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. Mary
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 and was closer to St. John’s Chapel. As Roman Catholics, the Dawson children attended the Roman Catholic school 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. 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. Two other Dawsons 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.

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. 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. 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.” 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.\(^\text{46}\) 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.\(^\text{47}\) 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.\(^\text{48}\) 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.”\(^{51}\) 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.\(^{52}\) Margaret’s husband John had emigrated to the U.S. in 1914 from Paisley\(^{53}\) 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.\(^{54}\) 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,\(^{55}\) 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.\textsuperscript{61}

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.\textsuperscript{62}

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.\textsuperscript{63} 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,\textsuperscript{64} and Edward and his wife Margaret also joined the family in America in the early 1960s.\textsuperscript{65}
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.  

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. 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 Russian 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. 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.” 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.” 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.\(^3\)

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.”\(^4\)

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.\(^5\)

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.\(^6\) 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.”97 Her arrest, according to one Charlotte newspaper, “caused a wild commotion among the strikers attending the meeting, but Miss Dawson herself seemed little perturbed.”98 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.”99

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.”100

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”101 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.”102 The charges were completely fallacious. Ellen had entered the United States on May 9, 1921103
and received her U.S. citizenship in the summer of 1928, after living in the country for more than seven years.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{105} Two days later, the Charlotte newspaper ran a photograph of Ellen in jail.\textsuperscript{106} The headline above the photograph read, “STILL BEHIND BARS.”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{108} On April 25, she was once again arrested, this time with Carl Reeve, because they were identified as the picket line leaders.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.” 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.’”

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 fortunate 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}
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 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 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.

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.”

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.


*The Glasgow Herald*, December 14, 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 1906, 1922; Hughson, *Barrhead and Neilston* (Zaltbommel/Netherlands: European Library, 1985), p. 50.

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.

*General Registry of the Poor*, Paisley, Record 4638.

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.

General Registry of Scotland: Births 1896.

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.

General Registry of Scotland: Births 1905.

General Registry of Scotland: Deaths 1906.

General Registry of Scotland: Births 1907.

General Registry of Scotland: Deaths 1909.

SS Baltic Manifest, Oct. 22, 1922.

Renfrew County Voter Registrations, 1913-14 and 1914-1915. Patrick’s last name appears as Dawsey, rather than Dawson, but the address is 330 Main Street, Barrhead, where the family lived at the time.

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.

General Registry of Scotland: Deaths 1917.

This period of labor unrest will be discussed in the third chapter – “Red Clydeside.”

Patrick Dawson letter.

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.”

Whitworth Poor Rate, 1919, p. 29.


Whitworth Poor Rate, 1919, p. 29.

Patrick Dawson letter.

SS Cedric manifest, May 9, 1921.

SS Caledonia manifest, June 22, 1914. The date of Margaret’s crossing is unknown.

The transatlantic crossing and the Ellis Island experience will be discussed in the fourth chapter – “Migration.”

The New York Times, May 9, 1921.

SS Cedric Manifest, May 9, 1921.

Patrick Dawson letter.

SS Columbia manifest, August 7, 1921.

Patrick Dawson letter.

Ibid.

Whitworth Urban Sanitary Authority, June 30, 1922; the health risks of working in the foundry will be discussed in the second chapter – “Barrhead.”

General Registry of Scotland: Deaths 1922.

SS Baltic manifest, October 22, 1922.


Marie Chack e-mail, May 22, 2003.

In the 1920s, there were more than thirty different languages spoken in Passaic. The community and the local textile industry will be discussed in chapter five – “Passaic.”

Ship manifests for SS Cedric, May 9, 1921; SS Columbia, August 7, 1921; and SS Baltic, October 22, 1922.


This strike will be discussed in detail in the Chapter 5 – “Passaic.”

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
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.”

*Daily Worker*, September 12, 1928.

Ibid.

Ibid, September 14, 1928.

Ibid.

New Leader*, October 6, 1928.

*Daily Worker*, March 9, 1929

Communist Party USA files, Reel 104, dilo 1367.

American Civil Liberties Union weekly news bulletin #333, December 13, 1928.

At the time, the U.S. Immigration Service was part of the U.S. Department of Labor.

Ashley Scrapbook. The unnamed official was probably Charles G. Wood, U.S. Commissioner of Reconciliation and a former New Bedford newspaper editor.

Lovestone was the head of the Communist Party in the United States at the time. Of the 104 delegates to the convention, 95 were his supporters.

The FBI File on Ellen Dawson (February 25, 1943).

The Loray Mill Strike of 1929 in Gastonia, North Carolina will be discussed more fully in chapter seven – “Gastonia.”

Many attribute the infamy of the strike simply to the involvement of the communists, however, James Leloudis believes that it was the communist commitment to racial equality that made the strike so significant, because it brought the question of race to the forefront. Certainly the response of the community to the strike was very similar to the response of many southern communities to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Leloudis make these comments during a presentation entitled “Looking Ahead: The Story Continues,” a presentation at a public symposium commemorating the Loray Mill strike, June 12, 2004, Gastonia, North Carolina.

*Charlotte Observer*, April 5 & 7, 1929.

Loss of hearing was especially common among weavers. Ellen’s deafness was note by Vera Buch (Weisbord) in her book, *A Radical Life*, p. 207.

*Gastonia Daily Gazette*, April 19, 1929.

I have found no record of Ellen being involved in labor disputes in Paterson, New Jersey, although it is possible since she lived in the area.


The union headquarters had been destroyed the night before by a gang of masked vigilantes.

*Charlotte Observer*, April 19, 1929.

Ibid.

Ibid.

The woman was listed in the indictment as Anna Bresnak.


*SS Cedric* Manifest, May 9, 1921.

ACLU weekly news bulletin #333, December 13, 1928. Multiple attempts to secure a copy of Ellen Dawson’s file from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service under the Freedom of Information Act have been unsuccessful.

*Charlotte Observer*, April 19, 1929.

Ibid.

This photograph appears in Georgianna’s book, *The Strike of ’28*. He attributes it to a New Bedford newspaper, however, it seems more likely that the photograph was taken while she was in the Mecklenburg County Jail by a photographer from the *Charlotte Observer*.

*Charlotte Observer*, April 20, 1929.
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.


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 Fight for Civil Liberty 1930-1931*, ACLU Archives.

The Comintern was the communist agency, based in Soviet Russia, which connected the various national parties throughout the world. It was one of the forces Stalin used to gain control of communism worldwide.

Morgan, *A Covert Life*, p. 103-104.

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*, April 20, May 21, November 22, 1930 & April 25 & May 9, 1931.

St. Nicholas Death Register, 1936, p. 2.

Burial card, St. Nicholas Cemetery, Deed 1288.

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.
St. Nicholas Cemetery Records, Deed 1288, Section M., Lot 734.
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.