was the real leader of the communist activities in
Passaic.

According to Gitlow, everything that occurred in Passaic was part of the
Communist Party’s master plan, and Weisbord was simply the party’s less than
competent puppet. Speaking of Weisbord, Gitlow said, “He was a hard worker – in
fact, indefatigable – but he lacked common ordinary horse sense… I do not mean to
imply that Weisbord was an utter fool. On the contrary: he was an intelligent, broadly
cultured chap… he became so puffed up with his importance… so vain about his talent
as a Communist philosopher and tactician that he became overbearing toward his
subordinates.” Gitlow noted how totally consumed Weisbord was by the strike. “It
was not unusual for him to address ten meetings a day and be twenty hours on the job.
He was a dynamo of energy. Fanatical in his zeal, he literally ate, slept and talked
nothing but the strike and Communism. He was an effective speaker, a good agitator.
His tragedy was that he overrated himself. His ambition stumbled over his inordinate
vanity. Nationwide publicity, often on the front page under blaring headlines, was his undoing.”

Gitlow also noted that the violent actions of the local police proved beneficial to the communist cause. “By clubbing the strikers, smashing picket lines and arresting prominent liberals…the Passaic police gave us nationwide publicity. No amount of money and no agitation effort could have secured us this publicity otherwise. We exploited the stupidity of the police by provoking dramatic situations, which made stirring news stories and interesting action pictures for the newspapers.”

Passaic was a short train ride from New York City, American’s most influential news center. “We staged parades. We dressed the pickets in uniforms and steel helmets and paraded them as ex-service men. We utilized the young girl strikers to give the strike feminine attraction and color.”

Some of Gitlow’s assertions must be taken with a grain of salt, perhaps even an entire box of salt. Gitlow abandoned the Communist Party in the 1930s, and by the time he published these comments in 1940 he was an avowed anticommunist who made a career of speaking out against communism and his former associates. As such, it was to his advantage to inflate, at least to some degree, both his role and the role of the Communist Party in the Passaic strike. Further, given the internal strife that permeated the leadership of the Communist Party and its various factions at this time, it is difficult to believe they were so well organized and so totally in control of a strike that involved more than sixteen thousand workers. This is not to say that individual communist labor activists did not play a major role in the Passaic strike; certainly, they did.

Finally, one of the biggest ironies associated with the strike is that the communists were only given an opportunity to represent the Passaic workers because
the American Federation of Labor’s textile union, the union that ultimately represented the workers, initially declined to get involved. According to Asher, who interviewed Gus Deak in 1985, “the first effort of the mill committee in the Botany Mill was to approach the local union of the United Textile Workers of America for help.” Unfortunately, the AFL affiliate was unwilling to get involved. The UTW believed “that the time was not ripe for an organizing drive or a strike. (The UTW) warned of the possibility of retaliatory firings and a counter-offensive by the employers. The (Botany workers’) committee (which included Ellen) left disheartened; the union had not even offered a long-term plan.”

If the American Federation of Labor’s textile union had been responsive to the unskilled workers of Botany, the communists may never have gained a foothold in Passaic, but without the aggressive organizing tactics of the communist labor activists, one must also ask: Would the textile workers of Passaic have been as successful?

Regardless, from Ellen’s perspective, the Passaic Strike of 1926 was the event that transformed her from an anonymous weaver into one of the leading women labor activists of the late 1920s. Ironically, although Ellen lived in Passaic for more than forty years, she still remains absent from the historical memory of both the community of Passaic and the state of New Jersey. During my research, I found no one in the local history community who knew of Ellen or her work. She is as anonymous today as she was eighty years ago. Certainly there are several reasons beyond class and gender that help to explain her invisibility. Being a local worker, she did not have the notoriety that came from being an outside agitator, a role she assumed in New Bedford and Gastonia. Being one of countless young, unmarried women workers, Ellen did not attract the type of media attention that mothers such as
Elizabeth Kovacs did when she took the lead in a picket line with her baby. News accounts of Ellen’s activities during the strike come from newspapers outside of Passaic, when she went on the road raising money, seeking political support, and drawing attention to the plight of the women and children with whom she worked. In Passaic, her activities were much more invisible. They often involved the mundane, the ordinary, the quiet, day-to-day activities that were essential to the success of the strike, but went unrecorded by both journalists and historians. This is supported by the fact that Ellen was named secretary of the United Textile Workers’ first Passaic local. All of these factors were compounded by Ellen’s own silence in later years. Her lack of celebrity status is clearly seen in the fact that her deportation trial, held in Trenton, New Jersey in 1929, was not covered by the Passaic newspapers, and her Passaic obituary listed her simply as Mrs. Louis Kanki, making no mention of her radical activities.
These early Scottish settlers were Protestant Scots, many coming via Ireland and known in the United States as Scots-Irish. In Britain, they are called Ulster Scots. The name Dundee suggests a Scottish connection. Given the ethnicity of the community at this point in time – primarily British – and the growing textile industry in Scotland, a connection is highly likely. However, no firm connection has been found.

Interestingly, today there are more than thirty different languages spoken in the Passaic High School. Many of these languages are different from the ones spoken in the 1920s. Passaic remains a community of immigrants, only today they come primarily from Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Weisbord was the leading organizer in the 1926 Passaic textile strike. He will be discussed more fully later in this chapter.

Ellen Dawson’s FBI File, (February 25, 1943. Photocopy obtained by David Lee McMullen under the Freedom of Information Act.).

I viewed this film in the Library of Congress. I believe Ellen can be seen at least once in the film. She is working in the strike committee office. It is a split second shot, perhaps two-thirds of the way through the movie, so I can not be absolutely certain.

Ibid. The writer seems to accept Johnson as a paternalistic father figure looking out for the best interests of his workers. This was an image carefully cultivated by many industrialists, on both sides of the Atlantic. The Coats family of Paisley provide a classic example.

There were several different communist groups in the U.S. during the 1920s. This is the group Ellen was connected with during her days as a labor activist. This group, under the leadership of Jay...
Lovestone, changed its name to the Communist Party USA early in 1929, at the same convention where Ellen was elected to the executive committee of the party.

34 *Daily Worker*, October 29, 1925.
35 Ibid., November 4 & 13, 1925.
37 Ibid., pp. 24-25.
40 Ibid, p. 27.
44 Ibid, March 3, 1926.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid, March 4, 1926.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid, March 5, 1926.
50 Calling up the National Guard was a common practice in strike situations. It was often justified as a way of maintaining the peace. However, in most cases the troops were used to protect the mills and strike-breaking workers. The New Jersey governor’s restraint is surprising. The militia was used in both New Bedford and Gastonia. This will be discussed in the relevant chapters later in this section.
51 At first, local authorities refused to serve the arrest warrants issued by Justice of the Peace Julius Katz for Zober and his officers. The men were finally arrested on March 8. All three entered pleas of “not guilty” and were allowed to continue on the job until their hearings. These were the first of a series of charges filed by the ACLU during the strike. None was successful.
52 *New York Times*, March 5 & 6, 1926.
54 *New York Times*, March 12, 1926.
56 Racism was a central element in the 1929 strike in Gastonia, North Carolina, a region of the country where black-white racism was openly used to divide the working class. It will be discussed in chapter seven – “Gastonia.”
57 Murphy, *The Passaic Strike of 1926*, p. 17.
58 *Daily Worker*, July 8, 1926.
59 Ibid, July 26, 1926.
60 Ibid, August 6, 1926.
61 Asher, *Recollections*, p. 11.
63 *Industrial Solidarity*, December 29, 1926.
64 President William McKinley was assassinated in 1901 in the neighboring state of New York.
65 *New York Times*, April 12 & 17, 1926.
66 Ibid, April 15 & 16, 1926.
67 The suggestion was made by the Associated Societies and Parishes of Passaic and reported in the *New York Times*, July 22, 1926.
69 Ibid, p. 38.
70 The Holy Name Society is an international brotherhood of Catholic laymen dating back to the Council of Lyons in 1274. In Passaic during 1926, it would have included the area’s most prominent Catholic laymen.
72 Ibid, May 16, 1926.
73 Albert Weisbord, *Passaic*, p. 46.
74 Asher, “Recollections,” p. 18.
75 Albert Weisbord, *Passaic*, p. 44.
76 Asher, “Recollections,” p. 11.
78 Ibid, p. 15.
The Pioneers were a communist youth organization similar to the Scouts.


Weisbord’s resignation was one of the conditions set by the United Textile Workers for taking over the strike. Other communists, such as Ellen and Gus Deak, were allowed to remain in leadership roles. One reason may have been, unlike Weisbord, Ellen and Deak were experienced textile workers with jobs in the Passaic mills.


Ibid, November 12, 1926.

Ibid, December 14, February 15, 1926, & March 1, 1927.

On November 8, 1919, a task force of 700 police officers, under the direction of New York State Senator Clayton R. Lusk, raided 73 radical locations and arrested 500 individuals. Two months later, on January 2 and 3, 1920, under the direction of U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, and commanded by J. Edgar Hoover, federal agents raided radical groups in 35 cities and arrested more than 2,600 aliens. Individuals who could not prove U.S. citizenship were held or taken directly to Ellis Island. Ultimately, 800 aliens were deported. These were known as the Palmer Raids.

Sing Sing is a New York state prison in Ossining.


After leaving the Communist Party USA in 1929, Gitlow was part of a splinter group headed by Jay Lovestone. Ellen was also associated with this group.


I have taken the initial steps to have this omission corrected. Hopefully, Ellen will soon be included in a New Jersey web site, sponsored by Rutgers University, listing New Jersey women of historical significance.

It was covered by newspapers in New York City.
Chapter Six – New Bedford

In New Bedford, Massachusetts, Ellen’s role changed dramatically. Although she was not the first activist to arrive on the scene, she played a central and highly visible role in the 1928 strike of unskilled textile workers, a strike that lasted six months and involved more than 30,000 women and men. The strike began without the communists, when the skilled workers voted to walk out in response to a ten percent wage cut by local mill owners. However, in a matter of hours, two communist activists arrived on the scene, seeking to organize the unskilled textile workers. Without their involvement, the strike would most certainly have been a very different series of events.

The two men, Fred Beal and William Murdoch, the first from New England and the second a native Scot, represented the Textile Mill Committees, an organization that had developed from the United Front Committee after the Passaic strike. Beal and Murdoch established a beachhead in New Bedford, despite opposition from the skilled workers, and were quickly joined by many of the Passaic strike leaders, including Ellen.

In New Bedford, Ellen assumed a new role. No longer was she a striking worker with a leadership role in a local strike. Now she was a labor activist. She worked with all of the strikers, but especially with the women workers who were a
majority of the textile workers in New Bedford. Ellen helped organize and direct	heir activities, helped keep them motivated, and helped expand the strike to other
textile centers within New England. She was what those opposed to the strike liked to
call “an outside agitator.” From the perspective of the New Bedford workers,
however, she was one of them. She was a textile worker, an immigrant, and a woman
who had fought the mill owners in the violent Passaic strike and won. In a variety of
ways, she provided New Bedford workers, especially the women, with an important
role model. She was a courageous woman willing to stand up for what she believed,
even in the face of overt violence. The depth of her involvement in the New Bedford
strike, and her fearless attitude toward confrontations with the establishment, can be
clearly heard in her response to an interrogation by the local police chief at the end of
the strike. Asked if she had been arrested in New Bedford, she responded: “So many
times I can’t count them.”

New Bedford in 1928 was similar to Passaic in many ways, but it was also
very different in other ways. Most notably, it was similar in the ethnic diversity of the
mill workers, men, women and children who lived well below the poverty level. It
was different in the fact that the mills were locally owned, rather than being
controlled by large European companies. To understand the textile industry in New
Bedford, it is important to recognize the importance textiles played in the industrial
development of Massachusetts and New England. In many ways, New England was
the Lancashire of America.

Historically, New Bedford is extraordinarily fascinating. Like so many of the
coastal cities in New England, it was known in the eighteenth and early nineteenth
centuries for shipbuilding and the various commercial ventures associated with the
ocean. As a result, New Bedford’s earliest industries were focused toward the sea. A
decade before the American Revolution, whaling companies began relocating to the area from Nantucket. By the mid-nineteenth century, New Bedford was the busiest whaling center in the world. According to Daniel Georgianna, “these whaling merchants operated a complex network of finance, shipbuilding, ship supply and marketing through their interlocking control of banks and the waterfront.”

At the same point in time, the interior communities of New England, financed by an ever more sophisticated financial empire built on the fortunes of shipping families, began to develop America’s first major textile center – Lowell, Massachusetts. Initially, the mills of Lowell sought to escape the horrors of the British factory system, employing the daughters of New England farmers to run the looms in an environment that was half finishing school and half factory. During the following decades, as large numbers of immigrants began to arrive in the United States, the New England mill girls were replaced by immigrant workers willing to work longer hours for less money. Soon, the New England textile system, which had sought to escape the abusive factory system of Great Britain, became nothing more than a mirror image. Over the next two decades, textile production in New England rose dramatically, making it America’s leading textile region for the remainder of the century. “U.S. cotton textile production more than doubled between 1840 and 1860. By the start of the (American) Civil War the cotton textile industry dominated the cities and towns of New England with 600 cotton textile mills throughout the region.” This rapid growth was fueled by the expansion of slavery and the cotton growing plantation system of the Deep South. After the Civil War, and the end of slavery, the South began building its own textile mills, finally surpassing Northern production in the 1920s.
As for New Bedford, the community’s first successful mill,7 Wamsutta Mills, was chartered in 1846, the same year the town was incorporated. Within twenty-five years, an initial investment of $60,000 had grown to $2 million, as the mill produced twenty million yards of cloth a year and paid a steady dividend of six percent to its shareholders. Between 1881 and 1914, 32 mills were incorporated in New Bedford. They employed 30,000 workers and those “merchant families that had built their wealth through whaling and now owned the textile mills continued to dominate New Bedford’s finance and commerce.”8 It was during this time that the whaling industry in New Bedford began a rapid decline. Where once whale oil had been an important source of fuel, it was replaced by the oil fields of Pennsylvania. Where New Bedford had once been a community of ”ship-building, sailmaking, sparmaking, rigging, ropemaking, cooperage, ship blacksmithing and the making of ship bread” for provision, it was transformed into one of the world’s leading centers for the manufacturing of fine cotton goods. It was not, however, until 1925, three years before the textile strike of 1928, that the last whaling ship sailed from New Bedford harbor.9

The transition from whaling to textiles changed the town dramatically, transforming it from a small seaport community of 40,000 individuals in 1880 to an industrial center of 120,000 in 1920. This growth was primarily the result of immigrant textile workers – from England, Ireland, Germany, French-speaking Canada, Poland, Syria and Portugal. Only fourteen percent of New Bedford’s population was foreign-born in 1865, but that climbed to more than forty percent by 1900.10 Although not as diverse as Passaic, New Bedford had the same international flavor. Here too, the native born residents – mill owners and skilled workers – felt threatened by the growing number of immigrant workers who filled the ranks of the
unskilled. This divide was one of the most significant challenges faced by the labor activists, such as Ellen, who came to New Bedford to organize the unskilled workers.

As Philip Foner noted in his introduction to the New Bedford strike, New Bedford’s textile mills “were more modern and sanitary than those of Passaic. There was no night work for women. Living conditions there were far superior…New Bedford is a seaside city, and the mills were built on the water. The mill workers’ homes were clean and tidy, but the wages of these workers, who produced the finest cotton goods in the United States, were incredibly low even compared with those of the Passaic textile workers.” The average weekly wage in New Bedford during the first quarter of 1928 was $19 per week, down almost a dollar a week from the previous year. “Yet in 1927 a New Bedford family of five…needed (an annual income of ) $2,204.04 to maintain standards of health and decency. Since the average New Bedford earnings for 1927 were $1,037.40, the mill workers were receiving less than half of what was needed to provide a living wage for a family.” Even when both the mother and father worked, the family still failed to reach the minimum income needed to survive. “Women employed in the mills for as long as five years were making $8 to $10 a week. Not surprisingly, mothers as well as fathers had to go into the mills, and children were sent to work as soon as the law allowed. Lodgers were a common feature of life in the families of mill workers.”

These were the circumstances when, on April 9, 1928, the day after Easter, the New Bedford Cotton Manufacturers’ Association, an organization of all the New Bedford textile mills, announced a ten percent wage cut for all workers, skilled and unskilled, effective the following Monday, April 16. Presenting their decision to the community in a full page advertisement in the two local newspapers, the mill owners cited operating costs, competition and work rules that they said placed New
Bedford mills at a disadvantage with other New England cotton mills. “It should be obvious that New Bedford manufacturers, paying the old (higher) wage scale, limited to a 48-hour week and restricted as to night work, must be doing business under serious handicap…New Bedford cotton mills have struggled under these unfair conditions for a long time. It is now essential that they get their production costs nearer those of their competitors if they are to continue to operate.”

This newspaper advertisement was signed by all twenty-seven local textile mills.

New Bedford Mayor Charles F. Ashley, a savvy politician who served for more than forty years, from 1891 to 1936, made an effort to delay the wage cut. Mayor Ashley was a local businessman, not a mill owner, but as Georgianna noted, “In his years as mayor, he (Ashley) had expanded into real estate and other businesses, owing much of his success to the mill owners. In 1920, when he claimed that his office as mayor kept him so busy that his business interests had suffered, the mill owners held a dinner at the Wamsutta Club and presented Ashley with a check for $20,000 (about $150,000 at today’s [1993] prices to cover any business losses he incurred as mayor.”

In response to Ashley’s request, the mill owners agreed to delay the reduction in pay for a week, if the skilled workers would delay a scheduled strike vote as well. The leadership of the skilled workers refused. They saw the action by the mill owners as an effort to disrupt their response to the threatened cut in wages and as a direct violation of a thirty year agreement with their organization – the local Textile Council, a federation of local craft unions – to provide the skilled workers with thirty days’ advance notice before any wage reduction. The Textile Council operated “as partners with management in production, and the mill owners consulted with them over wages and working conditions. The city’s craft unions had won…respect from
the media, built contacts with the business community and elected members to the state legislature and local government. But, their success always rested on the sandy foundation of the majority of textile workers (the unskilled workers) who were not union members.”

On Thursday evening, April 12, the skilled workers voted 2,571 to 188 to strike, a vote that did not include ninety percent of New Bedford’s 30,000 textile workers, most of whom were unskilled. On this same day, the Beacon Mill withdrew from the manufacturers’ association, did not cut wages, and was the only mill in New Bedford where the workers did not strike. Walter Langshaw, president of the Dartmouth Manufacturing Corporation, which owned Beacon Mill, noted, “The trouble rests on those who are governed by the spirit of greed and intolerance, and who have little or no consideration to the effect of their arbitrary attitude…Our ills are mainly due to overproduction…due to expansion beyond requirements.” Langshaw also pointed to the excessive salaries paid to mill owners and their senior managers, many doing little in return for their compensation. “There are many who have been drawing salaries of from $10,000 to $25,000 a year as officials in the cotton manufacturing business whom I would pension rather than have in the employ of the Dartmouth Manufacturing Corporation.” Such salaries, it should be remembered, were ten to twenty-five times that of the average mill worker.

Langshaw was not a member of New Bedford’s old guard. Born in Bolton, Lancashire, England, his family had opened their first cotton mill in 1790. His honest assessment of the situation in New Bedford could easily be applied to the textile industry as a whole. Candor such as his, however, was rare.

It was also during this week before the ten percent wage cut began that the Communists took notice of the pending strike. William Murdoch and Fred Beal were
on a train from Boston to Manchester, New Hampshire. Like Ellen, Murdoch was a Scot. He was born in Inverness around 1900 and went to work as an apprentice in a machinist shop when he was in his early teens, but with the start of World War I he soon enlisted. After the war, when unemployment in Scotland skyrocketed, he emigrated to Providence, Rhode Island. There he worked in various local textile mills and became involved in labor organizing activities. In late 1931, after the New Bedford strike, Murdoch was deported, as were several other leaders of the strike.

Beal was a native New Englander, four years older than Murdoch. He started work as a bobbin boy at the age of 14 in 1910 at the Crescent Worsted Mill in his hometown of Lawrence, Massachusetts. His job was to keep the bobbin racks filled on 8 frames, each frame having 208 bobbins. In 1912, at the age of 16, he joined in the famous “Bread and Roses” strike – “a violent confrontation over a wage cut...The strike attracted national attention when the National Guard attacked a crowd of women and children...The strikers won their demands when...the city’s major mill owner was implicated in a dynamite attack.”

Murdoch and Beal had been directed by the Communist Party to organize the textile workers of New England under the banner of the Textile Mill Committee. Reading a Boston newspaper on the train to Manchester, New Hampshire, they learned of the pending wage reduction in New Bedford. According to Beal, when he read about the events in New Bedford, he turned to Murdoch and said: “Our place is in New Bedford. Let’s go there and organize a strike.” The two men then got off the train at the next station, where they boarded a train for Boston. In Boston, Murdoch and Beal penned “a leaflet urging the New Bedford workers to strike and then went to a print-shop where (they) worked all night and got out ten thousand copies.” The following day, the two men were in New Bedford and by Saturday morning had
begun distributing the newly printed leaflets to workers at the gates of the local mills. On Monday, April 16, the strike began when more than five thousand skilled workers, all members of the American Federation of Textile Workers, walked off the job in response to the wage reduction. By this time, Murdoch and Beal had been joined by several veterans of the Passaic Strike, including Ellen. Together they immediately began to organize the unskilled and unorganized textile workers. They capitalized on “the alienation and frustration of the unskilled, lower-paid workers, who had been excluded from the craft unions and turned it into an enthusiasm unrivaled in previous New Bedford textile strikes. Daily picketing, meetings, rallies and soup kitchens created excitement, purpose and unity behind the strike in the Portuguese and Polish communities.” The experience gained during the Passaic strike of 1926 was used effectively in New Bedford, as they focused on the immigrant neighborhoods surrounding the mills. “Thousands walked the picket lines and attended rallies organized to educate and entertain…Organizers went to people’s homes to encourage participation. Families picketed as groups – women with babies in their arms, young children walking alongside.”

As in Passaic, the communists expanded the objectives of the strike, presenting a familiar list of demands. The Textile Council only wanted a repeal of the ten percent wage cut. The Textile Mill Committee called for a twenty percent pay increase for all workers; adoption of an eight hour day, five day work week; an end to discrimination against members of the union; a halt to the continuing introduction of production efficiency techniques known to the workers as “speed-up;” and an end to the employment of child workers. Most importantly, from the perspective of the women workers, they also demanded equal pay for equal work.
On April 17, the local newspaper reported the “invasion” of the Passaic activists. Organizers “opened an office at 954 Purchase street and immediately issued a call for a mass meeting of strikers and operatives...(proposing) to organize 27 unions, one from each plant now on strike...(open to) all classes of workers”

Speakers announced for the mass meeting included Ellen, Benjamin Gitlow, Gus Deak, Beal, James Reid and Murdoch. However, Ellen did not speak at this initial meeting. Murdoch explained that she had been called to Pennsylvania and she was replaced by one of her closest associates, Juliet Stuart Poyntz.

As could be expected, labor activists who were intent upon organizing the unskilled textile workers were not warmly received by the leaders of the local organization that represented the skilled workers. William Evert Gladstone Batty, the Lancaster-born secretary of the local Trade Council, and the council’s most predominant leader during the strike, visited the committee’s office on opening day and confronted Murdoch. Their conversation was reported in the *Morning Mercury* on April 18, 1928.

“You are no good to anybody. You do not help the workers; you divide them. You are professional agitators. And I tell you, Murdoch, if you try to start anything here there’ll be trouble,” Batty said in front of a small group of men and women, a group which probably included Ellen.

“We will do what we came here to do, Batty,” Murdoch replied. “We have nothing against the officials of the New Bedford Textile Council as individuals, but we do believe their policies are not of the very best. We offered them our moral and financial support and they did not accept. Still we stand ready to work along with them. In fact, members of their unions will be eligible to vote at our balloting upon presentation of a paid-up membership card in their respective locals.” Murdoch
pointed out to Batty that the skilled workers were only ten percent of the total textile workforce in New Bedford, and that ninety percent were unorganized and free to join the new communist union. Murdoch said it was their “purpose to organize our committee from this free element, and members of existing locals can join our group without hindrance, and without relinquishing the membership they already have. Ours is a national body. We are fighting not only the cause of New Bedford’s workers, but for textile operatives throughout the country.”

Batty responded, saying, “This is a group of professional agitators…They care neither for the workers nor for the manufacturers, but only for themselves. They do not unite the workers, they divide them.” After this brief confrontation, Batty told reporters that the Trade Council would have “observers” at the Textile Mill Committee meeting the following day, not to “interfere” with the meeting, but to monitor their activities.  Given the long established chumminess between the Trade Council and the Cotton Manufacturers’ Association, the craft union representatives who observed the mass demonstration probably provided the mill owners with a detailed report of the event.

On the day of the rally, the mill owners again presented their case to the community with another full page newspaper advertisement. Under a headline that read, “What’s the Matter with New Bedford,” the ad read, “New Bedford is the largest cotton textile center in New England…Now the looms are stopped! The Mills are closed! The operators walk the streets! Why?” The advertising copywriter asked if manufacturers were to blame for a depression that involved the textile industry worldwide? They concluded with, “The future of our great industry is at stake! Be Fair. Be Just. Be Constructive.”
As with other major strikes, activists from a variety of different organizations began to arrive in New Bedford, some in support of the unskilled workers, others disavowing any involvement in the strike. Thomas McMahon, president of the United Textile Workers of America, denied any connection between his union and the Textile Mill Committee. This was a slap in the face to Gus Deak and Ellen who were founding officers of the UTW’s Passaic Local # 1603, which had been formed in the closing months of the Passaic strike, and was a clear indication of the confrontation that would occur between her and the UTW union later that year. Others coming to support the effort included representatives of the Boston and New York branches of the Women’s Trade Union League. Mary Thompson, president of the Boston group, was another Scot drawn to New Bedford. She had gone to work in a textile mill at the age of 11 and spent twenty years working as a flax spinner. Sadie Reisch, a WTUL organizer, helped to establish a New Bedford branch of the WTUL and worked with the various striker relief programs. Elizabeth Donneley of the Workers’ Relief Fund helped to organize children in support of the strike, offering classes to help them understand the issues involved in the strike. A Boston University drop-out, Donneley boarded with Ellen at 499 Purchase Street, just a few blocks down the street from the Textile Mill Committee headquarters, during the strike. Other Passaic veterans who worked in New Bedford included Albert Weisbord, Gus Deak, Sophie Melvin, Eli Keller, Jack Rubenstein and Amy Schechter.

The response from the unskilled workers of New Bedford to the organizing campaign of the Textile Mill Committee was overwhelming. On April 23, “30,000 cotton workers, 60 percent of whom are female, struck 58 mills of the 27 companies affiliated to the New Bedford Textile Manufacturers’ Association. Not a loom wove and not a spindle spun in even one of the mills” as the workers went out in defiance
of a 10 percent wage cut.” During the following weeks, the organizers sought to build solidarity among the striking workers. Ellen, and other women organizers, were active throughout New Bedford. One internal Communist Party report provides a general description of the women involved in the New Bedford strike. “The bulk of the women strikers are young. Very few over 40 years of age. A great number of them read and write not only in their own language but English as well. The women compose 50% of the strikers, and are the most militant fighters. The picket lines are predominated by the women. Wholesale arrests do not discourage them.”

Sophie Melvin (Gerson), who had worked in Passaic and would later work in Gastonia, confronted one of the realities of organizing women within male-dominated immigrant communities. Melvin later recounted how she saw “husbands become vicious against their wives who took a meaningful position in the union. I stayed with one family where one night, the wife, the two daughters and myself in the midst of winter had to get dressed and run out of the house because the husband came back drunk and he lashed out at his wife, primarily because she was at a meeting that night and spoke. It was horrible.” Ann Craton, another Passaic veteran, spoke of the courage of the women. “Make the strike a family affair,” she told a local newspaper reporter, adding, “Women are better at this sort of thing than the men. They are more courageous than men. They will do more and suffer more.” Addressing women strikers directly, Craton continued, “You women who cannot leave your children at home, bring them with you. Let them understand what the strike means, so that when they have to go hungry, and when they have to go to school in ragged shoes, they will know why. Educate them to be good union men and women for they are the workers of the future.”
This family approach was apparent on April 30, when children joined their parents on the picket lines for the first time. Mayor Ashley, local newspapers, and a local Girl Scout leader protested the use of children in the strike. This did not halt the involvement of children in the various strike activities. “Marching through the streets…the children…have done much to keep up the firm spirit of their parents.” As Elizabeth Donneley explained in response to the criticism. “These children are brought up in the working class…they ought to learn what the conditions are under which they will work when they become men and women…These children are forced to work at an early age; they do not receive proper education, they do not have proper food…The children have been forced into the class struggle.” However, despite this seemingly legitimate argument, the Textile Mill Committee did halt the use of children on the picket lines.

During these early days of the strike, local church leaders began cautiously to address the subject of the local textile strike. One newspaper reported, “That New Bedford pastores and churches are deeply concerned about present conditions in the city was apparent yesterday in numerous services and addresses given by pastors. There was no suggestion of partisanship but everywhere the solemn voicing of a deep desire for adjustments with honor and the early resumption of industry along lines consistent with the principles and spirit of the Christian gospel.” The two ministers quoted in the article were from leading Protestant churches. Their congregations would have included mill owners, local business and government leaders, and skilled workers. It is doubtful that the unskilled, immigrant workers of New Bedford attended these churches. The sermons focused on compromise between the mill owners and the skilled workers, assuming that the unskilled workers would be forced to follow the lead of the skilled workers. Ministers were careful not to make specific
recommendations that might offend the mill owners, but rather spoke only of moral issues. As Rev. Leonard C. Harris of the Trinity Methodist Church noted, “Assuredly it is not the duty of the church to interfere with the proper functioning of the state, industry, society, science or economics, but it is the duty of the church to claim final jurisdiction over the moral and spiritual implications in their operation.” As one newspaper noted editorially, “The preachers assured the strikers that every man has a moral right to a living wage. New Bedford, the aristocrat of American mill cities, is fighting for…the one thing which can preserve its aristocracy, the wage scale of its superior craftsmen.” The term *superior craftsmen* clearly denotes the skilled workers, not the unskilled.

On May 8, police began the first of what would prove to be many direct assaults upon the organization that represented the unskilled workers, pushing the Textile Mill Committee from their meeting hall and forcing them to gather outside. Police cited lack of a proper city license, disconnected exit lights and locked or obstructed doors as justification for their action. A police spokesperson said they were “not picking on any particular group, but that it was the duty of the police department to see that halls unlicensed by the state are not used for public assemblies.” Beal said, “it was funny the police…discover(ed) that the hall was unlicensed only after they had been meeting there for three weeks.”

Loss of their meeting hall did not stop the strikers. They quickly organized “an open air meeting on a lot between…garages in the rear of Scott street on the site where “Big Bill” Haywood spoke in 1912…An impromptu platform of some wooden horses and a big iron slab with a small table was soon in place for the speakers, and when the word was spread round nearly 1,000 gathered at the lot.” Ann Craton, who was one of the speakers that day, showed how adept the strike
leaders were at taking a negative and turning it into a positive. She told the crowd, “We thank the city authorities for giving us such a big meeting. They don’t know that everything they do like this makes us stronger. Why, we don’t blame the policemen, they are only doing their duty. We do understand they have to obey orders. You all have behaved beautifully. When the strike came all you people were willing to stay out. Be peaceful, be calm, and don’t get excited about fire escapes.”

It is important to note that Craton and the other strike leaders, including Ellen, continually reminded the workers, just as they had in Passaic, to remain calm and peaceful. While others charged the communist labor activists with being violent revolutionaries, the activists were trying to keep the demonstrations peaceful and non-violent.

Response to the communist leadership of the strike was not all negative, at least in the early days of the strike, as an editorial in one local newspaper noted, “The Communists are dramatizing the strike and making its spirit more militant through mass picketing. They are giving the old union some needed lessons in the technique of demonstration.” The paper also noted how the communists were “concentrating attention upon the unskilled workers outside the unions who have been somewhat neglected…On the picket line, policemen smile at the singing children. There are rumors that even the police are contributing to the strike relief fund, as the firemen have already done openly. The newspapers unite in demanding that the manufacturers should meet (with) the union at once and discuss the wage cut.”

Peaceful demonstrations and appreciation for the communists’ contribution to the unskilled workers were not to the advantage of the mill owners, and as a result, by the end of May, the police began to target the leaders of the strike. Murdoch and Beal were arrested on May 27 for not obeying a police order while marching on a picket
line outside Hathaway Mills. Murdoch was arrested the following day outside the Page Mill, where police claimed a “near riot” occurred. Then, on May 29, Murdoch was arrested for a third time. On June 21, he was sentenced to two months in the House of Correction. The prosecutor called Murdoch “a common exploiter who does nothing but create disturbances everywhere.” On the following day, Beal pleaded guilty to a lesser charge and was sentenced to thirty days in jail. With Murdoch and Beal in jail, leadership of the Textile Mill Committee fell to Ellen, Keller and Rubenstein, all veterans of the Passaic strike. Albert Weisbord, too, was in and out of New Bedford on a regular basis. When they were released from jail, Murdoch and Beal worked under the direction of the former Passaic leaders.

Initially, the skilled workers had simply tried to distance themselves from the unskilled workers, taking the attitude that the Textile Mill Committee would not last long. As one newspaper headline noted early on, “Unions to Let Radical Drive Run Self Out: But Police Will Jail Outsiders If They Beg Strike Funds.” Batty attacked the leaders of the Textile Mill Committee, calling them communists, Reds, and telling the local newspapers that “They lead the workers not to strike but to slaughter.”

Such rhetoric only increased the hostilities between the two groups. As the strike moved into the summer months, Thomas McMahon, president of the United Textile Workers of America, denied any connection between his union and the Textile Mill Committee, although several UTW leaders from Passaic, including Ellen and Deak, were active in the TMC leadership. Even at the national level, William L. Green, president of the American Federation of Labor, weighed in on the issue in a speech at the group’s annual convention in Atlantic City, “declaring that communists were attempting to undermine labor organizations in the United States.” Green said “the communistic element is obvious in the New Bedford textile strike and... the red
workers are playing directly into the hands of the textile owner.” Green did admit that the strikers had “a just cause and no one can blame them for fighting against a reduction of wages which would lower their standard of living.”

Green’s stand against the labor activists who organized the unskilled workers of New Bedford provides meaningful insight into the myopic view held by the skilled workers and the leaders of their unions at this time. Green claimed that the communists were undermining the established labor organizations by representing the unskilled and unorganized workers – workers the AFL openly admitted have a valid cause, but whom the AFL itself would not represent. This aristocratic view on the part of the skilled workers is reminiscent of the stand taken by the skilled workers of Glasgow during World War I against dilution.

Local officials clearly differentiated between the leaders of the two groups of workers as well. At one point, Batty, the leader of the Textile Council, and James Reid, a Providence, Rhode Island dentist who was later named president of the National Textile Workers Union and was extremely active on behalf of the Textile Mill Committee, were arrested at the same demonstration. Batty was fined $10, and Reid was given a six month sentence. As Police Chief McLeod noted, Batty “is the most prominent of the leaders of the Textile Council, the conservative group. He is distinctly one of ‘our real people.’”

From the perspective of the unskilled workers it clearly became an us (the workers striking under the banner of the Textile Mill Committee) against them (the mill owners, skilled workers and local authorities) confrontation. As one immigrant worker, Joe Figueiredo, observed, “The word ‘reds’ was used a lot in the commercial press. They (the news media, acting in support of the mill owners and the skilled workers) tried to take the focus away from the strike and what it was all about. They
tried to portray it that we had an enemy here when the real enemy was the mill owners.” Figueiredo said that the newspapers “fabricated and exaggerated and invented. What happened, however, was it boomeranged as far as the mass of the textile workers were concerned. They were involved in the strike, and (they knew) it didn’t happen the way these newspapers presented it.” The newspapers, as often is the case in confrontations between capitalists and workers, were more attuned to the local business community, which supported their publications through paid advertising.

On June 30, with Murdoch and Beal still in jail, the Textile Mill Committee, now under the leadership of Weisbord and the other Passaic veterans, including Ellen, staged a massive parade through New Bedford. Weisbord had announced the group’s intention to stage such a parade at a mass meeting the previous Tuesday, telling the crowd he intended to ask the mayor for a parade permit. Weisbord said, “if permission could be obtained to have the parade he wanted every man, woman and child to join.” He added, “that he didn’t know how the mayor felt about it, but he didn’t think the right to walk the streets could be denied any person in America.”

The parade began as planned, but without the mayor’s approval. It was a colorful event. “Small American flags, carried on the arms of children, banners and placards were profuse in the procession. Some of the placards read: Free Nurseries for Our Children; Murdoch and Beal We’ll Never Forget: Bosses Holler Bolsheviks; We Say Down with the Wage Cut Notices; Only Victory; Millions for Textile Bosses, Wage Cuts for the Strikers.”

Police arrested twenty-eight strike leaders, charging them with unlawful assembly, rioting, assaulting officers and disturbing the peace. According to local news accounts, striking workers attempted to march from the immigrant sections on
the north and south sides of New Bedford. Their plan was to bring the two groups together on the city commons in the middle of town. Police halted the demonstrators and arrested individuals “who did not disband as promptly as the police wanted them to, and who by their actions and spoken words were declared to be ‘inciting to riot.’ Among those arrested for “riot ing in the street and parading without a permit” were Ellen and Elizabeth Donneley. Donneley was arrested at the head of the children’s unit of the parade. “When she was asked to get her children’s unit out of the parade, police reported, she answered by singing and refusing to budge. After another opportunity had been extended to her… and allegedly refused, she was arrested…. The arrest of Miss Donneley provoked hoots and jeers at the police from the crowd on the sidewalks.”

Meanwhile, at the North End, a detachment of fifty police officers had been sent to stop that group from reaching the city center. Jack Rubenstein was leading the demonstrators when they met police, who had two wagons ready for transporting demonstrators to jail. According to the Morning Mercury, police stopped the parade and asked Rubenstein if he was the leader of the parade.

“Yes, I’m leader of this parade,” Rubenstein answered.

“You have no permit to parade,” said Captain MacKinstry, “and you are violating the law.”

“It is our constitutional right to hold a parade,” replied Rubenstein.

“Turn about and return quietly to your headquarters,” Captain MacKinstry said, “and I’ll let it go at that, but try to parade and you will be arrested.”

“It is our constitutional right to…,” Rubenstein attempted to explain again. He was immediately arrested. Then, a young woman came forward to take his place, shouting “Come on, follow me. They won’t stop us.” She too was arrested. In
response to her arrest, her father “began to rouse the excited paraders to action, but
soon followed his daughter to the truck.”69

On July 6, Mayor Ashley ordered the National Guard to duty after he failed to
secure enough local volunteers to support the police.70 Normally, National Guard
troops are called to duty by the governor71 of a state. This was true in Passaic, where
the governor declined to call out the guard, even after receiving requests from local
officials. In North Carolina, where the governor ordered National Guard troops into
Gastonia, it was in response to a request from local officials.

On July 10 and 11, there was a major confrontation at the Kilburn Mill that
lasted throughout the night. The demonstration involved 3,000 pickets and more than
12,000 bystanders protesting the mill’s use of scab (strikebreaker) labor. Ellen and
one of her picket captains, Marion Boteho, were arrested during the demonstration. A
newspaper account of the incident noted that “both had been arrested several times
previously.”72

Confrontations between striking workers and police, supported by National
Guardsmen, increased during the following weeks. A July 13, newspaper headline
proclaimed, “ORGY OF WINDOW SMASHING MARKED STRIKE
DEMONSTRATIONS AT THE MILLS LAST NIGHT; Page and Nonquitt Mills
Suffer Most Damage in Worst Outbreak of Strike – Arrests Made – Chief of Police
Declares Disorder Will Be Stopped at Any Cost.”73

Church leaders continued to appeal to the various groups in the community for
cooperation, hoping to halt the continued confrontation. Some even took tough
stands in support of the striking workers, despite receiving pressure from the mill
owners. Rev. Linden H. White, pastor of New Bedford’s St. Martin’s Episcopal
Church, said the “only thing that can bring unity is a mutual appreciation of each
other as Brethren gaining a living out of the same industry.” White later “reported to the newspapers that he had been approached by a private detective hired by the mill owners, who had asked him to urge his parishioners to return to work.” According to Reverend White, the mill owner’s detective also made the same request of Father Henry J. Noon at St. James’ Catholic Church, but Father Noon “also refused to preach his congregation back to work.” In fact, “a few days after the visit, Father Noon sent a letter to the city’s newspapers, which they printed on the front page, telling mill workers, ‘Never go back under this (wage) cut,’ and asking the mill owners, ‘Be big, take down your notices of a cut and then and not till then, open your gates.’” Also, the Twentieth Annual Unitarian Fellowship for Social Service meeting at Bulfinch Place Church in Boston passed a unanimous resolution in support of the New Bedford Strikers.

On July 23, there was a major confrontation outside a mill owned by the Sharp Manufacturing Company. There were more than 1,200 pickets, representing the Textile Council, the Textile Mill Committee and the Textile Workers’ Union. They were part of a crowd that numbered five thousand. Included in the crowd was a group of students from Harvard University who had come to New Bedford in support of the Textile Mill Committee. There were between thirty and forty police officers also on the scene. According to one account, the incident began when strikers began yelling and booing strike-breaking workers as they left the mill. Police ordered strikers to disband the picket line, but strikers refused. Then the three picket line leaders were arrested and placed in a police wagon without incident. As the wagon started away, Augusto Pinto, one of the striking workers who had just been arrested, stood up in the back of the wagon and began shouting to the workers in Portuguese. “As the wagon sped toward the (police) center, somebody in the back of the crowd of spectators
hurled a large rock and it sailed over the heads of the spectators and struck the side of the covered patrol wagon, not a foot from Pinto’s head.” Police went for the stone thrower “and the crowd of pickets with Pinto’s fist shaking and the crowd of spectators yelling, seemed to suddenly go wild.”

The battle that followed was termed by one local newspaper as “the worst outbreak since the textile strike began here over 15 weeks ago.” By the time the confrontation was over, more than a hundred law enforcement officers had rushed the scene and eight people had been arrested “before the crowd of over 5,000 finally dispersed about an hour after the trouble started.” Throughout all of this, the Textile Mill Committee picket line was being led by Ellen. After she was arrested, taken away in a police wagon and charged with “disturbing the peace and unlawful parading,” Beal took her place at the head of the picket line, which continued after the confrontation had ended and calm had been restored. Beal was arrested later that day by warrant on similar charges.

On July 30, National Guard troops, with bayonets affixed to the ends of their rifles, stopped a group of demonstrators that local newspapers said were attempting to “storm the Police Station and free 256 prisoners” being held there. One headline read: “Members of Battery E Draw Wall of Steel Around Center of City – Dozens More Arrests After Riot Act is Read from Steps of Station.” Members of the Textile Mill Committee were refused bail; Beal made a speech to the crowd from his cell window. Textile Council members involved in the demonstration were quickly bailed out.

The local courts were unable to keep up with the flood of arrests that were being made by the police. On July 31, “In the Third District Court the cases of 225 were disposed of today and tonight… the court continuing in session to clear the
docket. Ellen Dawson, Manuel Sylvia, and Marion Bothelho received three month sentences and the rank and file of the pickets two months each."\(^81\) Two days later, in the court of Judge Frank Milliken, Ellen was sentenced to an additional twelve months. The *Daily Worker* reported, the court interpreted mass picketing as rioting and that eighty-four strikers were sentenced that morning, including “Elizabeth Donnelly (sic), Jackson Wales, the Harvard student aiding the strikers, and Eli Keller, the general organizer of the Textile Mills Committee, Amy Schecter, press agent for the Workers International Relief, received a sentence of two months.”\(^82\)

On August 13, activists continued their verbal attacks on the leadership of the Textile Council, stressing the group’s willingness to work with the mill owners for their own interests and against the interests of the unskilled workers. ‘Two big strikers’ meetings were held at both ends of town…Saulneir’s Lot on the south end and the Hick St. lot on the north end were crowded till the last speaker had finished his talk.” Speakers included Ellen, Keller, and Donneley. They “assailed William E. G. Batty, Textile Council head, for his offer to aid the employers in installing a speed-up system if the wage cut were (sic) rescinded.”\(^83\) The speed-up affected unskilled workers far more than it affected skilled workers.

On August 29, Textile Mill Committee activists finally won the right to hold rallies in Brooklawn Park, where local officials had previously only allowed the skilled workers to meet. Ellen was one of the primary speakers, joined by Murdoch, Beal, and others. “A French Canadian Speaker, Henri Ruth, was also there and was enthusiastically received by the voters.”\(^84\)

One of the more interesting events during August was a Sunday afternoon picnic at Sylvan Grove, attended by more than 6,000 men, women and children. The event was organized by Ellen, under the banner of Workers’ International Relief, with
the assistance of a committee of forty striking workers. The afternoon included races for the boys, women and fat men. There were scrub ball games and numerous speakers, including Weisbord and Keller. The event ended with “a monster parade around the field…headed by the Tuna Portuguese Orchestra.” Clearly, Ellen drew upon her childhood experiences at the children’s field days sponsored by the Barrhead Cooperative.

Ellen had added the responsibility of directing the WIR to her other responsibilities when William Schwarzfeller left New Bedford. She continued this until Eva Stone arrived from Boston at the end of August. The importance of Ellen’s contribution as a strike organizer was so significant that the communist leadership asked that she be released from the WIR assignment so that she could concentrate her energies on organizing women workers in New Bedford. In a report on Work Among Women, the leadership noted, “the work (in New Bedford) has not been carried on systematically. Just one council of working women has been organized. There is no special committee responsible for this work. Ellen Dawson who has been sent up for this work by the Party, is occupied with many other duties. She is taking care of clerical work for the Workers International Relief office.” The committee asked that Ellen “be released from all other work and be assigned to work amongst women.”

The end of August also brought the arrival of a “Federal Labor Agent Working to End Strike.” The agent was Charles G. Wood, former publisher of the New Bedford Times, who was the Commissioner of Conciliation for the U.S. Department of Labor. Wood, it was noted, “had been instrumental in effecting settlements of strike disputes in New Bedford before and has always enjoyed friendly relations with both the local labor leaders and manufacturers.” In a statement to the
news media, Wood said: “I am coming into the controversy with an open mind. I know personally the representatives of the responsible labor organizations and most of the manufacturers. I have a very high respect and friendship for the representatives of both sides. I feel that the Department will have the fullest cooperation from them. With such cooperation we ought to be able to find a solution fair…to all.” The responsible labor leaders Wood referred to were those representing the Textile Council and not the Textile Mill Committee. In fact, his comments clearly reflect collusion between the mill owners, the established trade unions of the skilled workers and the Labor Department against the unskilled workers. Wood was central to the undermining of unskilled workers in both New Bedford and Gastonia, and in efforts to have Ellen deported.

On September 8, the skilled workers reached a tentative agreement with the mill owners. In this agreement, the skilled workers accepted a wage reduction of five percent, rather than the initial ten percent reduction which had been announced in April. Unskilled workers had no voice in the negotiations. Leaders of the Textile Mill Committee were denied admission to the meeting where the agreement was reached and a picket line they formed outside the hotel in which the meeting was held was quickly broken up by police.

The next day, in response to the action by the skilled workers, the Textile Mill Committee strikers staged a major parade and demonstration through the heart of New Bedford, clearly attempting to display their numerical superiority over the skilled workers affiliated with the Trade Council. “Establishing beyond all doubt, the unchallenged leadership of the Textile Mill Committees…20,000 striking textile workers, amid scenes of indescribable enthusiasm, marched for three hours through the main streets of this city, poured into the town Commons, and held a monster mass
demonstration against the strike sell-out now being prepared by the American Federation of Labor officialdom and the mill owners.” Ellen was one of the organizers leading the parade. Others included Murdoch, Beal, Keller, Rubinstein, Fred Biedenkapp, of the Workers’ International Relief, and Robert Minor, editor of the Daily Worker. Ellen was also one of several speakers who addressed the crowd at the mass meeting on the New Bedford town commons.89

On September 11, Ellen and Eli Keller were not allowed to participate in the national convention of the United Textile Workers of America being held in Passaic, because of their activities on behalf of the Textile Mill Committee and other communist activities. Ellen was forced out of the convention despite the fact that she was a founding officer of the United Textile Workers’ Passaic Local #1603, and at the time of the convention was secretary of Local #1619 in Passaic. On September 22-23, under the leadership of Albert Weisbord, a competing union was formed by the communists at a convention in New York City. The new National Textile Workers’ Union claimed an initial membership of more than 131,000 textile workers. Ellen was elected second vice president of the new union, the first woman to be elected to a national leadership position in an American textile union. The new union incorporated the New Bedford Textile Mill Committee.90

Throughout September, the Textile Mill Committee pushed to halt the negotiations, but the mill owners, with the support of the skilled workers, were unstoppable. “Realizing that the overwhelming majority of the 30,000 textile workers are opposed to the acceptance of the 5 percent wage cut, the mill owners are attempting to create an atmosphere…(that) will compel the (unskilled) workers to accept.”91
One of the last organized events of the strike occurred when Ellen and other Textile Mill Committee leaders took a group of children to the office of the New Bedford school superintendent to protest the brutal treatment these children had received in school from teachers and class mates, and to ask the school system to provide food and clothing for the children of the strikers. When the superintendent declined, the committee called for a student strike.92

On Sunday, October 6, the mill owners of New Bedford announced that they would open their mills on the following day. After almost six months, the New Bedford textile strike was over. The unskilled workers had been sold-out by the skilled workers in a bargain between the Textile Council and the Manufacturer’s Association. Most unskilled workers felt they had no choice but to return to work. As for the strike leaders, their depression was evident. As one newspaper headline noted: “MURDOCH QUIT…Effect On Morale Is So Bad Keller Gets Himself Arrested, Miss Dawson Does Not Stand With Him.” The article explained that Eli Keller and Ellen were outside the Nashawena Mill, when they were approached by police and warned not to loiter. Keller refused and was arrested. “Miss Dawson,” it was noted, “continued on her way down the street.”93 Why Ellen failed to join Keller in confronting the police is unclear. Perhaps it was physical and mental exhaustion or even depression that caused her to move quietly away. Regardless, it was an uncharacteristic act on her part.

The day after the strike ended, local police began what they termed a “Sort of Cleaning Process,” arresting Textile Mill Committee strike leaders on sight, in what police termed a “War on Disorderly Idle.” Police Chief Samuel D. McLeod told reporters, “We arrested persons who we know have not worked since April 16, and who have not satisfied us as to their visible means of support.” Among those arrested
were Ellen, Murdoch, Rubenstein, Peter Hagelias, an organizer from Boston, and Andrew Izyk, a local weaver. Ellen was arrested at the union headquarters, apparently for no other reason than she was there. According to one local newspaper account:

Miss Ellen Dawson and Manuel Pacheco, were arrested at the Center headquarters, 49 William street by Motorcycle Patrolman Elrick M. Chaput and Traffic Patrol Daniel J. Goldrick.

Chief McLeod personally quizzed Miss Dawson when she was brought to the station from the center headquarters. She told the chief that she had been a citizen of this country since May 22 of this year. She said that she was born in Bar Head (sic), Scotland and came to this country, May 9, 1921, arriving at New York on the steamship Cedric, White Star line. She said she was made a citizen at Paterson, N. J., but gave 194 President street, Passaic, as her home address. When asked whether she had ever been arrested in connection with the Passaic strike, in which she was one of the reputed leaders, Miss Dawson replied in the negative. Questioned as to how many times she had been arrested since coming to New Bedford, she replied, “So many I can’t count them.” Since coming to New Bedford, Miss Dawson said she had lived at 499 Purchase street.

In another account, Ellen reported being arrested “While sitting on a bench in the corridor” of the Textile Mill Committee headquarters. She was charged with “being idle and disorderly.”

In mid-November, local officials continued their attack on the leaders of the unskilled workers of New Bedford. As the Daily Worker reported, “Decadent Massachusetts bossdom again prepares for a savage retaliation against those who dare to lead the workers in struggles against inhuman industrial suppression. Twenty-five militants, leading figures in the bitter strike of 30,000 textile workers which lasted six months, were indicted on the unheard of charges of ‘conspiracy to violate the city’s laws’, and ‘conspiracy to disturb the peace’.” Among the twenty-five who were indicted were Ellen, Weisbord, Donneley, Keller, Eulalia Mendes, Rubenstein, Wales, Maria C. Silva, and Augusto C.G. Pinto. Clearly those indicted were some of the most prominent labor activists involved in the strike, as well as local immigrant
workers who challenged the local establishment by fighting for their rights as workers.

Ellen was interviewed by the *Daily Worker* in New York shortly after the New Bedford indictments. It appears as if she left Massachusetts shortly after learning about the charges, probably to avoid immediate arrest by local authorities. The interview provides a glimpse into her determination as an activist and labor organizer.

“The indictment of 25 leaders of the New Bedford strike on charges of conspiracy was characterized yesterday by Ellen Dawson, women’s organizer in the strike, as a brazen attempt on the part of the mill owners’ courts to railroad the leaders of the strike to long jail terms.” Ellen “pointed out the fact that this is a maneuver seeking to assure punishment for those who took the most active part in the strike. The 25 workers cannot be tried separately thus greatly facilitating the railroading of the strike leaders.” According to Ellen, the first time any of the activists knew of the indictment “was when we read about it Saturday in the New Bedford Evening Standard, one of the most vicious of the boss organs…But the workers of New Bedford cannot be intimidated by such attacks on their leaders.” She said the workers “have shown repeatedly their determination to build a strong union …Despite all difficulties, despite all the attacks of the courts of the mill owners, the New Bedford Textile Workers Union is going forward, organizing more and more mill workers into a powerful, militant rank and file organization.”

By December 6, fifteen of the twenty-five individuals had been arrested. In an effort to capture six of the remaining ten, including Ellen, the local court ordered bail associated with the other charges to be forfeited. As the *Daily Worker* noted, “In an attempt to lay hands on six more of the textile strike leaders against whom a frame-up for ‘conspiracy’ is being prepared by the mill barons… the authorities here yesterday
ordered bail forfeited on another case, so that the workers will be compelled to appear in New Bedford and thereby face arrest on the conspiracy charge.” The six included Ellen, Donneley and Wales. All were “out on an appeal against their conviction and jail sentence for picketing during the strike.”

Ellen was arrested by Federal authorities at some point during the following week. How and when she was arrested is not known. However, the American Civil Liberties Union reported “Federal proceedings now underway to cancel the citizenship of Ellen Dawson, arrested recently for her activity in the New Bedford Textile Strike offers a parallel to the Government’s action in the Tapolcyani case at Pittsburgh… Whether or not communism is antagonistic to citizenship is the issue in both cases.” According to the ACLU, Ellen, “took out her final citizenship papers six months ago. The government, in its attempt to revoke them, charges that they were obtained fraudulently in that, believing in communism, she could not honestly have taken the oath to uphold the Constitution.”

In her Federal Bureau of Investigation file, the report writer noted that “The Pittsburgh Federal District Court only last month revoked the citizenship of – (the individual’s name was censored by the U.S. Justice Department) – and ordered him deported, stating in the decision that it was not even necessary to be a Party member; that one believing in and upholding communism was subject to revocation of citizenship and deportation if alien born.” It seems highly likely that the report writer was referring to the Tapolcyani case.

Deportation was a very serious threat. It was one of the most effective means the United States government had for eliminating radical labor activists who challenged the established system. It should be noted that at the time, the U.S. Immigration Service was part of the U.S. Department of Labor. Deportation was also
an intimidating force that helped to silence other immigrant activists who remained in the country. In fact, an unnamed official of the Labor Department was quoted in a New Bedford newspaper saying that he “would deport the Red Agitators.”\textsuperscript{102} In New Bedford alone, at least three of the strike leaders were ultimately deported, including one woman who was forced out of the country more than twenty years after the strike. Augusto Pinto, one of the Portuguese leaders of the New Bedford strike, who worked with Ellen, was deported in October, 1931, when the U.S. Immigration Service “forcibly placed (Pinto) on a ship bound from Providence to Lisbon. When he arrived in President Salazar’s Portugal, a fascist dictatorship where militant labor leaders were not welcome, Pinto was sent to prison in Cape Verde and reportedly died en route, sending a shudder through New Bedford’s Portuguese community. During the middle of the strike, Pinto had been quoted as saying, “There is no liberty in this country, just a statue.”\textsuperscript{103} For Augusto Pinto, that statement was most certainly true.

As noted earlier, strike leader William T. Murdoch was deported to Scotland several months after the strike. And, more than twenty years after the end of the strike, during the “Red Scare” of the early 1950s, “Eula Mendes, who at 18 had been secretary of the TMC, was arrested at her New Bedford home by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service in a roundup of 39 people throughout the country and charged with the McCarran Act\textsuperscript{104} as a subversive alien.” Mendes was born in Portugal, came to the United States during her childhood, but was refused American citizenship because of her involvement in the 1928 strike. At the time of her arrest, “front page headlines throughout New England in type usually reserved for declarations of war or peace proclaimed her arrest as a foreigner and a Communist. She was found guilty by an administrative judge and sentenced to deportation.”\textsuperscript{105}
In her own words, Mendes explained how she tried to apply for U.S. citizenship, but was denied for more than two decades. “When I applied for citizenship, they said, ‘You’re a criminal, we can’t give you citizenship…you were arrested a number of times.’ I said, ‘Sure, during the strike,’ and he said, ‘That’s against you as a criminal.’” Mendes explained, “Later when the Second World War started, many foreign-born people were able to get into the army and eventually were able to get citizenship. Well, I decided I would try, but they said that they couldn’t take foreign-born women.” When she asked why she was not acceptable, “they told me that I had to become a citizen first. I said, ‘but you take foreign-born men.’ ‘Well, that’s different,’ they said, ‘because they are going to fight.’ And so there was no way of getting citizenship.” Thus, she was deported because she had been a leader of the 1928 textile strike in New Bedford. “Picking on foreign-people was used during the McCarthy days as a pressure against people in general. Even though everybody thought I was an American citizen, my arrest had the effect of creating a lot of fear amongst…the Portuguese people who were not citizens. Most of those people who were deported had to go to countries they had not seen, had not lived in (because they had come)…to the United States when they were children.”

With respect to the December 1928 immigration charges against Ellen, she did not stay in the New Bedford jail for long. “Dawson, vice president of the National Textile Workers Union, now facing several trials for her activities in the big strike here, will be released on bail set for the other charges against her, because the federal frame-up artists admitted they could not fabricate sufficient evidence. This admission was made when they announced that federal charges had been dropped. The charge she is to be bailed out on is ‘conspiracy to break city laws.’” Apparently, Ellen’s
release from jail came on December 14, and provided her with a welcomed twenty-eighth birthday present.

The case of the local Textile Mill Committee strike leaders, including Pinto, came to trial in New Bedford on March 6, 1929. Superior Court Judge David Dillion released the defendants, saying: “Such a disposition will end the recent industrial warfare so far as the court is concerned, invite industrial peace and encourage the repair of the damage already done to the defendants and to almost everyone else in New Bedford.” As for the leaders from outside New Bedford, their trial came to court on March 12. The Daily Worker described it as, “A deliberate attempt to ‘get’ the leading figures in the New Bedford textile strike.” Included among the eleven leaders were Ellen, Murdoch, Beal, Schecter and Rubinstein. This group was also freed and the Daily Worker reported that: “Preparations are under way for a huge mass celebration of the freeing of the workers. The celebrations will be in the form of a mass meeting to be held this Sunday afternoon, in the large Bristol Arena and is to be held under the auspices of the New Bedford locals of the N.T.W. In addition to the local leaders, leaders of the national union and nationally known labor leaders will address the meeting.”

The mass demonstration in celebration of the newly freed leaders of the National Textile Workers’ Union clearly indicates that the group had not given up the fight for improving the lives of New England’s unskilled textile workers. This is supported by the fact that a week after the celebration, several of the newly freed activists were working to organize workers in several New England textile communities, including New Bedford, Lawrence and Easthampton, Massachusetts, and Providence, Rhode Island. Ellen was in Fall River, Massachusetts, trying
organize textile workers there. She was unaware that in less than a week she would be headed south to North Carolina to face a new, and decidedly different challenge.

Finally, from the perspective of a biographer, the New Bedford strike marks a dramatic change in Ellen’s visibility. No longer an invisible worker, it was in New Bedford that she began appearing in a variety of sources, including the files of the Communist Party, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the United Textile Workers, and the American Civil Liberties Union. Her activities were reported by the local and national new media, recalled by individuals involved in the strike, and recorded by local historians. The diversity of these accounts help provide a more detailed and comprehensive picture of Ellen, and at least reserve a place for her in our historical memory. This increased visibility was due in part to her new status as both a leading labor organizer and an *outside agitator*. It also came from her growing prominence during the months between the Passaic and New Bedford strikes, a time when she used her position as a local official of the United Textile Workers’ Union to become involved in a variety of radical activities, including a Women’s Delegation to Soviet Russia, demonstrations in support of Sacco and Vanzetti, International Women’s Day Celebrations, and the formation of the United Front Committee, an organization that provided a base for the Passaic Radicals and the foundation for the creation of the National Textile Workers’ Union. Unfortunately for Ellen, this increased visibility made her a prime target for the forces opposed to the workers’ movement – forces that included mill owners, skilled labor organizations, government at various levels, and individuals within the communist party whose agenda did not include a sincere interest in the plight of unskilled workers.
Fred Beal and Ellen were the co-directors of the 1929 strike at the Loray Mill in Gastonia, North Carolina. This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter – “Gastonia.”

A member of Mayor Ashley’s staff clipped news articles and collected other documents during the strike in an effort to keep the mayor informed of all critical events. These items were saved in a scrapbook which is now held by the New Bedford Free Public Library. It is cited here as the Ashley Scrapbook. Because page numbers are frequently repeated in the scrapbook, they have not been cited. Daniel Georgianna, who wrote the leading book on the strike, also omitted page numbers from his citations.

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Partially benevolent, it was also necessitated by a lack of surplus labor during these early days of the New England textile industry. This would change dramatically as immigrant workers began arriving in the 1840s.

In the 1830s, when the mill owners attempted to cut wages and increase the pace of work, the women went out on strike, first in an impromptu effort, and later under the banner of The Factory Girls Association. Although both strikes failed, these were among some of the earliest efforts by American workers, especially women workers, to organize and bargain collectively.

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The New Bedford mill owners ran several full page newspaper advertisements during the strike. The tone of these ads – educational – is in sharp contrast to the ads run by the mill owners during the Gastonia strike in 1929, which attacked the labor organizers and encouraged the local community to use violence against them. These ads will be discussed in the next chapter – “Gastonia.”

Workers in other mills, according to the New Bedford mill owners, were working longer hours for less pay. They also cited restrictions that prevented women from working the night shift, which they said slowed deliveries.

*The Morning Mercury,* April 10, 1928.

*The Morning Mercury,* April 10, 1928.

*The Morning Mercury,* April 10, 1928.

Evening Standard, April 10, 1928.

Evening Standard, April 10, 1928.

Evening Standard, April 10, 1928.

Evening Standard, April 10, 1928.

At this point, Ellen was an official in a UTW local in Passaic and a member of the communist Textile Mill Committee.

Evening Standard, April 10, 1928.

Evening Standard, April 10, 1928.

Evening Standard, April 10, 1928.

Evening Standard, April 10, 1928.

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Evening Standard, April 10, 1928.

Evening Standard, April 10, 1928.
In *The Strike of ’28*, Georgianna spells her name Donnelly. However, local newspaper accounts from the time of the strike spell it Donneley. I have elected to use this spelling.

This seems to conflict with other accounts of the strike indicating that the Beacon Mill, owned by Walter Langshaw, did not go out on strike.


A miner by trade, Haywood was a founding member of the Industrial Workers of the World, also known as the “Wobblies.” He was a leader in an earlier attempt to organize unskilled workers of the U.S.

The newspaper was not identified in the scrapbook.

The U.S. President can also mobilize state militia forces by “federalizing” them. This is usually done only in time of war.
Despite its stated commitment to gender equality, women in the communist labor movement were often relegated to secondary assignments. This is just one example.

The McCarran Act was named for the Nevada Senator who headed the U.S. Senate Internal Security Subcommittee that worked with the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities, seeking to identify communists during the Red Scare of the early 1950s.

The continuing threat of deportation must have contributed to Ellen’s silence during her later years in the United States as well.
Chapter Seven – Gastonia

Ellen was the first woman organizer to arrive in Gastonia. As a result, she played a pivotal role in what is perhaps the most infamous strike in the history of the southern textile industry – the 1929 strike at the Loray Mill in Gastonia, North Carolina. Sent to Gastonia by Albert Weisbord in response to Fred Beal’s request for assistance, she arrived just days before the strike began. On March 30, 1929, at the union’s first public meeting in Gastonia, Ellen was the first speaker to address workers in a rally near the Loray Mill. In the following weeks, she was instrumental in organizing and leading the workers of Loray, men and women alike. Despite the subsequent involvement of other women activists in the Gastonia strike, women who represented a variety of organizations, Ellen had two unique characteristics that distinguished her from her female colleagues. She was the only woman organizer who was an experienced textile worker. In fact, at age 28, she had already spent half her life working in textile mills. In addition, her Scottish birth and accent provided a unique bond with southern textile workers, a majority of whom were of Scottish descent.

The textile industry in the South dates to the early nineteenth century. Although there is disagreement on the exact date and location, it appears that one of the first textile mills in the Southeastern United States was constructed on the South Fork River, less than fifteen miles north of Gastonia, around 1820. The first mill in
Gastonia was constructed during the early 1850s. These mills were part of a tiny number of isolated industrial facilities that dotted the South in the years before the American Civil War. The South was an agrarian economy during these years, producing cotton to fuel the textile mills of England and New England. It was not until the 1880s, during the closing days of Reconstruction, that southern business interests began developing their own textile industry. Many of these early mills were organized by local investors, helping to make the mills a focus of community pride. Often, however, textile interests in the North were silent partners in these “locally owned” mills. According to C. Vann Woodward, “A wide spread practice was to raise only part of the required capital locally and then issue a large percentage of the stock for a new mill to Northern textile machinery and commission firms.”

Gaston County in the 1920s was, as the local newspaper proclaimed daily, “The Combed Yarn Center of the South.” It was, however, very different from Passaic and New Bedford. One primary difference was the lack of immigrant workers. “In 1930, only 212 foreign-born whites lived in Gaston County, as compared with 65,489 native born.” Most of the mill workers were of Scotch-Irish, Highland Scot or German descent. Many had lived in the region for several generations, their ancestors fighting together in the American Revolution and Civil War. As a result, they shared several common bonds. As Liston Pope observed, “these groups of (white) settlers had traditions of craftsmanship, and the attention of their descendents was easily directed to industry when the prospect of economic advantage appeared.” During the years following Reconstruction, “the poverty of small farmers and tenant farmers provided a great reservoir of cheap labor for any enterprise that promised a decent livelihood. As the price of cotton declined, opportunity for employment at cash wages became increasingly attractive. Thousands
of unsuccessful farmers, able to eke out only a mean livelihood in agriculture, stood ready to furnish man power for new industrial enterprises.” In the final two decades of the nineteenth century, thousands of rural families abandoned their farms and moved to the mills of Gaston County, and other communities throughout the South. “A survey of 100 families of mill workers in the county in 1914 revealed that 73 had come from counties immediately bordering Gaston; 66 had been tenants, not owning land. Beginning about 1905, recruits were drawn increasingly from the mountain regions farther to the west in North Carolina, Georgia and Tennessee.”

The transition from farm to mill village was often remarkably quick, as mill agents traveled the region recruiting workers to fill the new mills. They transported families directly from farmhouse to newly constructed industrial villages located adjacent to the new textile factories. The workers in these new mill-owned communities, according to Pope, “were almost completely homogeneous in race and class, and no special problems were involved in housing them in the mill villages or in the management of them by the mill executives. The latter, indeed, were of precisely the same racial and cultural background and knew how to handle their employees with a deftness bred of long association.”

As for the mills, rather than being located close together, as they were in Northern cities, they were scattered throughout the region. This first generation industrial labor force rented their homes from the mill owner, shopped for food and other goods in a mill store, went to church in a sanctuary built by the mill owner, and listened to the sermons of a minister who was paid, at least partially, by the local mill. Where mill owners in the North had used ethnic diversity as a way of preventing the unionization of their unskilled workers, mill owners in the South isolated their workers and created the same paternalistic communities that the mill
girls of Paisley had begun to rebel against in the early days of the twentieth century.

As one sociologist noted, “Southern textile mill towns were…a closed community
isolated from the rest of the world. Here the only economic opportunity was work at
the mill, the ‘prison,’ ‘sweatshop’ or ‘death hole’ as it was variously known.”

In 1923, one historian observed, “the mill village is a curious institution. It
has no life of its own. Its destinies are spun by the mill.” As for the mill workers,
“They are like children, but rather strange, lost looking, and bereaved. Their faces
seem stripped, denuded, and empty…their eyes drawn and stupid. They give the
impression of being beyond the realm of things daily lived and experienced by other
people…they are men and women who have been lost to the world and have forgotten
its existence.”

Loray, the village surrounding the Loray Mill, was in many ways a
classic example of the southern textile mill community.

While the 1929 Loray Strike was only one of numerous organizing efforts
attempted by southern textile workers, this strike attained its unique standing in
history because it was the one strike in the South where the workers were represented
by a communist labor union, the newly formed National Textile Workers’ Union.

The Loray Mill managers, the Gastonia business community and the leaders of the
southern textile industry responded to the strike with a massive propaganda campaign
against Ellen and her fellow NTWU organizer, Fred Beal. Mill interests followed this
war of words with violent vigilante attacks upon union offices and the tent city that
housed striking workers and their families. Almost immediately, community leaders
began creating a myth about the strike, a myth that helped to foster a long-standing
anti-union bias among workers in the region. For decades this anti-union bias
effectively prevented southern workers from organizing in any significant numbers.
The foundation for this Loray myth is the belief that the strike was a well-organized conspiracy by international communism to infiltrate the Carolina textile industry, a narrative that was begun during the opening days of the strike. In truth, it was nothing of the sort. The strike was the result of a confluence of forces into which the communist-backed National Textile Workers’ Union was drawn, as much a victim of the strike as were the Loray workers themselves.

Available evidence indicates that the reason workers were willing to strike, and the events that gave the strike its infamy – the murders of the local police chief and a woman striker, and the subsequent trials – were the result of actions by the mill owners and their agents, not the labor activists or the striking workers. The fact that the National Textile Workers’ Union represented the Loray Mill workers was more a result of simple chance than any massive conspiracy, but it was the NTWU’s communist connection that gave the Gastonia business community and the textile interests of the Carolinas the justification they needed violently to suppress the strike and the rights of the textile workers who challenged the established system. However, it must also be noted that it was the NTWU involvement that helped attract, if only for a brief moment in time, international attention to the abuse of southern textile workers.

Most significantly, when the strike is examined from today’s perspective, it provides a classic example of how the southern elite has historically responded to threats to its power and authority. As sociologists Richard Peterson and N.J. Demerath III noted in 1965, during the peak of the civil rights movement in the South, “the way in which Southern communities have reacted to civil rights workers are reminiscent of Gastonia’s reaction to outside union organizers.” This parallel between the response of the South to the civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s and
the labor unrest in the 1920s helps contemporary readers better understand why the
textile interests of Gastonia responded so violently to the efforts of the communist
labor activists. As James Leloudis observed, the Loray strike “brought race to the
forefront and threatened the very foundation of the Southern economy.”
Racial segregation was the cornerstone of southern society, just as racial equality was one of
the primary pillars of the communist workers’ movement. Where other labor
organizations, such as the AFL’s United Textile Workers, were reluctant to challenge
the racism of the South, the communist-backed National Textile Workers’ Union saw
racism as a major impediment to the workers’ cause and faced the issue head-on.
Racism was one of the most effective tools used by the southern elite to suppress the
organizing efforts of southern workers against the abuses of the mill. For that reason,
to understand fully the events associated with the Loray strike, one must recognize
that racism was the foundation upon which the class structure of the South was built.
By challenging the racism of the South, the communists were challenging the power
and position of the southern upper class.

Fred Beal was the first representative of the National Textile Workers’ Union
to go south, when he traveled from New York to Charlotte, North Carolina on a
motorcycle. His account of his initial three months, written several years later,
provide the best record of how the NTWU became involved in the Gastonia strike and
offers insight into how Ellen would have seen the events that unfolded. According to
Beal’s account, he arrived in Charlotte, about twenty-five miles from Gastonia, on
New Year’s Day of 1929. It was his first trip south. Recounting his thoughts as he
climbed off his motorcycle, Beal wrote, “so here I am, down South…A new year and
a new place. I wonder what the year will bring.’’ But it was an idle thought. I really
did not try to look into the future. If I had, could I ever have foreseen that before the
year was over a district attorney would be picturing my arrival in Charlotte to a jury as ‘sweeping into the South like a cyclone, like a tornado, to sink his fangs into the heart and life-blood of the community?’”  

Beal spent the next two-and-a-half-months trying to organize textile workers in Charlotte. In recounting his first attempt to find a job in North Charlotte, Beal detailed the following response from the owner of a small, local textile mill. “No, suh, young man, I’d never take on a Yankee or any other ferriner in my mill, ‘n’ that thar goes I reckon fo’ all the South. They’d put too many strange ideas in the heads of mill-hands – some nonsense lak workin’ only eight hours a day. Why, I work nine hours every day ‘n’ I own this here mill. I guess my help should be willin’ to work at least ‘leven, ‘n’ by the Lord Jesus Christ, they will!” the mill owner said, adding, “Work never hurt no one. Read yer Bible! It condemned man to hard work forever because he sinned. But nowadays the ferriners, like those Rooshin Communists are tearin’ down religion – but they’ll never make headway in the South, because we are all God-fearin’ people.” While I suspect this response is a composite pieced together by Beal from several different encounters, it is representative of the xenophobia common in the South during this period, and of the attitude of southerners toward a New Englander like Beal. In fact, these comments are light-hearted in comparison to the propaganda that would be used against Ellen and Beal in Gastonia.  

As for the North Charlotte mill workers, Beal’s description of their living conditions provides a depressing picture of homes not unlike those of Ellen’s native Barrhead. “One typical family I visited had eight grown-ups and two babies living in three rooms – two bedrooms and a kitchen. The beds were of the old fashioned wooden type, always unmade because as one of the workers expressed it, ‘they never get cold.’ For when the day-shift worker rose, his place was taken by the night
worker.” In general, the rule in most southern mill villages was that there should be at least one person working in the mill for every room in the house. As for children too young to work in the mills, Beal recalled one family where “the grandmother stayed home and looked after the two babies while the mother worked on the day-shift. She also did much of the general housework. The father had run away, leaving the burden of bringing up the children on the women. The rest of the family included three children from fourteen to twenty years old and three boarders – all working in the mill.” When Ellen came face-to-face with the poverty of southern textile workers, despite her own experiences with poverty, she told a Charlotte newspaper reporter, “how surprised she was to find that the south would allow such ‘horrible conditions.’”

One of the three boarders in the North Charlotte mill home described by Beal had a brother working at the Loray Mill in Gastonia. It was through this contact that Beal first learned about the dissatisfaction of the Gastonia workers. “Go to him,” the man told Beal, “and he’ll help you organize the workers there. If you succeed in organizing the workers at Loray, you’ll organize the South.” As a result of this tip, Beal made his first trip to Gastonia in mid-March of 1929. From all accounts, the workers of Loray were ready to strike.

Loray, which produced tire cord fabric for the automobile industry, was the largest mill in Gaston County. It was founded in 1900 by John Love and George Gray. The combination of their names was used to create the name Lo(ve) (G)ray. In 1924, the mill was purchased by Manville-Jenckes, a textile company based in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Two years prior to the strike, Manville-Jenckes hired Gordon A. Johnstone as the new mill superintendent. Johnstone was a master of the “stretch-out,” production efficiency techniques designed to increase productivity
and profits for the company. Johnstone’s approach to the mill workers was harsh and insensitive. During his time at Loray, Johnstone cut the total workforce from 3,500 to 2,200, initiated two pay cuts of ten percent each, and moved most of the women workers from salary to piecework, while raising their workloads. He also fired skilled workers and replaced them with semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Johnstone’s efforts resulted in worker wage reductions of between 25 and 50 percent. It also saved the company half a million dollars in annual operating expenses. John Salmond, author of the most comprehensive account of the strike noted, “Management, of course was delighted at what Johnstone had achieved. In a letter of congratulations given wide currency during the strike, F. L. Jenckes admitted that he had been skeptical about Johnstone’s prospects of cutting the payroll by $500,000 annually without any loss of production and was delighted to be proven wrong. Now he thought that $1,000,000 could go, and he urged Johnstone to keep up the good work.”

What management saw as a good thing was not well received by the workers. In March 1928, weavers at the Loray Mill walked out. Their weekly income had been cut in half, while the number of looms they were required to run had doubled. In response, Manville-Jenckes replaced Johnstone with J.L. Baugh. However, this change in management did little to resolve worker grievances. Baugh eased the pressure on workers slightly, but kept most of Johnstone’s “stretch-out” innovations in place. Most historians, even those with a business perspective, agree that the level of dissatisfaction among the Loray workers was extremely high long before Beal made his first trip to Gastonia.

During the second half of March, Beal worked with Will Truet, a local mill operative, to establish a secret union local for the Loray Mill. Membership in the union was intentionally kept small because, as Beal noted, “I was afraid that the
situation might run away from us.” He then made a “flying-trip” back to New York to update NTWU leaders on the situation in Gastonia and to urge them to send support.23

Ellen was the first organizer to travel south in response to Beal’s request. Her journey must have been very similar to that of Vera Buch (Weisbord), who recorded her own experience just a few days later. “Weary and rumpled, huddled in the coach seat where I had spent the night, I peered bleary-eyed at the Piedmont landscape speeding by in the gray predawn…Already I had glimpsed an occasional mill village, the landscape was dotted with them. ‘Matchboxes on stilts’ came to mind as I watched the mill cottages pass, flimsy structures all, elevated on posts, some painted white, others shabbily unpainted, dilapidated.” Like Buch, Ellen must have been equally nervous, as she assumed her new role as co-director of the NTWU efforts to organize southern textile workers. “My heart was beating faster as I thought that here I would have to be one of the principal organizers, a leader. In fact Albert (Weisbord) had said he was sending me to “stiffen up” Beal, to “straighten him out…When a big roadside sign sped by, ‘Gaston County, Combed Yarn Center of the South,’ I was all excited.”24

On Saturday, March 30, 1929, the union held its first public meeting, attended by several hundred Loray workers. Standing on a grassy slope near the mill, Ellen spoke first, preaching a message of worker solidarity. She was followed by Beal. They were the main speakers, and the only communist labor activists in Gastonia at this point. Also in the crowd were Loray Mill agents who noted the names of workers involved in the new organizing campaign. After the meeting was over, Beal told his associates, “you can just bet there will be a strike on Monday. The bosses will force the issue, whether we want it or not.”25
Beal’s strike prediction was correct. On Monday, April 1, 1929, the mill bosses began firing workers that they had identified as being active in the newly formed union. In response to this action by the mill managers, Beal called a strike on behalf of the National Textile Workers’ Union. By the end of the day, the Loray Mill was closed.

Once the strike began, representatives of several different communist inspired groups began arriving in Gastonia. Some of these individuals had agendas very different from the welfare of the textile workers. As Beal observed, “A horde of organizers sweeps into the field and before the local union leader realizes what is happening, he finds himself surrounded by a flock of political enthusiasts bent on accomplishing something usually foreign to the strike.” Ideology was often far less important to the labor organizers. As Ellen later wrote about her experiences in Gastonia, “Our entire work concentrates upon building up the National Textile Workers Union upon a broad base…It is not and must not be a Communist Union. The acceptance of the proletarian dictatorship is no prerequisite for membership. It must be open to all workers in the mills who are ready to struggle for a union, for higher wages, for better conditions, for better living standards, no matter what their other beliefs may be.”

On Tuesday, George Pershing, representing the Daily Worker and the Young Communist League, arrived in Gastonia. Pershing was a young communist firebrand who was far more concerned with preaching the communist dogma than he was concerned about the well-being of the textile workers. He openly admitted to being a Bolshevik and talked in revolutionary terms that played directly into the hands of the mill owners and the local business community. He would become one of the prime targets for their subsequent propaganda campaign.
Vera Buch, who would be one of Ellen’s closest companions during the next two months, was next to arrive in Gastonia. Buch’s account of her arrival in Gastonia provides a vivid picture of the excitement associated with the early days of the Loray strike, and a quick glimpse of Ellen, who came running down the station platform to greet her. “Ellen was a small, wiry, somewhat elfish young woman in her middle twenties, with shining black cropped hair, twinkling little brown eyes, and a Scotch accent. She had been a weaver in the Botany Mill in Passaic, a member of the strike committee there and on the staff also in the New Bedford strike. She was now a vice president of the NTWU.” Together the two women took a taxi to the Loray Village, just west of Gastonia. “There loomed the mill, a huge long rectangular building, five stories high, of dull red brick with tall narrow windows, fortresslike as most textile mills were. It sat on a slight eminence so that it dominated the scene. Behind it and around it were the many mill worker cottages. The mill stood silent now, closed by the strike.” Ellen told her that the national guard troops had arrived the day before, “indicating the many young men in khaki walking about or lounging on the grass. Some, shouldering guns, were lined up on guard duty against the wall of the mill. The tents of the state militia were set up on the lawn off to one side. There were also a few men on horseback. The sight of the guns produced certain qualms...(that Buch) quickly suppressed. ‘They’ll be here, better get used to them,’ I told myself.” The taxi drove on to the newly established union headquarters, “a tiny unpainted shack set between two small cottages and in the doorway Fred Beal, grinning broadly, waiting to greet us.” This was the first time Buch met Beal, whom she described as “rather stout, of medium height, in his early thirties, with reddish-blond hair and very blue eyes with pale lashes standing out against his sunburn. The very first impression was
one of naivety, honesty, and friendliness. I could see he would be a good contact
man. His high-pitched soft voice had a certain feminine quality.”

Buch, because of her experience in Passaic and her association with Weisbord,
was a labor activist. Although she came from a middle-class background and
graduated from Hunter College, she was, like Ellen, heavily involved in organizing
the women textile workers of Gastonia. They were later joined by Amy Schechter, a
Barnard College graduate from an affluent New York family, representing the
Workers’ International Relief organization. She had worked with Ellen in the New
Bedford strike the previous year.

Unlike Beal, who stayed in a “secret” hotel room in Charlotte, driven to and
from Gastonia by his bodyguard, the three women lived unprotected in the Loray
community. In her autobiography, Buch noted that the women, including Ellen, were
often the ones who led the marches and picket lines, while Beal remained in the safety
of the union headquarters. Because resources were extremely limited, Ellen, Buch
and Schechter often shared a single bed in a mill village boarding house, or lived with
the families of workers. “Every week or so Ellen would take a hotel room for one
night. The other two would then sneak up the stairs, bathe, wash their hair and do
their laundry – or rather Vera would. Amy would simply ‘keep on buying new
bloomers until all the drawers and suitcases were full of dirty ones,’ then send the
whole lot to the local laundry.”

As she had done in New Bedford, Ellen focused on organizing the women.
The day Buch arrived in Gastonia, the Charlotte Observer featured a story about the
women’s campaign. Written by Cora Harris, daughter of the newspaper’s editor, the
story also appeared in the Gastonia Daily Gazette. “If Gastonia has never realized
that militant women are within its bounds, it certainly knows it now.” Harris wrote,
explaining how it took her only a few hours “to discover the prominent part that the Loray mill women are taking in the strike.”

Harris visited the union headquarters, interviewed a family of five that lived on less than fourteen dollars a week in a mill house that had no electricity. She also attended a mass meeting where Ellen was the featured speaker. Calling Ellen’s remarks “the crowning speech” of the day, Harris noted how Ellen directed the crowd in singing union songs, such as “Solidarity Forever.” Ellen told the assembled workers how hundreds of workers had been arrested in New Bedford, many of them women, and how they sang such songs together from their prison cells all through the night. In Gastonia, “the strikers were bursting their throats at the second trial of their new song,” as Ellen “insisted on getting up more pep!” Ellen “told the strikers that radicalism was caused by oppression and that foreign workers in the north would not consider working under such conditions…‘I am surprised to find such conditions where a section boasted of 100 per cent Americanism,’ she said.” Ellen talked about the low wages southern workers were paid, and how this helped to increase the profits of the mill owners. “She further urged the women to ‘step out’ and do their bit for there are 60 per cent women in the textile industry today…she pointed out the various causes why women should take such a lead…(and she) warned the strikers not to get excited, but certainly they must not become intimidated. ‘Resort to no violence, come out and strike and stay on strike and everyone remain solid and we’ll have a 100 percent victory.’”

After the mass demonstration, Ellen talked about the “deplorable” conditions in which the Loray workers lived, how poorly the working women were dressed, and the poor quality of food that was available in the local stores, despite finding some of the highest prices she had ever seen. Company stores, it must be remembered, were
another way mill owners took advantage of their workers. As for the workers themselves and their enthusiasm for the union, Ellen said, “she found a very fine type of womanhood” in Gastonia, pointing out that “regardless of nationality, if you agitate them sufficiently they will become full of fire.”

Two days later the Observer ran a three column photo of Ellen speaking to a crowd of strikers, along with a smaller photo that provided a close-up of Ellen’s face. The headline above the photo read, “WOMAN AGITATOR SPURS STRIKE.” The caption below explained, “STIRS MILL WOMEN – One of the leaders in the Loray mill strike in Gastonia is Miss Ellen Dawson, who has been devoting her principal efforts toward stirring up the women of the community. Above, she is shown addressing an audience in true ‘soap box’ fashion. Insert shows a close-up of the feminine agitator.”

There can be little doubt that during the early days of the Loray Mill strike Ellen established herself as one of the strike’s most important organizers.

As the Loray strike progressed, the three women were joined by Sophie Melvin (Gerson), who had worked in Passaic and New Bedford. She worked with both the women and children of Loray. In an interview years later, she offered a rather depressing picture of what life was like for the youngest children of the Loray mill workers. With parents working twelve hour shifts at the mill, “the kids were just left to themselves. They lived in these little shacks. Most of the kids never went to school; there was no one there to make sure that they did. You would see kids crawling around, practically naked, and the sanitation was bad. The running water was outside. Many of the shacks were without windows, without screens.”

When asked what made the women organizers successful, Melvin explained how “women brought that special quality of intimate knowledge and understanding of the needs of people, the questions of housing, education, health, of the total family, whereas the
man too often discusses in the abstract.” More than any of the other women organizers in Gastonia, Ellen understood the plight of the women workers of Loray. She had experienced the same conditions for much of her life.

Melvin’s comment about Gastonia’s most famous woman striker – Ella May Wiggins, a single mother who was murdered by vigilantes – offers the most insight into why the women of Loray were such an important part of the strike. Melvin recalled meeting Wiggins during the strike. “She saw no other way except through the union…the union gave (women) a certain sense of dignity…a sense of belonging, and being part of a world that cared for them, whereas until then they were outside of everything. The boss doesn’t care. The community doesn’t care. There’s nothing in government that cares. Here, for the first time, they became part of something that cared collectively for them and their children.”

Much has been written about the Loray strike, more than either the Passaic or New Bedford strikes. Most of the research associated with Loray, however, has focused on the events connected with the murders of Gastonia Police Chief Orville Aderholt and striker Ella May Wiggins. Far less attention has been concentrated on the first weeks of the strike and the actions of local business and civic leaders that helped to incite local citizens against the strikers and their union representatives. This, I strongly believe, is one of the most important aspects of the strike, because it was through the early vilification of Ellen, Beal and the other strike leaders, that local public opinion was so dramatically hardened against the NTWU and the striking workers.

According to the first reports of the strike by the local newspaper, the Gastonia Daily Gazette, the opening day of the strike was peaceful. Mill owners “appeared only slightly perturbed…over the agitation that evidenced itself among...
some of the Loray mill employes within the last day or two.” Local readers were told that the pickets were peaceful and that there were no disturbances. The newspaper attributed the strike to the recent arrival of NTWU representatives, who organized local workers and formed a picket line in front of the mill on Monday afternoon. The news article made no mention of the firing of workers who had taken a leadership role in the Saturday rally. Loray General Manager J. A. Baugh told reporters that half of the day shift workers were on the job on Tuesday morning. There was no mention of communists.38

During the next twenty-four hours, however, things changed dramatically. The front page of Wednesday afternoon’s newspaper carried a banner headline: “CALL OUT MILITIA,” followed by a large sub-head that read: “Gastonia and Shelby Units Are Ordered Out To Quell Loray Strike.”39 At the request of local officials, North Carolina Governor O. Max Gardner had activated the Gastonia and Shelby units of the National Guard and promised units from Charlotte and Concord if they were needed. Within hours, two hundred troops had pitched their tents on the front lawn outside the Loray Mill and were walking guard duty around the mill.

According to the local newspaper, “The disturbance that led to (calling out the militia) came about when the sheriff’s deputies and city policemen attempted to stretch a cable or rope across the street in front of the entrance to the mill office to prevent strikers from crowding in and intimidating those who wished to enter the mill to go to work.” According to the newspaper, what had begun as “a happy, laughing, joking crowd…became a belligerent, threatening mob…Jeers, cat cries and howls of derision greeted the deputies…Fists were shaken and sticks and clubs waved in the air.”40 Beal’s account of the incident was very different, noting that “The police and deputies were doing everything within their power to antagonize the strikers. The
minor skirmish with the cable was the excuse used by the mill owners for calling out
the militia."\textsuperscript{41}

Vera Buch’s description of the incident came from Ellen, who told her that
“the troops were called in following a picketing incident the second day. There was
really a fine turnout of strikers, but a fight broke out with the police when they
stretched a rope in front of the entrance to prevent the workers from reaching the mill.
The rope was cut: they put up a cable. A tug of war followed, which the strikers won.
That was really the excuse for bringing in the militia.”\textsuperscript{42} The accounts provided by
Beal and Buch are supported by a news article in the \textit{Charlotte Observer}. The
newspaper reported that no one was injured in the tug-of-war, but that shortly after the
incident, the sheriff rushed “to the city hall, met with the city council in emergency
session and presented the hopelessness of the case to the officials. Former
Congressman A. L. Bulwinkle\textsuperscript{43}…promptly established long distance communication
with Governor Gardner in Raleigh and the order for troops immediately followed.”\textsuperscript{44}
It should be noted that Governor Gardner was a native of neighboring Shelby and a
textile mill owner himself.

In addition to calling out the militia, the mill owners began an intense
propaganda campaign attacking the union and its leaders. Two days after the start of
the strike, a group identified by the newspaper as “leading textile officials of the
county and city,”\textsuperscript{45} ran the first of a series of full page advertisements attacking the
NTWU and its representatives. The complete text of this first advertisement follows.

\begin{center}
\textbf{History of Loray Strike}

\textit{Last Saturday, Fred Erwin Beal, claiming to be an organizer for the
National Textile Union, made a speech in a vacant lot at the corner of Fifth
and Trenton Streets.}

\textit{Beal openly and with a great deal of braggadocio announced that he
was a Red, that he was a Bolshevik, that he was against all American tradition
and American government, and that he was against all organized government
with the exception of Russia, of which he was a direct representative.}
\end{center}
He also, according to his belief, announced that he was against all
religion of whatever kind.

He brought with him to Gastonia some two or three co-workers, who
are apparently foreigners, one of whom is a woman (Ellen). They, like Beal,
are also against religion and against organized government.

In other speeches that Beal and his associates have made here, they
have openly called (upon) those who paid their 50 cents dues to join the so-
called union, to engage in violence and even bloodshed, if necessary.

The statements made by Beal to the newspaper reporters are in line
with his speeches and this article is written for the express purpose of letting
every 100 per cent American man, woman and child in Gaston county know
who, and what kind of people have come into Gaston county to cause trouble.

The very existence, the happiness, and the very life even, of every
citizen of Gaston county, is threatened, and is in the balance, if Beal, and his
Bolshevik associates succeed in having their way.

The question in the minds of many people who belong to the Christian
church, who belong to the various patriotic and fraternal organizations is:
Shall men and women of the type of Beal and associates, with their Bolshevik
ideas, with their call for violence and bloodshed, be permitted to remain in
Gaston county?

The so-called union that Beal is organizing is a spurious union and not
recognized by the American Federation of Labor, or any other legitimate labor
organization. The fact is that Beal denounces the American Federation of
Labor just as bitterly as he does the churches and the government.

From all appearances, the so-called union that Beal has organized is
nothing, more or less, than a cloak to disguise the Bolshevik principles which
he advertises.

Paid For By Citizens of Gaston County

In order for this advertisement to be published on April 3, 1929, it must have been
written on Tuesday, April 2, the second day of the strike, at a time when news
accounts reported that the strike was peaceful, mill owners were only “slightly
perturbed,” and before the confrontation between strikers and law enforcement that
provided the questionable justification used to call out the militia. The timing of this
advertisement demonstrates that the mill owners never intended to open a meaningful
dialogue with the workers, rather they were simply marshalling their forces for an all-
out assault upon the NTWU and the striking workers.

Examining the rhetoric of the advertisement, it is evident that mill owners
were attempting to vilify the union leadership as anti-American, anti-Christian
revolutionaries. At a time when lynchings were still common in the South, the
advertisement can easily be interpreted as a call for local citizens to take the law in their own hands. At one point during the Gastonia strike, the Federated Press News Service reported that “Open threats of violence, including lynching, have been levelled (sic) against Organizers Fred Beal, George Pershing and Ellen Dawson.”

On Thursday, the *Gastonia Daily Gazette* ran another banner headline, “STRIKE SITUATION VERY MUCH BETTER,” with several news articles reporting how the troops had made the streets of Gastonia safe and that strike leaders were promising food and money for striking workers. In addition, a page-one editorial denied any direct connection between the newspaper and Manville-Jenckes. Obviously, at least some individuals within the community voiced criticism of the first ad. The editorial defended the newspaper’s decision to run the first advertisement as simply a normal business transaction for which they were paid the going rate of $80. They also stressed, that “THE GAZETTE WAS HERE FIGHTING THE PEOPLE’S BATTLES BEFORE BEAL WAS BORN, AND WILL BE HERE WHEN BEAL HAS LEFT THE GASTONIA WORKERS HIGH AND DRY AND HAS MOVED ON TO MORE FERTILE FIELDS, AFTER MILKING THIS ONE DRY.”

The Thursday edition carried a second full page advertisement, an ad even more violent in its attack on the union, encouraging local citizens to take action against the strikers and their leaders. The advertisement read:

**Mob Rule vs. Law and Order**

Every patriotic, law abiding American Citizen who was at the Loray Mills yesterday could see the difference between mob rule on the one hand and law and order on the other. Every American Citizen who loves his country and venerated (sic) its traditions could easily see the difference between the STARS AND STRIPES, the beautiful emblem of this Republic, and the blood red banner of Bolshevism, the flag of those who favor the destruction of all constitutional government, the flag of revolution and bloodshed, the flag of the country which does not believe in religion, which does not believe in the sanctity of marriage. MEN AND WOMEN OF
GASTON COUNTY, ARE YOU WILLING TO PERMIT THE MEN OF THE TYPE OF BEAL AND HIS ASSOCIATES TO CONTINUE TO PREACH THE DOCTRINES OF BOLSHEVISM ANY WHERE IN AMERICA AND ESPECIALLY HERE IN OUR MIDST?

Before the troops arrived here yesterday the mob was rampant at and near the Loray Mill in all of its seething hideousness, ready to kill, ready to destroy property. The troops arrived, men uniformed and armed, men true and loyal to their country, and all became quiet and the mob dispersed.

The Sheriff of Gaston County and his deputies, the Chief of Police and his officers, few in number but loyal to the core, faithful and true, for hours had been on the job. These few men kept law and order at the best of their ability, their number was not sufficient, for Beal and his associates had told the strikers to use force, to crack the heads of the officers, to kill if necessary. Reinforcements arrived and the mob left for their homes.

LET EVERY MAN AND WOMAN IN GASTON COUNTY ASK THE QUESTION: AM I WILLING TO ALLOW THE MOB TO CONTROL GASTON COUNTY, THE MOB WHOSE LEADERS DO NOT BELIEVE IN GOD AND WHO DESTROY THE GOVERNMENT.

THE STRIKE AT THE LORAY IS SOMETHING MORE THAN MERELY A FEW MEN STRIKING FOR BETTER WAGES. IT WAS NOT INAUGURATED FOR THAT PURPOSE. IT WAS STARTED SIMPLY FOR THE PURPOSE OF OVERTHROWING THE GOVERNMENT AND DESTROYING PROPERTY AND TO KILL, KILL, KILL.

THE TIME IS AT HAND FOR EVERY AMERICAN TO DO HIS DUTY.

PAID FOR BY CITIZENS OF GASTON COUNTY

The description of the Loray village offered in this ad in no way reflects the peaceful description provided by newspaper reporters covering the strike. Further, the concluding line of the advertisement, “THE TIME IS AT HAND FOR EVERY AMERICAN TO DO HIS DUTY,” was a clear message for individuals within the community to take the law into their own hands, before strikers decided to “Kill, Kill, Kill.”

On Thursday, the local newspaper published the strikers’ demands, demands that present a very different perspective of what motivated the striking workers and their organizers. The workers wanted the following eight concessions from Manville-Jenckes.

1. Elimination of all piece work, hank or clock systems and substitution of a standard wage scale.
3. 40 hour, 5 day week.
4. Abolition of all speeding and doubling up of work.
5. Equal pay for equal work for women and youth.
6. Decent and sanitary working and housing conditions.
7. Reduction by 50 per cent of rent and light charges.
8. Recognition of the union.51

There is no evidence that these demands were ever considered by the owners of the Loray Mill. The news article that included the workers’ demands, also included the following letter from the management of the mill.

To the people of Loray mills and law abiding citizens of the community.

Foreign agitators and a few misguided local people are endeavoring to tear down and disrupt the social, moral and business life of our community and it can only lead to serious trouble and want, and the occasion calls for the coolest thinking and best judgement on the part of the people.

Don’t be misled, think carefully of what you are doing.

To the people of our community, you are offered full protection by the loyal and efficient county and city officers.

Those who desire to go about their regular business the company will back to the limit, and are assured of fair and courteous dealings as in the past.

To those who do not wish to continue in our employ. You must understand that you cannot continue to occupy our houses, nor remain on the premises of the company.

Respectfully,

MANVILLE-JENCKES CO.52

The tone of this statement was far more civil than the attack ads, but one message was clear: workers who continued to strike would be removed from their company-owned, mill village homes.

On Friday, April 5, despite more news articles reporting that the community was quiet and peaceful, a third full-page advertisement appeared, even more vitriolic than the previous two. The headline read, “Red Russianism Lifts Its Gory Hands Right Here In Gastonia.” The text began, “Do the people of Gastonia, Gaston County and the South realize what the Communist Party is? This is the party…that seeks the overthrow of capital, business and all of the established social order. World
revolution is its ultimate goal! It has no religion, it has no color line, it believes in free love.”\(^{53}\)

These ads totally ignored the far more peaceful rhetoric used by Ellen and Beal, who continually reminded striking workers to remain calm and peaceful. The difficulty organizers faced in maintaining a campaign of peaceful civil disobedience against the verbal attacks of the mill owners was exacerbated by an important difference between the cultures of the North and the South. According to Vera Buch, striking workers wanted to carry their own guns as protection against the National Guard, local law enforcement and special deputies, all of whom carried guns. “Beal reiterated patiently that they (the strikers) couldn’t carry guns. It wasn’t a war. We couldn’t be violent in our strike… Ellen Dawson told of the picket lines in Passaic and New Bedford that were carried on determinedly by thousands of unarmed workers despite beatings and police terror.”\(^{54}\)

A comparison of handbills circulated by the strikers with those circulated by the supporters of the mill owners provides additional evidence as to which group sought peaceful civil disobedience as opposed to violent action. In literature the strikers gave members of the national guard, they asked the guardsmen to join in the fight. “Workers of the National Guard! Do not accept the orders of the capitalist murderers, but stand fast when the order is given for strike duty. Refuse to shoot your fathers and brothers on the picket lines! Fight with your class, the strikers, against your common enemy, the textile bosses. Join us on the picket line and help win this strike. Do not obey the orders of the bosses! Do not shoot us, the strikers!” Literature distributed by Gaston County citizens opposed to the strike was far more inflammatory. “Our Religion, Our Morals, Our Common Decency, Our Government and the very Foundation of Modern Civilization, all that we are now and all that we
plan for our children IS IN DANGER. Communism will destroy the efforts of Christians of 2,000 years. Do we want it? Will we have it? NO!! It must go from the Southland.

The peaceful rhetoric of the strike leaders is supported by at least one North Carolina newspaper, *The News and Observer* in Raleigh, which offered what appears to be a far more objective assessment of the Gastonia strike situation than that provided by the local newspaper. “There has been no disorder to speak of. Strikers, even Beal and Pershing, are counseling peace. But the bogie of communism has created a vast fear and it is stated authoritatively that textile interests not connected with the Loray mills are frightened.” The article concluded that “fear more than facts got the troops to Gastonia and fear more than facts is keeping them there.” As *The News and Observer* understood, fear was motivating the community’s response to the strike, an illogical fear that was being fueled by the mill owning interests of Gastonia and the Carolinas.

Opening another front against the strikers, mill owners enlisted the support of the U.S. Department of Labor, just as they had done in New Bedford. A banner headline in the Saturday, April 6, *Gastonia Daily Gazette* declared that “UNITED STATES AGENT DENOUNCES BEAL AND PERSHING: Says No Conciliation Possible Between Mill and Strikers As Long As They Stay in Gastonia,” The federal agent was Charles G. Wood, the former New Bedford newspaper editor, who had helped to negotiate an agreement between the skilled workers and the textile mills of New Bedford, cutting off any negotiation with the unskilled workers. Wood was allied with both the skilled workers and the textile owners in New Bedford, and it was quickly apparent that he was in North Carolina to support the interests of the textile industry, not to help negotiate a settlement between the Loray Mill and its striking
workers. In a statement written in the newsroom of the Gazette late Friday afternoon, Wood said, the NTWU organizers were “avowed enemies of the form of government subscribed to by the workers themselves. It is not a strike as strikes are defined; it is a form of revolution created by those committed to revolutions by mass action. There is not here any existing common ground upon which employers and employees can stand.” Thus, the federal official charged with talking to both sides and negotiating a settlement refused to talk to the NTWU organizers, much less tried to bring about a compromise between the workers and the mill owners. Wood told the local press that “no conciliation is possible until the misled workers divorce themselves from their communist leaders. Until then the only way to meet the situation is just what is being done now…by the police and military power of the community.” Wood then set up shop in a Charlotte hotel and “declared he intended to continue his investigations here daily.”

Another authority weighing in on the situation was David Clark, editor of the Southern Textile Bulletin. On Friday afternoon, Clark “declared the Loray strike would not last long,” explaining that the strike “was started by two boys and a girl, the oldest of whom is about 25 years of age, all of whom live in the north. They somewhere, probably in school or college, came under the influence of radicals and communists…They profess to believe that Russia with its socialism, social equality, free love and atheism is a heaven into which all workers should enter.” Clark’s primary message, however, targeted the racial prejudices of white southerners. Clark attacked the communist labor activists for their stand supporting racial equality. “Their demand that negroes be admitted to the union on an equal basis with whites is…an appeal…for white and black workers to get together socially. The(y) insisted upon white girls dancing with negro men to break down capital-instilled prejudices.”
Clark was appealing to one of the most inflexible rules within the southern racial code—white southern women must be protected from black men at all cost. Clark’s message was directed at the white men of the community, particularly the members of such groups as the Ku Klux Klan. According to David Goldfield, southern race relations were built on a rape myth that “freedom had dissolved the discipline of the black male; no longer constrained by the surveillance of white civilization, black men would revert to their base African instincts, among the most prevalent of which was an insatiable sexual appetite, especially for white women. The rape myth justified the controls, sometimes as horrific as lynchings, whites placed on blacks.”

In the South white men of every class believed that it was their responsibility to protect their women.

Clark was not the only one to focus on race. It was a recurring theme of the local attack ads. In fact, language very similar to that of Clark’s was used in an ad published in the Gazette on April 5. The ad referred to a social event that had been scheduled for March 22 in New York City and was quoted directly from the Daily Worker. The ad noted that the event was “Another opportunity for white and black workers to get together socially…Leaflets for the affair call upon the workers of all races to show their working class solidarity by coming together at the dance and help break down capitalist-instilled prejudices and race hatred.” The underlined sections of the ad are identical to the wording used by Clark. It suggests that the ad, while attributed to “A CITIZEN OF GASTON COUNTY,” may well have been written by Clark, one of the leading spokesmen for the textile industry throughout the South, not just in Gastonia.

The open and almost universally accepted racism of the South during this period can also be found in a full-page Sunday feature story in the Charlotte
Observer, recounting the life of a Grover, South Carolina man who had been one of the original members of the local Ku Klux Klan. Talking about Reconstruction, the man recalled, “Negroes were mean and impudent then, and if it hadn’t been for the Ku Klux Klan to tame them down I don’t know what would have become of things. The Ku Klux Klan made them go to their dens at sundown.”

Ellen recognized that the issue of race was a major problem for southern workers and clearly expressed the uncompromising attitude of her organization when she wrote that “the Negro question plays a decisive role in the South. On this we can make no concessions or compromise. We use every occasion to convince the southern workers of the correctness of our program of complete social, political and racial equality.” She also understood that the NTWU stand on race was a problem for southern workers. “It is true that in the beginning our uncompromising attitude may slow down our progress but it cannot be too much emphasized that the road to victory in the South lies in our ability to destroy the dangerous weapon of race hostility so carefully cultivated and so effectively used by the bosses.” Ellen stressed that the union’s educational efforts, along “with the experiences of the actual struggle will weld together the solidarity of the Negro and white workers in a united fight against the bosses and the strike-breaking government.”

Ellen’s written commitment to racial equality was supported by her actions. John H. Owen, the first black communist to be sent to Gastonia, recalled the response to his first speech, when he heard one of the striking workers say, “I have never heard a colored man make a speech before.” Owen then said he “walked outside and sat down on some boards beside the strike headquarters. Ellen Dawson came out and shook my hand, said a sincere word of greeting and went into the hall. After that every striker was my friend…If Ellen Dawson vouched for me, I must be all right.”
On April 8, Albert Weisbord came to Gastonia. He was identified by one Charlotte newspaper reporter as “one of the nation’s most famous radicals.” Weisbord attacked North Carolina’s governor as a “mill-owning, slave-driving capitalist.” He asked national guardsmen assigned to the mill to refuse to act against the strikers, urging them to “Fight with your class,” and to “Join us on the Picket line and help us win the strike.” Weisbord also addressed the mill bosses directly. “The bosses would like to have us talk about the red flag and revolution. Mr. Baugh (J. A. Baugh, general manager of the Loray Mill), you bow-wow, stop your barking. Don’t talk revolution to these workers. They might take you seriously.” Weisbord’s message was, instead, one of worker solidarity. “Our strike depends upon how you spread this movement…to all the mills. Go say, ‘come on brother, white and black,’ Our union knows no political or religious distinction. We have no color line, although the bosses wish you did. Tell your brother workers in these mills ‘now is the time for us all to mobilize.’ We will spread this strike throughout the south. The quickest way to win victory is for all the mills to go out.” After the speeches, striking workers paraded through the community. According to one report, it was one of the “biggest demonstration(s) of the strike…when approximately 350 members of the union paraded throughout the Loray section…(going) to various mills in an attempt to call out other workers. They marched for almost an hour, singing and cheering at intervals.”

The most significant event of the day was an announcement by local officials that they would begin enlisting the support of special deputies to assist in maintaining order. “Should any troops be moved away from the strike area in West Gastonia within the next few days, their places will be taken by a picked body of deputies chosen from the ranks of the American Legion and former service men.” The
following day, it was announced that two guard units were being withdrawn from Gastonia and that 35 special deputies would go on duty at the mill. Speaking to the new deputies, Gaston County Sheriff Lineberger said, “Hold your heads, men, in this extreme situation…Do your duty as we shall see (it). Prove yourselves real men. Let us uphold the laws of the state and the nation, in this emergency that is facing us in this county.”

On April 11, the propaganda war continued as the *Gazette* ran a cartoon on page one. It showed a snake coiled around the bottom of pole holding the American flag. Beside the flag were written the words “Communism in the South, Kill it!” The caption above the cartoon read “A Viper That Must Be Smashed!” The newspaper attributed the cartoon to an unidentified worker at the Loray Mill, adding the unnecessary comment that he was not a striker.

The following evening, one of the key figures in Gastonia’s anti-strike campaign – A. L. Bulwinkle – spoke to the American Legion chapter in Charlotte. “You were not afraid of foreign foes and I know you are not afraid of domestic foes that threaten to destroy our government,” the former congressman told a crowd of more than 200. “We cannot sit by and let this go on, when open and avowed bolsheviks call upon people to let them teach boys from 14 to 21 how to destroy our government. It is your social duty to tell people what they stand for. These people can be smothered by bringing their affairs into the open, showing the people that they are trying to destroy our government.” Bulwinkle talked about how the communists were infiltrating the United States Army in an effort “to demoralize the troops. We want to advertise these people to destroy their powers. It is from the ranks of communists and bolsheviks that all this pacifism propaganda comes the Civil Libertys (sic) union and like organizations.” He concluded by telling the legionnaires that
“every private citizen and member of the American Legion should be alert to see that no foreign or domestic foe threatens the welfare of the people through an attempt at the destruction of the home, our religion, patriotism or the corruption of national events.”

Bulwinkle, who would again serve in Congress in the years after the strike, was a member of the legal teams that prosecuted the strike leaders for the murder of Chief Aderholt and defended those accused of killing Ella May Wiggins. He was also the alleged leader of the Committee of One Hundred, a local citizens’ group that supported the mill owners. This group was suspected of being responsible for numerous incidents of violence against the strikers.

On April 13, the National Textile Workers’ Union office in Gastonia sent a letter to the Gastonia Daily Gazette addressing many of the issues which had been raised during the previous two weeks. Although the letter was never published, a copy survived. The letter, which accused the newspaper of being a “mouthpiece” for the textile manufacturers, consisted of twelve questions, each addressing attacks that had been published in the newspaper against the striking workers and the leaders of the NTWU.

1. WHAT HAVE YOU AND YOUR PAPER EVER DONE TO BETTER THE CONDITIONS OF THE WORKERS, SUCH AS LESSENING THE VERY LONG HOURS, INCREASING THE WAGES, DOING AWAY WITH THE DOUBLING AND STRECH-OUT (SIC) SYSTEM AND BETTER HOUSING CONDITIONS, IN GASTONIA, WHICH YOU ARE FORCED TO ADMIT EXIST?

2. YOU SAY IN ONE OF YOUR ISSUES THAT THE TEXTILE WORKERS ARE GOING TO HAVE A UNION. WHY IS IT THAT YOU FAVOR THE UNITED TEXTILE WORKERS UNION (U.T.W.) AT THIS PERIOD OF TIME WHEN THE WORKERS ON STRIKE ARE ALREADY ORGANIZED IN THE NATIONAL TEXTILE WORKERS UNION (N.T.W.U.) IS IT YOUR PURPOSE TO SPLIT THE WORKERS SO AS TO BREAK THE STRIKE? WHY DIDN’T YOU THINK THE WORKERS SHOULD HAVE A UNION BEFORE THE STRIKE TOOK PLACE?

3. IN A LIBELOUS FULL PAGE ADV. YOU AND YOUR BOSS FRIENDS CLAIM BEAL TOLD THE STRIKERS TO “CRACK THE HEADS OF OFFICERS AND KILL IF NECESSARY!!” WE CAN GET 1,000
WITNESSES TO PROVE HE SAID NO SUCH THING, CAN YOU GET ONE STOOLPIGEON TO SAY HE DID?

4. YOU AND YOUR BOSS FRIENDS SAID THE UNION LET THE STRIKERS STARVE AFTER THREE DAYS BEING OUT OF WORK. IF THIS WERE TRUE DON’T YOU THINK THIS IS A TERRIBLE INDICMENT (SIC) AGAINST YOUR FRIENDS-MANVILLE AND JENCKES, THAT THE WORKERS BEGIN TO STARVE AFTER THREE DAYS UNEMPLOYMENT?

5. WHY DO YOU RAISE THE QUESTIONS OF COMMUNISM, FREE LOVE, RUSSIANISM AND RELIGION WHEN THE ISSUES FOR WHICH THE WORKERS WENT OUT ON STRIKE, AND FOR WHICH THE UNION STANDS, ARE FOR HIGHER WAGES, LESS HOURS AND RECOGNITION OF THE UNION?

6. DO YOU KNOW THAT YOUR FRIENDS-MANVILLE AND JENCKES WILL NOT PERMIT WORKERS IN THEIR PLANT TO BELONG TO A UNION OF THEIR CHOICE. IS THIS WHAT YOU MEAN BY AMERICANISM?

7. ARE MANVILLE AND JENCKES AMERICANS OR FOREIGNERS?

8. WHY DO YOU NOT TELL YOUR READERS THAT AT EVERY MEETING THE LEADERS HAVE COUNCILED AGAINST VIOLENCE?

9. MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN ARE WORKING 60 HOURS AND MORE, NIGHT AND DAYS, FOR ONLY 6, 8 AND 10 DOLLARS A WEEK WITH THEIR WORK SLOWED AND DOUBLED UP IN THE MANVILLE AND JENCKES MILL. IS THIS COMMUNISM?

10. DO YOU KNOW THAT BEAL, PERSHING AND OTHER ORGANIZERS OF THE NATIONAL TEXTILE WORKERS UNION ARE AMERICANS FROM OLD STOCK AND THAT BEAL IS A VETERAN OF THE WORLD WAR BEING HONORABLY DISCHARGED?

11. IS GASTONIA IN AMERICA? DO AMERICANS COMING FROM THE NORTH TRAVELING THRU GASTONIA SUDDENLY BECOME FOREIGNERS?


The letter was signed by Will Truett, Organizer-Secretary, Manville-Jenckes Local, National Textile Workers Union, and Fred Erwin Beal, District Organizer. Ellen would certainly have participated in drafting this letter.

This war of words was soon drowned out. On April 18, less than three weeks after the workers first walked off the job, the anti-strike forces intensified their attack
on the striking workers and their leaders. In the pre-dawn hours, an estimated 75-150 masked men raided the union’s headquarters, demolishing the building. The raiders destroyed the building “with axes, picks, matticks (sic), and crowbars and (threw) the equipment in the street.” The mysterious mob also raided the union sponsored relief store down the street, destroying food collected for the striking workers and their families, as well as financial and membership records of the union. The local newspaper declared that the attack was the “First Show of Violence Since Strike Began; No Clue To Perpetrators.” National Guardsmen, although encamped nearby, arrived too late to save the building or catch any of the masked men. They did, however, arrest ten striking workers who had been sleeping in the building.74

Later that same day, Ellen was arrested by a U.S. Marshal on immigration fraud charges and imprisoned in Charlotte. Her arrest rated a banner headline on page one of the *Gastonia Daily Gazette*. It read: “ELLEN DAWSON ARRESTED; OFFICERS SEEKING BEAL: Strike Leader Is Jailed By U.S. Officer, Is Wanted By Federal Court at Trenton, N. J., For False Pretense.”75 According to the news article, Ellen “was arrested…just after she had finished a speech of most incendiary tone to a group of strikers in the Loray community.”76 She was taken to Charlotte by a U.S. Marshal for a preliminary hearing before a U.S. Commissioner who ordered her held for action by the Federal Grand Jury in Trenton, New Jersey. Her bond was set at $2,000. In reporting her arrest, the *New York Times* reported that Ellen, “a frail weaver, known as ‘the Little Orphan of the Strikers,’ served a jail sentence in New Bedford, Mass., in connection with the textile riots in that city last August and in 1926 took an active part in aiding Albert Weisborg (sic) in organizing the textile workers of Passaic, N. J.”77
Labor’s News reported, “Ellen Dawson, heroine of mill strikes in Passaic, Paterson and New Bedford, has been arrested in Gastonia on a federal immigration charge which was used against her in New Bedford. The case was dropped later in New Bedford, but revived in Gastonia to embarrass the strike’s most effective women’s organizer.”

On the same day that Ellen was arrested on immigration charges, the Gaston County sheriff began a manhunt for Beal, explaining that a warrant had been issued several days earlier for his arrest. The warrant was based on civil charges filed by Troy Jones demanding $5,000 damages, claiming his wife, Violet Hastings Jones, had been enticed away from home “without his knowledge or consent.” Mr. Jones said Beal sent Mrs. Jones to “New York, along with other strikers, in an effort to raise funds for the Loray union.” Two days later, Jones was arrested for trying to throw a lighted stick of dynamite into a strike meeting. Police later released him, “because they had no evidence and no one appeared to prosecute the case.” Beal ultimately surrendered to police a week later in the Charlotte office of the union’s attorney, Tom Jimison.

On April 19, the local newspaper made an astute, if unintended, observation. “The Loray strike situation, which for the past several days has presented a calm and unperturbed surface, has been again transformed into a boiling cauldron of agitation by a quick series of events since early yesterday morning.” The events listed were the destruction of the union headquarters, the arrest of Ellen, the arrest of Amy Schechter for trying to recover union records from the collapsed building, and the search for Beal. All of these events were the result of action by individuals outside the union, not the striking workers. Once again, it was not the strikers, but the non-
strikers who broke the peace. Late on the evening of April 20, Ellen was released from jail after her bail of $2,000 was posted by Jimison.

On April 21, without any clear explanation of why, the last of the National Guard troops were withdrawn from Gastonia. Local authorities said “they did not expect any further trouble in the Loray mill village or at the mill.” The sheriff did, however, swear in five additional deputies and summon another 20 from other parts of the county.\(^83\) The question that must be asked at this point is: Was the National Guard dismissed because local officials felt the troopers were no longer needed, or because the newly appointed special deputies could be used against the strikers more effectively without the presence of the National Guardsmen? John Salmond said of the National Guard’s departure, “certainly their departure and replacement by forty special deputies was the signal for violence to escalate. Not even their supporters defended the character of some of these men chosen for the job.”\(^84\) The violence was quick in coming.

On April 22, a confrontation between strikers and local law enforcement turned violent. It began at a mass meeting outside the recently destroyed strike headquarters. During a series of speeches, Pershing, Buch, Schechter and Beal each stressed the need to protest a newly enacted city ordinance against parading without a license. The intent of the ordinance was to prevent strikers from picketing. “When the meeting was over, a large crowd, about five hundred strong, set off to make the point. Shortly after entering the city limits, they met with a force of about fifty deputies, armed with pistols, rifles, blackjacks, and bayonets, and with orders to stop the march.” These special deputies attacked “the unarmed marchers with a ferocity born of the tension of the past three weeks. Marchers were punched, kicked, pricked
with bayonets, and bashed with rifle butts. Thirty were arrested, and many more retreated to their meeting place cut and bleeding.\textsuperscript{85}

Jimison, the union’s attorney, sent a telegram to Governor Gardner protesting the actions of the deputies. It read: “Special deputies in charge (of the) strike area at Gastonia have instituted a reign of red terror. They say they have orders to stop picketing and they have taken charge of streets and highways, attacking citizens, cursing and beating women and putting them in jail for no cause save that they have ventured to walk upon public streets. In God’s name, can not the state of North Carolina protect the poor and insure the rights of her citizens?”\textsuperscript{86}

Many of these special deputies were nothing more than hired thugs, using violence at the least provocation. W.W. Bindeman, for example, a chain gang prison guard from Grover, South Carolina, openly admitted knocking a \textit{Charlotte Observer} reporter unconscious with the butt of his rifle. When asked why, Bindeman said, “Because he didn’t move.” Bindeman was fined $50 for his assault on the journalist\textsuperscript{87} and fired from the force of special deputies. He was quickly hired as a security guard at the Loray Mill.\textsuperscript{88}

On April 24, Ellen was again arrested, this time outside the Loray Mill, where she was leading striking workers on the picket line. The only person in the picket line arrested, “she was carried to the police station and almost immediately released on her own recognizance.”\textsuperscript{89} On April 25, she was once again arrested, this time with Carl Reeve, because they were identified as the leaders of the picket line.\textsuperscript{90}

By May, however, the strike at the Loray Mill was faltering. Some of the workers had returned to work, while others moved away, seeking employment elsewhere. Loray’s management said the mill was running at near capacity. Baugh then initiated a direct attack against the workers who were still out on strike. Saying
Loray no longer needed the striking workers, mill bosses and special deputies began forcing workers out of their mill-owned homes. On May 6, the mill put approximately a thousand people out on the street. As Buch recounted the day, “The sheriff of Gastonia came with some sworn-in deputies and without the slightest regard for crying babies, sick people, resisting women, they set all their poor possessions in a heap outside and padlocked the doors. It was a scene of great confusion and distress.”

Journalist Mary Heaton Vorse, reporting for The Federated Press, provided a more personal glimpse of what occurred that day. She told of one woman “who sat among her household goods, a sick child in her arms. The little girl’s face…covered with scabs, her eyes – sick-looking eyes – roll upwards so only the whites can be seen.” The child had been checked by the mill doctor who said, “that’s not the chicken pox. That’s the small pox she’s got. She’s all right, just peelin’ her scabs.” The doctor noted that the little girl “ain’t really sick. She’s up already. Past the contagious stage and tem’ture normal.” Vorse added that, “the ‘well’ child who is recovering from small pox droops her head on her mother’s shoulder and closes her eyes. Who is going to take in the little girl with smallpox tonight?”

It wasn’t just the strikers who were thrown out on the street. Vera Buch found herself homeless as well. The mill family that she was living with had been evicted. Exhausted from a long, stressful day, she rescued her suitcase from the family’s possessions and walked in the rain to the mill boardinghouse where Ellen and Amy Schechter were sharing a room. Schechter welcomed her. Ellen, however, was not very pleased to see Vera. As Buch told the story, she had just gotten undressed and was resting in the center of the bed when Ellen arrived. When Ellen saw Vera, she said, “What’s this, we’re sleeping three to a bed again?” Vera explained her situation. Ellen “didn’t answer, but flounced out in a huff, slamming the door.” The next day,
Vera learned that Ellen had slipped into an unoccupied room and slept there. The problem was resolved when Ellen rented a room in the dormitory for herself.\textsuperscript{93} Clearly, the stress of Loray was getting to everyone involved in the Loray strike. It also supports Betty Dawson’s description of Ellen as someone who could be cold and wanted to be in charge.

To help the evicted families, the union erected a tent city on some vacant land and constructed a new headquarters building. The tent city provided a temporary home to the homeless workers, but in less than a month it also proved to be the scene of the most fateful event of the strike – the murder of Chief Aderholt.

At the end of May, Ellen left North Carolina and returned to New Jersey to face the immigration charges. The legal proceedings dragged on for several months. However, her departure proved timely, at least from her perspective, and according to one account, she may have sensed the impending doom that would quickly draw the eyes of the world to Gastonia and the plight of the Loray workers. Buch later wrote, “Our slim forces were further reduced when Ellen Dawson’s case came up. The authorities had intended to have Dawson deported as an undesirable alien; failing this, they succeeded in getting her extradited to New Jersey.” According to Buch, Ellen was “full of smiles (as) she bade us goodbye. I couldn’t help thinking, did she have to be so completely joyful to get out of it? Could there not have been one moment of regret, one thought for those left behind? Every departure brought its trauma, where so few were willing to come. I used to have dreams at times of myself left all alone there, all other staff members having fled.”\textsuperscript{94}

On June 7, approximately a week after Ellen left Gastonia, Orville Aderholt, the Gastonia Police Chief, was killed during a police raid of the strikers’ tent city. Seventy-five years later, there is still debate over who killed the chief and no firm
evidence that anyone in the leadership of the union was involved. Regardless, Aderholt’s death gave the mill owners their most powerful weapon against the striking workers and the union’s leaders.95

In response to the shootings, vigilantes raided the tent city, terrorizing the men, women and children living there. Sixty strike supporters were jailed. Beal escaped, but was later arrested in Spartanburg. On June 18, claiming union guards shot first, local prosecutors charged fourteen union people with the murder of Chief Aderholt, including Beal, Buch and Schechter. The subsequent trial drew national and international attention to Gastonia, and was compared to the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti.96 A mistrial was declared when the prosecution, borrowing an idea from a contemporary movie, produced a life-size wax model of the dead Aderholt in the courtroom. Locals believed the shock drove one juror mad. Built secretly in the basement of the courthouse for a cost of $1,000, the wax model explained why janitors had reported seeing the ghost of the police chief in the courthouse during the weeks before the trial.98

“In the chaotic week that followed the mistrial, Ella May Wiggins, traveling with a group of NTWU workers from Bessemer City, was shot and killed. They were on their way to a union meeting, which sadly had been cancelled for fear of violence. Seven men, including non-striking employees of Loray Mill, were charged with her murder. Mill Superintendent Baugh bailed them out and Bulwinkle lead their defense team. All were acquitted.”99

At the second Aderholt murder trial, prosecutors limited the number of defendants to seven and reduced the charge to second degree murder. Charges against Buch and Schechter were dropped. Beal remained the target of the prosecution. Ultimately, this group of seven was convicted and given sentences of from 5 to 20
years. The *Harvard Law Review* spoke to the unfairness of the trial, when it noted, “Far from revealing the undisputable guilt of the defendants…it (is) exceedingly difficult to determine whether the defendants were convicted because of their guilt or because of their radicalism.”

While out on bail, most of the defendants escaped to the Soviet Union. Beal made two trips there before surrendering to North Carolina officials in 1939. He was pardoned in 1942 and returned to Massachusetts, where he died in 1954.

Ellen returned to Gastonia at least once during the trials, but only briefly. Her attentions were focused on her upcoming immigration trial, Lovestone’s expulsion from the Communist Party USA, and a variety of other activities.

Looking back at her participation in the three strikes – Passaic, New Bedford and Gastonia – there are several observations that can be made. During these years, Ellen matured from an anonymous weaver into a leading labor activist. She became an activist in Passaic. During the long, hard campaigns there and in New Bedford she honed her organizing skills, and in Gastonia she demonstrated her leadership abilities. There can be little doubt that by the time Ellen left Gastonia, she was a battle-tested veteran of the American labor movement.

As for the group of radicals who came together under the leadership of Albert Weisbord, connecting the three strikes provides insight into the birth, development and ultimate dissolution of this group as a force fighting for the unskilled American textile worker. Even before Gastonia, Weisbord was expanding his efforts into other industries. In the mid-1930s, he and Vera Buch moved to Chicago where they continued their radical activities in areas outside the textile industry. Like several others in the group, including Ellen, they were expelled from the Communist Party at
the end of the 1920s, as the Soviet Union began to take firm control of communist activities in the United States and throughout the world.

Finally, from the biographer’s perspective, Gastonia was the place where Ellen became most visible. As co-director of perhaps the most infamous strike in the history of the southern textile industry, she was a highly effective labor organizer. Today, Ellen’s activities in Gastonia can be found in a rich and diverse collection of sources, including local, regional and national newspapers, autobiographical accounts written by Vera Buch (Weisbord) and Fred Beal, and the work of several historians. In the historical records prior to this thesis, however, Ellen’s role in the Loray Strike is usually reduced to a brief accounting of her speech at the first union rally. Ironically, Ellen’s success in Gastonia helped reduce her from a starring to a supporting role in this historical drama. Her arrest on bogus charges of immigration fraud forced her to return to New Jersey days before the shooting of the local police chief. Most historical accounts of the Loray Strike focus on the murders of Aderholt and striking worker Ella May Wiggins. If Ellen had remained in Gastonia another week, she would certainly have been arrested with the others and assured a more prominent role in the historical accounts of the strike. Instead, her early departure helped drop the curtain of historical invisibility on her life and her work at the Loray Mill. If it had not been for the intersection of John Salmond’s book Gastonia 1929 and my search for a research topic that took full advantage of the University of Aberdeen’s joint program with the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Ellen would, I am afraid, still be invisible.
In the years following the Civil War and before the start of World War II, the American South was a region isolated from the rest of the nation. Economic opportunity for the average worker was significantly less than in the North. As a result, few working class immigrants migrated to the region during this period. New immigrant workers preferred to settle in the industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest because there was significantly greater opportunity.


Scotch-Irish is a North American term. In Britain the more commonly used expression is Ulster-Scot. It refers to Scots, mostly from the lowlands, who migrated to Northern Ireland during the 17th Century under the Plantation scheme begun by James VI of Scotland after he took the English throne. When the English landowners began to oppress the Scots in the early 18th Century, the Scots began migrating on to North America. Many of these individuals went south from Pennsylvania after reaching the U.S.

Highland Scots were some of the earliest settlers of the Eastern Carolinas. Most of these settlers were yeoman farmers who were forced to move west as the plantations took the area’s more fertile farmland. Contrary to a commonly held belief in the southern United States, Highlanders represented only a small percentage of the total number of Scottish-Americans.

Pope, Millhands and Preachers, pp. 9-10. These were often the poorest of the poor, individuals who were barely surviving. Textile mills provided their only avenue of escape from this extreme poverty.

The Protestant ministers of Gastonia almost universally supported the mill owners. To have spoken out against the mill owners would have cost the minister his job. Unlike the strikes in Passaic and New Bedford, where the immigrant workers were primarily Catholic, and Catholic clergy often supported the workers, the mill workers of Loray were Protestants and received almost no support from their clergy. The one exception was Pentecostal ministers, many of whom worked in the mill during the week.

Pawtucket is less than 30 miles from New Bedford. It is reasonable to assume that Manville-Jenckes was familiar with the NTWU organizing efforts in New Bedford and the role played by Dawson and Beal.

In the North, “stretch-out” was known as “speed-up.” In Britain it was known as scientific management or Taylorism.


Ibid. The odd spelling is Beal’s attempt to capture the speaker’s southern accent.

The twenty-four hour use of beds by shift workers was called “hot bedding.”

Single women workers were common in the southern textile mills. Ella May Wiggins, the striker killed during the Loray strike, was another example of a mill worker who had been abandoned by her husband.
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26 Ibid, p. 129.
27 *Revolutionary Age*, November 1, 1929.
29 The quotation is from Buch.
31 *Charlotte Observer*, April 5, 1929.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid, April 7, 1929.
36 OHAL, Tamiment Library, Sophie Melvin Gerson.
37 *Charlotte Observer*, April 4, 1929.
38 *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, April 2, 1929.
39 Ibid, April 3, 1929.
40 Ibid.
43 Bulwinkle is perhaps the dominant leader in the battle against the NTWU and the striking workers. A congressman who served in the years before and after the strike, he is believed to have been the leader of the Committee of One Hundred, the local vigilante group. He was also active in the propaganda campaign against the strikers, the prosecution of the strike leaders for the murder of Chief Aderholt and the defense of the vigilantes charged with the murder of Ella May Wiggins.
44 *Charlotte Observer*, April 4, 1929.
46 Ellen was a devout Catholic for much of her life. In the South, even today, it is not unusual for a conservative Protestant to question whether or not a Catholic is a Christian.
47 *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, April 3, 1929. The details included in the ad suggest communications between local mill interests and the Manville-Jenckes headquarters in Rhode Island, which must have supplied information about Beal’s activities in New Bedford.
49 *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, April 4, 1929.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid, April 5, 1929.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
56 Much of the news coverage associated with the strike demonstrated a clear gender bias against the women involved in the report. The actions of Beal and Pershing were reported as the primary story, while the actions of Ellen and the other women involved in the strike were often reported as less important stories, usually with a feature story, rather than news story, perspective.
57 *News and Observer*, April 6, 1929.
58 *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, April 6, 1929.
59 Ibid.
61 One aspect of this racism can be seen in the textile mills of the period, where white women and black men never worked together. Black men always worked outside the mill, white women worked inside the mill. Black women were not yet part of the textile mill workforce.
63 *Charlotte Observer*, April 21, 1929.
64 *Revolutionary Age*, November 1, 1929.
66 *Charlotte Observer*, April 9, 1929.
67 *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, April 9, 1929.
68 Ibid, April 10, 1929.
Sacco and Vanzetti were two immigrant workers who, because of their political beliefs, they were anarchists, were convicted and executed for a crime that most historians believe they did not commit. Their Boston trial drew international attention.

The movie was *The Trial of Mary Duigan*. In the film, the use of a wax model won the case for the prosecution.
Chapter Eight – Conclusion and Personal Observations

I believe that this reconstruction of Ellen Dawson’s life offers several valuable insights into the world of working class women in Scotland and the United States during the early twentieth century. Specifically, it provides a meaningful example of the difficulties of researching the life of a working class individual, especially the life of a woman worker; it contributes to our understanding of the important role played by women in the labor movements of the 1920s; and it illuminates the bias of a male dominated society against women workers, even among men who worked with women activists and shared their goals and experiences. This thesis also offers insight into previously unexplored connections between seemingly unrelated events, including the lack of attention given to the transatlantic influences upon and the experiences of immigrant workers in the United States; the influence of Red Clyde upon labor movements in the world outside of Scotland; and the connection between the strikes in Passaic, New Bedford and Gastonia. Beyond this, Ellen’s life story helps to provide a human face to the often ignored communist workers’ movement in the United States during the 1920s, a very different perspective from the traditionally accepted view of American communists; and it also offers a vivid example of the isolation and fear of activists who were forced to hide their radical activities during the later years of their life. Finally, as Ellen’s biographer, I believe my own personal
experiences in researching her life offer unique insights into her story and the world in which she lived.

Reconstructing Ellen’s life required research in Scotland, where she was born; England, where she worked as a young textile worker; and the United States, where she lived most of her life and was a leader in the labor movement. While our archives are filled with information about the rich, the famous and the powerful, only bits and pieces are left to tell the story of working class women, and to provide their perspective of the world in which they existed. News accounts from the period, which often provide the only surviving record of key events, provide a decidedly masculine point-of-view. Although women shared the speaking platforms and picket lines with men, journalists tended to focus their attention on the men, ignoring or downplaying the role of women whose actions were equal to and sometimes more important than the men. Men were considered the “hard” news story, while the activities of women were covered from the “soft” news perspective, mostly in the feature sections of the newspaper. During the Loray Mill strike, for example, Ellen and the women strikers were not covered by the local news media until the daughter of the editor of the *Charlotte Observer* went to Gastonia to write a feature story about the women. In the Passaic striker’s documentary film, male speakers were identified, while women speakers, clearly shown in the film, were rarely named.¹ Written accounts by men, such as Albert Weisbord’s account of the Passaic strike and Fred Beal’s accounts of the New Bedford and Gastonia strikes, seldom identify women activists by name. These masculine accounts are in sharp contrast to Vera Buch (Weisbord)’s record of Gastonia, which provides detailed coverage of both men and women, and helps to illuminate the central role played by women in that strike.² Even professional historians are sometimes remiss in reporting the activities of women.
Only recently have Scottish labor historians begun to focus on the role of women in the events associated with Red Clydeside. In the United States, it has only been since the late 1970s that women workers have become the focus of serious research. With respect to the role played by women in the labor movements of the 1920s, Ellen’s story provides a clear example of the courage and commitment of women workers. Ellen was a charismatic speaker, an effective organizer, and a dedicated supporter of the women’s movement and the worker’s cause. Beyond that, she was a fearless campaigner who faced violent attacks by local police and mill thugs. Even when her own organizations – the American Federation of Labor’s United Textile Workers and the communist sponsored National Textile Workers’ Union, which she helped to found – expelled her, Ellen refused to go quietly, protesting both verbally and physically on behalf of the workers she represented and whom she felt were being ignored by these organizations. Ellen provides historians with a meaningful example of the idealistic spirit and sincere determination of many women workers in the United States during the 1920s, characteristics that came directly from her immigrant experiences.

In addition to the perspective of women workers, Ellen’s life also provides important insights into previously unexplored connections between seemingly unrelated events. This is particularly true with respect to transatlantic connections. Conducting research about a single individual on both sides of the Atlantic highlighted for me the nationalistic myopia of historical scholarship. Scottish historians study events that occurred within the borders of Scotland. Even research related to the Scottish Diaspora often ends when the emigrants reach a foreign shore. As for U.S. historians, many have even narrower and highly nationalistic views of the world. The problem with such restrictive approaches is that scholars often miss
important connections. I believe that Ellen Dawson’s experiences as a young worker in Glasgow during World War I, where she was a witness to the events of Red Clydeside, directly influenced her actions in the United States and help to explain why she made the decisions she did. William Murdoch, a native-born Scot who worked with Ellen in New Bedford, is probably another example of the influence of Red Clydeside in the United States. And, I suspect that they are but the tip of the iceberg, as several other Scottish-born activists can be found in both Passaic and New Bedford. Ellen’s life story clearly supports the idea that to fully understand immigrant workers, we must research their lives in both their native and their adopted homes. By doing so, we begin to understand the multitude of connections that can be found in comparing life in different countries. The numerous connections between working class life and the textile industries in Scotland, England and the United States provide an excellent example.

With respect to Ellen’s activities in the U.S., I was struck by the failure of labor historians to recognize the group I call the Passaic Radicals and the connections between the textile strikes in Passaic, New Bedford and Gastonia. In almost all of the research associated with these events, scholars focused their attention on an individual strike, making few if any connections to the other two events. It is as if activists suddenly materialized at the start of a strike and disappeared at the end. This is a significant oversight, and it may be one of the most important findings of this thesis. During these three confrontations, Ellen matured from an anonymous weaver into a leading labor activist. In Passaic, she stopped being an observer and began working for change. During the long and difficult campaigns in Passaic and New Bedford, she honed her leadership skills, preparing herself for her most important role – co-director of the Gastonia strike. There she proved herself to be a very effective
leader, ultimately leaving North Carolina as a battle-weary veteran of the American labor movement.

An exploration of the three strikes also offers insight into different regions of the United States, each with a well developed textile industry. The companies that owned the various mills were equally diverse – from local ownership in New Bedford, to national ownership in Gastonia, to international ownership in Passaic. Textile companies in all three communities made concerted efforts to prevent their workers from organizing. In Passaic, it was by intentionally attracting a highly diverse, immigrant labor force. In New Bedford, it was by recognizing and negotiating with a select group of native-born, skilled workers and then using these skilled workers as a wedge against the mass of unskilled immigrant workers. In Gastonia, the only region with a homogenous group of workers, mill owners isolated workers in paternalistic mill villages, as the mill owners of Paisley had also done, restricting opportunities to improve conditions or escape. They also used racism, dividing black and white, as a way of preventing workers from uniting against the abuses of mill owners. This “divide and conquer” approach was similar to the ethic division encouraged by mill managers in the northern textile cities, and the religious divide that often separated Catholic and Protestant workers in Glasgow.

In all three strikes, local police used force, often violent, to control and break the strike. Official law enforcement agencies augmented their numbers with vigilante groups drawn from local organizations associated with the mill owners and the local business community. In some cases, these individuals were nothing more than hired thugs. These groups, especially in Gastonia, intimidated striking workers and increased the level of violence. National Guard troops supported local law enforcement in New Bedford and Gastonia. In New Jersey, the governor declined to
supply guardsmen, although Passaic officials requested them. This was a common practice in labor disputes. In both New Bedford and Gastonia, militia forces proved ineffective in protecting individuals or property, or in ending the strike. Interestingly, in Gastonia, when National Guardsmen were sent home, violent acts by mill-controlled special deputies increased dramatically.

Throughout all three strikes, the news media played a central role. Local newspapers tended to support the mill owners blindly. Larger regional newspapers outside the striking community provided more objective coverage. National and international news coverage, especially in Passaic, tended to support the strikers. In Gastonia, where a small number of activists were ultimately convicted of conspiracy to murder the local police chief, their fate might have been far worse if the national and international news media had not covered the trials.

Local religious leaders tended to support the perspective of their congregations, particularly those who provided financial support to their church. Only in Passaic and New Bedford, where most of the striking workers were immigrant Catholics, was a strong voice raised from the churches in support of the workers. Although opposed to communism, several Catholic clergy actively spoke out in support of the strikers. Most Protestant ministers either turned a blind eye to the workers or actively supported the mill owners.

As for the unskilled textile workers, all suffered from severe economic deprivation. Their low wages contributed to numerous problems, especially those associated with lack of proper diet, housing, medical care, education and economic opportunity. The southern workers were by far the most disadvantaged. Their poverty reflected the region as a whole. As for the willingness of the workers to heed
the messages of communism and unionism, clearly immigrant workers were far more receptive than were the native-born workers.

With respect to the more established labor organizations – the American Federation of Labor and its member unions – it almost universally failed to recognize the opportunity that a united labor force offered. In other parts of the world, including Ellen’s native Scotland, organized labor became a strong, united voice for the workers, often developing, at least for important periods of time, into effective political organizations. Despite similar efforts in the United States, a national labor party has never risen to power in the U.S.

Ellen witnessed the conflict between skilled and unskilled worker during World War I in Scotland, the rise of the Labour Party in Great Britain, and she fought for a unified voice for American workers. Unfortunately for her, and many other American workers of the time, their strongest outlet for protest was the communist labor movement, a group that was destroyed by the propaganda of American capitalism and the international power politics of Joseph Stalin and the rise of the Soviet Union. This helps to explain why Ellen retreated into silence in the early 1930s and why her contributions to U.S. labor history were invisible for so many years. In the United States, communism was positioned as the archenemy of capitalism. As such, there was no room for a sympathetic view of communist labor activists. This wall of silence began to crumble in the 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the end of the Cold War, but American scholarship that presents a sympathetic view of workers such as Ellen is still clearly a minority perspective. I believe that the international perspective afforded by the transatlantic University of Aberdeen/University of North Carolina at Charlotte postgraduate program allowed
me to develop a more accurate interpretation of individuals within the communist workers movement in the United States during this period.

Ellen’s life story offers the often ignored human side of the communist workers’ movement in the United States during the 1920s. Ellen was very different from the traditionally accepted view of American communists as atheistic and sinister individuals committed to the violent overthrow of the government. Ellen’s sincerity and idealism are evident in her words and actions. Concern for the workers, especially women and immigrants, was a top priority throughout her activist career. Her later silence is a vivid example of the isolation and fear that activists of her time were often forced to endure as the price for participation in the fight for worker rights.7

Finally, I think it is important to note my own personal observations with respect to Ellen and this reconstruction of her life. I have spent more than three years of my own life searching for every available scrap of evidence pertinent to her life. During that period, I traveled to the communities in which she lived and worked. I searched countless documents related to her life, the world in which she lived, and the events in which she was a participant. I communicated with her surviving relatives in Scotland, the United States and Canada. I tried to understand how the world might have appeared to Ellen by drawing upon the lives of individuals whom I believe influenced her life, the events that swirled around her, and the memories of those who knew her. As a result, I believe that I began to experience the unique bond that often develops between biographer and subject, because, while I never met Ellen, I know more about her than any other living human being. There are times, when I look at the photograph of Ellen8 sitting on my desk, that I honestly believe that I can feel the intensity of her dark brown eyes. At such moments, I believe that I can sense what
she must have been thinking at some of the important moments in her life. It is
difficult to explain, totally unscientific I admit, but it is real.

Looking back at the past three years, there are several events that stand out in
my memory. They include the first photograph I found of Ellen, the first time I saw
the Loray Mill, my trip to Barrhead, the evening I spent at the Whitworth Heritage
Museum in Lancashire, walking past the school at St. Nicholas Roman Catholic
Church in Passaic, and the evening I found Ellen’s grave in Lodi. Beyond this, there
were the connections I was able to make with Ellen’s surviving relatives and the
caregiver who assisted Ellen’s husband in the final years of his life.

As I explained in the introduction to this thesis, I believe that the experiences
of the biographer, in researching and reconstructing the life of the subject, are relevant
because they offer the reader a more comprehensive understanding of the work.
Through an understanding of these experiences, the reader is offered valuable insights
into the research process, including connections between scholarship and imagination,
and the empathy a researcher develops for the subject. For these reasons, I have
added these final comments. This section is for the scholars who attempt a working
class biography in the future, because I believe it will help to demonstrate that amid
the countless blind alleys that must be searched there are moments of great joy and
satisfaction. This section was also written because it provides the opportunity for me
to express my own personal perspective of Ellen and because I believe these events
deserve to be recorded.

The first image I found of Ellen was in Vera Buch Weisbord’s autobiography,
*A Radical Life*. Ellen was standing with Vera, Albert Weisbord and Fred Beal outside
the union headquarters in Gastonia during the Loray strike. One must ask the
question, “why is a picture so important?” Is it our twenty-first century perspective
that demands visual connections to make events real? Would Ellen or her contemporaries have needed pictures? I suspect that pictures may actually have been more important to individuals in the past, because while newspapers and magazines of the time were using more photographs, they were still more of a novelty, as compared with our world in which we are bombarded with visual images. Regardless, that first photograph suddenly made Ellen’s life more than simply words on a page; she started to become a real person. The day that the Gastonia picture was taken, Ellen was dressed in the style of the 1920s, with a “Flapper’s” hat pulled down over her ears. The expression on her face and her position in the group seem to demonstrate a shyness, a reserve that became clearer to me as I pieced together the events of her later years. It also appeared to convey a sense of friendly whimsy and childish energy that Vera mentions in her own descriptions of Ellen, a part of her personality that seemed to disappear as she grew older, except perhaps for moments when she was with her husband or her brother David Dawson. Comparing this photo with others taken before and after, Ellen’s nose appears swollen, perhaps as the result of a confrontation with local police or vigilantes. Ellen talked about such violent confrontations in her speeches. According to Vera’s account, the women strikers and strike leaders were attacked more than once during the Loray strike. For me, that apparently swollen nose was a mark of Ellen’s courage and determination. It appeared as a mark of the warrior inside her, and is evidence of the violence that Ellen and her associates faced almost daily.

Gastonia was a dangerous place in 1929, and the first time I saw the Loray Mill is a day that I will also long remember. I had read about the strike, seen pictures of the mill during those turbulent weeks. I had also heard that Loray was once promoted, at least locally, as one the largest textile mills in the world.10 Even with all
that, I was not fully prepared for my first encounter with this dark, sinister structure, squatting on a small hill, surrounded by abandoned streets and dilapidated mill houses. I felt a real sense of uneasiness as I parked my car and walked up to the main gate, where strikers had once walked the picket lines. Gazing through the chain link to the spot where the National Guard once pitched their tents, I recalled the early confrontations between workers and the police. Standing there, alone, looking up into the darkened windows of this silent mill, I tried to imagine what it would have been like to have been a worker in such a place, this looming structure that seemed more like a prison than a workplace.

Some months later, I had an opportunity to tour the ground floor of the Loray Mill. The machinery was gone from the enormous rooms, rooms where workers spent twelve hours a day, six days a week. The floor was littered with scraps of peeling paint, puddles of rainwater blown into the building through the broken windows, and the waste of rodents that hide in the hollows of this industrial ruin. I will confess to a sense of relief at leaving the building, a feeling of liberation. It must have been the same feeling that workers had at the end of their shift. Today, there is an effort to convert the Loray Mill into a mixed-use center with a small shopping mall with a variety of housing units. Personally, I have very mixed emotions about Loray. Ideally, it should be converted into a textile history museum, but such a course of action seems unlikely. If it does survive the wrecking ball, perhaps as housing, I doubt if anyone will ever enjoy a good night’s sleep in such a place. The ghosts of Loray will certainly keep them awake.

Unlike my impromptu visit to Loray, my trip to Barrhead was well planned. I secured a copy of a 1913 map of Barrhead from the National Library of Scotland and noted all the key locations from Ellen’s childhood before I left Aberdeen. I took a
train to Glasgow and then another train from Glasgow to Barrhead, along the same route Ellen must have traveled many times. Amid the urban renewal of the late twentieth century, I focused on the buildings that were there when she lived in Scotland and on what this part of the world must have looked like during the early years of the twentieth century. When the train stopped in Nitshill, where Ellen’s maternal grandparents once lived, I began to understand more fully the poverty of the Halford Family and the Irish immigrants of the nineteenth century, as well as the realities of industrial Scotland during World War I. Barrhead was the last stop on the commuter train. Disembarking with me at the railway station was a young woman with a backpack and a bicycle. I thought of Ellen and wondered what this little village must have been like when more people traveled by foot and bike than by motor vehicle.

Even today, in a country of remarkable beauty, Barrhead is not an attractive place. It sits in the middle of a large valley that once, several hundred years earlier, must have been a lovely part of pre-industrial Britain. While there have been significant modifications since the days when Ellen lived in Barrhead, it is still a rather grim place, a community that clearly reflects its working class roots and the workers’ struggles to survive in a rapidly changing world. I began my exploration at a rapid and excited pace, walking up the Paisley Road toward Main Street, along Cross Arthurlie Street in the Craigheads area, toward the area of town where Ellen and her family lived. I passed several Protestant churches and the red stone municipal buildings that were begun in 1900, the same year Ellen was born. Then, as I neared the site of Ellen’s birth, I discovered the old houses had been replaced by an odd collection of retail buildings, joined together several decades earlier as part of a civic development project. Ellen’s birthplace, and most of the places where she and her
family lived, were gone. It was the first of many disappointments I would have that day.

My next destination was St. John’s Roman Catholic Chapel and School. The church, I discovered, had been destroyed by fire in the 1950s and a new modern chapel had been built closer to town. There, a church staff member explained that all the records from Ellen’s days had been destroyed in the fire. I explored the remains of the old churchyard, a few hundred yards down the road. There I found a few broken and crumbling tombstones, none of which were related to Ellen’s family. Beside the churchyard, however, was the old school building, currently being used as the local social services office. The staff kindly listened to an explanation of my research and allowed me to explore the building. It was here, and no where else in Barrhead, that I sensed Ellen’s presence, because it was in these same halls and classrooms that she studied as a child. I visited the new Roman Catholic school, but they were unable to find any record of a student who had been gone for almost ninety years. I walked along the Glasgow Road, where the old Dovecothall branch of the Co-operative Society had once stood, but it had been replaced by a new traffic circle, and so I spent the remainder of the afternoon in the local library, searching through old newspapers and census records. Even the mills along the Levern River had been torn down and replaced with a public park. I found no one who had ever heard of Ellen Dawson, and even those I spoke with about her were only politely interested. Several months later, I would learn that one of Ellen’s nieces lives in a nursing home in Barrhead, but old age has robbed her of her memories. All in all, my trip to Barrhead was a truly frustrating experience. It demonstrated far too convincingly how the lives of working class women and men quickly vanish from our historic
memory – gone without a trace. It was a reminder of the shortness of our existence, the fragility of our efforts, and the smallness of individual human life.

My trip to Lancashire and the Whitworth Heritage Museum proved to be much more productive and evocative for it introduced me to people who shared some of the same roots as Ellen. Taking the train south to Manchester, I knew only that at some point during or after World War I, Ellen’s family had moved to a village near Shawforth, between the larger communities of Bacup and Rochdale. The big mystery was when they arrived and when they left.

Again I planned my trip carefully, spending much of my time visiting several different libraries, collecting bits and pieces about the area and life there during the years immediately following World War I. My final stop was a small museum I had discovered on the internet. It was open only a couple of hours, twice a week. What I discovered was one of the most rewarding moments of my research. The museum was almost like a small private club, managed by a group of gentlemen in their late seventies and early eighties. These old guys have done a remarkable job of collecting a wide range of documents and artifacts pertaining to the area and to the major local events of the past hundred years or so. The museum is clearly their labor of love. They are working class men seeking to preserve the world into which they were born and in which they lived. Their efforts reminded me of the Dylan Thomas poem about old age and raging against the dying of the light. They do not want their world to go gently into the darkness of night.

Once I explained my project, I was immediately taken under the wing of several very friendly fellows. The two most important questions I had about Ellen’s life from that period were about when her family had lived there and about what happened to her father. To answer the first question, I was given the rent books from
the years immediately following the war. Quickly I documented when the family arrived, where they lived, how much they paid in rent and when they left. As for the second question, I was offered the local death records, where I discovered Patrick Dawson. When I explained the significance of my finds, I was told the remarkable history of how these records had survived. Apparently, when the village council closed, all of their records were discarded, simply tossed into the trash. One of the museum members had literally climbed into the dustbin and retrieved them. It was then that I understood how truly fragile our historical memory can be, and how historians are all too often dependent upon pure chance for the information that they are able to collect as they attempt to reconstruct the past.

A somewhat similar experience occurred during my research trips in the United States. During my research in Passaic, I had the opportunity of passing St. Nicholas Church School. St. Nicholas was the church Ellen attended. It was where she was married and where her funeral was held. Looking up at the classroom windows, I found a message from the students, a quotation handwritten on large strips of paper and taped to the windows. “Together we stand as one.” I stopped and wrote the words in my notebook. I could almost hear Ellen – the striking worker, the communist labor leader – speaking these words. The church is now Hispanic, the priest delivers his sermons to an immigrant congregation in English and Spanish, but the ideals of the Passaic workers of 1926, knowingly or unknowingly, lived on in that simple phrase. I knew Ellen would have smiled if she had been with me that day, just as I smiled when I read those words. We both understood that while individual workers may be forgotten, the ideals that made them strong continued to live. For me, however, the emotional climax of my search for Ellen came on the eve of what would have been her 103rd birthday. By pure chance it was the day I found her grave. It was
a bitterly cold and cloudy day in mid-December. As the light of day faded beyond the working class homes of Lodi, New Jersey, I walked through St. Nicholas Cemetery for more than an hour, searching for the word Dawson or Kanki among the seemingly endless parade of grave stones. Finding Ellen’s grave was one of the personal goals I set for myself when I began this project. Finally, just when I had given up hope of finding her grave and had started back toward my car, the word Dawson suddenly appeared. It proved to be the combined graves of four Dawson women – Ellen, her mother and two of her sisters. I stood in front of her grave, silently, for several minutes, my lips so numb from the cold I could barely speak. Finally, I introduced myself. “Hello, Ellen,” I said, my voice choking with a sudden, unexpected surge of emotion. “I’m David McMullen. I’m your biographer.” For a moment I could not speak any more, my words were caught in my throat, as tears began to swell from behind my eyes. It seemed a bit foolish, speaking to the grave of a woman I never met, a woman about whom I knew so much and yet so very little. Then and there I promised Ellen that she would not be forgotten.

If I could rewrite history, our paths would have crossed in life, we would have had at least one opportunity to sit down together, to get to know each other, to talk about her life. I suspect that is a common fantasy among biographers. Yet we came so close. She died in Florida, a few dozen miles from where I was born. Her husband died in the same town where I was born. I suspect her husband and I lived only a few miles from each other during the mid-1980s. We may have passed each other in a local shopping mall, or sat at adjoining tables in a restaurant. I will never know.

During my research, I was fortunate enough to establish contact with several of Ellen’s surviving relatives.12 At first, I was surprised at how little they knew about Ellen’s radical activities, but the more I grew to understand Ellen, the more I was not
surprised at all. Ellen was a private woman who seldom let down her guard, except with those who were closest to her, such as her brother David. I believe she was a proud woman, who would not have enjoyed admitting her failure. I believe she loved Scotland, but like countless Scots before and since, she recognized that economic prosperity was more readily available in other parts of the world. And, I think she loved her adopted country.

Perhaps the saddest moment of my research was when I spoke to the woman who had cared for Louis Kanki, Ellen’s husband, in the final years of his life. Despite thirty years of marriage, Ellen’s memory had been completely erased from his life. The caretaker found not a single mention of Ellen in all of Louis’ remaining possessions. He never spoke of Ellen in those final years, although he shared other memories of his earlier life.

Today, I am reminded of the words of another American communist, the activist and folk singer Pete Seeger. For me, his words offer an insightful conclusion to my account of Ellen’s life. He said, “Don’t mourn a fighter who made a mistake and lost, but mourn the suckers who never bothered putting up a fight.” Above all else, Ellen, the radical activist of the 1920s, was a fighter. She was as brave and courageous as any woman or man who ever lived. She should not be mourned, but neither should she be forgotten. Ellen Dawson should be remembered. That is why I wrote this thesis.
Viewing the film at the Library of Congress in Washington, I believe I saw Ellen at work in the strike headquarters, but unlike leading male activists, she was not identified. Interestingly, Vera criticizes Beal for remaining at the union headquarters with his bodyguards while the women lead marches and picket lines. In Beal’s account, he presents himself as the most important activist, yet local news accounts from the time tend to support Vera’s perspective.

Philip Foner’s two volume history of women workers in the United States, published in 1979 and 1980, is still the only comprehensive study available. Despite criticism of Foner’s work, criticism that was often motivated by opposition to his political beliefs rather than a serious academic evaluation of his work, I found his research, when compared to primary source materials associated with the Passaic, New Bedford and Gastonia strikes, to be accurate.

Philip Foner is the only historian I have found who recognized this connection.

In the years after World War I, the Labour Party became a major force in Glasgow and throughout Britain.

It is clear that American capitalism was supported in its campaign by government at the national, state and local levels, and by representatives of the skilled workers.

Other historians have encountered striking workers from the period who were not only silent, but who had no conscious memory of events in which they were active participants.

The picture is of Ellen as a young woman, probably taken shortly after her arrival in the United States in 1921. It is the first photograph in the small collection of photos that I have included with this thesis.

This photograph is also included in the photo section of this thesis.

Loray was certainly one of the largest mills in the Southeastern United States. It was, however, comparable in size to numerous mills I have seen in both Lancashire and in New England. The claims, I suspect, were more the result of local boosterism than of fact.

The building now houses the local community theatre.

These relatives are all individually acknowledged at the beginning of this thesis.

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