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 Brookesbank¹
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.\textsuperscript{12}

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.\textsuperscript{13} “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.’”\textsuperscript{14}
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-fourth (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.\(^{18}\)

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.”\(^{19}\) 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\textsuperscript{24} 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,”\textsuperscript{25} 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.”\textsuperscript{26} 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.”\textsuperscript{27}

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.”\textsuperscript{28} 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. 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.

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
“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.”\(^{40}\) 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.\(^{41}\)

On February 23, 1926, the German owners of Forstmann & Huffman closed their New Jersey mills and left the country.\(^{42}\) 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.  

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.”

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.”

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.”

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.’”
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."⁶¹

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.’”⁶² 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.⁶³

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, 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.”

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... 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.
2 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.
3 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.
5 *Christian Century*, August 5, 1926. This article provides one of the most comprehensive and insightful descriptions of Passaic during the 1920s, providing clear pictures of the two communities within Passaic -- the haves and the have-nots.
6 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.
8 Weisbord was the leading organizer in the 1926 Passaic textile strike. He will be discussed more fully later in this chapter.
11 Amidon, Beulah, “Old-Fashioned Strike.” *Survey,* from Murphy, *The Passaic Textile Strike of 1926*, p. 63. Murphy noted that “Miss Amidon, the daughter of a prominent federal judge, was a frequent writer on social problems and the plight of the working class.”
12 *Christian Century*, August 5, 1926.
13 U.S. Census of Passaic, NJ, 1930; Polk’s City Directory of Passaic, 1929, p. 128.
14 *Christian Century*, August 5, 1926.
15 *Christian Century*, August 5, 1926.
17 Ibid, p. 87.
18 A workers’ committee from the Botany Mill, which included Deak and probably Ellen, approached the AFL’s United Textile Workers Union for help prior to the arrival of the communist organizers. The UTW refused to help the unskilled workers. This is discussed more fully at the end of this chapter.
19 Ellen Dawson’s FBI File, (February 25, 1943. Photocopy obtained by David Lee McMullen under the Freedom of Information Act.).
21 *Revolutionary Age*, November 1, 1929.
24 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.
26 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.
27 *Christian Century*, August 5, 1926.
28 Ibid.
29 *Daily Worker,* October 23, 1925.
30 Ibid, October 28, 1925. Benjamin Gitlow claimed Weisbord was simply a puppet who was totally controlled by the communist party. This will be discussed near the close of this chapter.
31 *Christian Century*, August 5, 1926.
32 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.
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.