Chapter Six – New Bedford

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

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

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

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

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

At the same point in time, the interior communities of New England, financed
by an ever more sophisticated financial empire built on the fortunes of shipping
families, began to develop America’s first major textile center – Lowell,
Massachusetts. Initially, the mills of Lowell sought to escape the horrors of the
British factory system, employing the daughters of New England farmers to run the
looms in an environment that was half finishing school and half factory. During the
following decades, as large numbers of immigrants began to arrive in the United
States, the New England mill girls were replaced by immigrant workers willing to
work longer hours for less money. Soon, the New England textile system, which had
sought to escape the abusive factory system of Great Britain, became nothing more
than a mirror image. Over the next two decades, textile production in New England
rose dramatically, making it America’s leading textile region for the remainder of the
century. “U.S. cotton textile production more than doubled between 1840 and 1860.
By the start of the (American) Civil War the cotton textile industry dominated the
cities and towns of New England with 600 cotton textile mills throughout the
region.” This rapid growth was fueled by the expansion of slavery and the cotton
growing plantation system of the Deep South. After the Civil War, and the end of
slavery, the South began building its own textile mills, finally surpassing Northern
production in the 1920s.
As for New Bedford, the community’s first successful mill, Wamsutta Mills, was chartered in 1846, the same year the town was incorporated. Within twenty-five years, an initial investment of $60,000 had grown to $2 million, as the mill produced twenty million yards of cloth a year and paid a steady dividend of six percent to its shareholders. Between 1881 and 1914, 32 mills were incorporated in New Bedford. They employed 30,000 workers and those “merchant families that had built their wealth through whaling and now owned the textile mills continued to dominate New Bedford’s finance and commerce.”

It was during this time that the whaling industry in New Bedford began a rapid decline. Where once whale oil had been an important source of fuel, it was replaced by the oil fields of Pennsylvania. Where New Bedford had once been a community of “ship-building, sailmaking, spar making, rigging, ropemaking, cooperage, ship blacksmithing and the making of ship bread” for provision, it was transformed into one of the world’s leading centers for the manufacturing of fine cotton goods. It was not, however, until 1925, three years before the textile strike of 1928, that the last whaling ship sailed from New Bedford harbor.

The transition from whaling to textiles changed the town dramatically, transforming it from a small seaport community of 40,000 individuals in 1880 to an industrial center of 120,000 in 1920. This growth was primarily the result of immigrant textile workers – from England, Ireland, Germany, French-speaking Canada, Poland, Syria and Portugal. Only fourteen percent of New Bedford’s population was foreign-born in 1865, but that climbed to more than forty percent by 1900. Although not as diverse as Passaic, New Bedford had the same international flavor. Here too, the native born residents – mill owners and skilled workers – felt threatened by the growing number of immigrant workers who filled the ranks of the
unskilled. This divide was one of the most significant challenges faced by the labor activists, such as Ellen, who came to New Bedford to organize the unskilled workers.

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

These were the circumstances when, on April 9, 1928, the day after Easter, the New Bedford Cotton Manufacturers’ Association, an organization of all the New Bedford textile mills, announced a ten percent wage cut for all workers, skilled and unskilled, effective the following Monday, April 16. Presenting their decision to the community in a full page advertisement in the two local newspapers, the mill owners cited operating costs, competition and work rules that they said placed New
Bedford mills at a disadvantage with other New England cotton mills. “It should be obvious that New Bedford manufacturers, paying the old (higher) wage scale, limited to a 48-hour week and restricted as to night work, must be doing business under serious handicap…New Bedford cotton mills have struggled under these unfair conditions for a long time. It is now essential that they get their production costs nearer those of their competitors if they are to continue to operate.”¹⁴ This newspaper advertisement was signed by all twenty-seven local textile mills.

New Bedford Mayor Charles F. Ashley,¹⁵ a savvy politician who served for more than forty years, from 1891 to 1936, made an effort to delay the wage cut. Mayor Ashley was a local businessman, not a mill owner, but as Georgianna noted, “In his years as mayor, he (Ashley) had expanded into real estate and other businesses, owing much of his success to the mill owners. In 1920, when he claimed that his office as mayor kept him so busy that his business interests had suffered, the mill owners held a dinner at the Wamsutta Club and presented Ashley with a check for $20,000 (about $150,000 at today’s [1993] prices to cover any business losses he incurred as mayor.”¹⁶

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

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

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

It was also during this week before the ten percent wage cut began that the Communists took notice of the pending strike. William Murdoch and Fred Beal were
on a train from Boston to Manchester, New Hampshire. Like Ellen, Murdoch was a Scot. He was born in Inverness around 1900 and went to work as an apprentice in a machinist shop when he was in his early teens, but with the start of World War I he soon enlisted. After the war, when unemployment in Scotland skyrocketed, he emigrated to Providence, Rhode Island. There he worked in various local textile mills and became involved in labor organizing activities. In late 1931, after the New Bedford strike, Murdoch was deported, as were several other leaders of the strike. Beal was a native New Englander, four years older than Murdoch. He started work as a bobbin boy at the age of 14 in 1910 at the Crescent Worsted Mill in his hometown of Lawrence, Massachusetts. His job was to keep the bobbin racks filled on 8 frames, each frame having 208 bobbins. In 1912, at the age of 16, he joined in the famous “Bread and Roses” strike – “a violent confrontation over a wage cut…The strike attracted national attention when the National Guard attacked a crowd of women and children…The strikers won their demands when…the city’s major mill owner was implicated in a dynamite attack.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As one newspaper noted editorially, “The preachers assured the strikers that every man has a moral right to a living wage. New Bedford, the aristocrat of American mill cities, is fighting for…the one thing which can preserve its aristocracy, the wage scale of its superior craftsmen.”

The term superior craftsmen clearly denotes the skilled workers, not the unskilled.

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

Loss of their meeting hall did not stop the strikers. They quickly organized “an open air meeting on a lot between…garages in the rear of Scott street on the site where “Big Bill” Haywood spoke in 1912…An impromptu platform of some wooden horses and a big iron slab with a small table was soon in place for the speakers, and when the word was spread round nearly 1,000 gathered at the lot.”

Ann Craton, who was one of the speakers that day, showed how adept the strike
leaders were at taking a negative and turning it into a positive. She told the crowd, “We thank the city authorities for giving us such a big meeting. They don’t know that everything they do like this makes us stronger. Why, we don’t blame the policemen, they are only doing their duty. We do understand they have to obey orders. You all have behaved beautifully. When the strike came all you people were willing to stay out. Be peaceful, be calm, and don’t get excited about fire escapes.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The local courts were unable to keep up with the flood of arrests that were being made by the police. On July 31, “In the Third District Court the cases of 225 were disposed of today and tonight…the court continuing in session to clear the
docket. Ellen Dawson, Manuel Sylvia, and Marion Bothelho received three month sentences and the rank and file of the pickets two months each.”

Two days later, in the court of Judge Frank Milliken, Ellen was sentenced to an additional twelve months. The *Daily Worker* reported, the court interpreted mass picketing as rioting and that eighty-four strikers were sentenced that morning, including “Elizabeth Donnelly (sic), Jackson Wales, the Harvard student aiding the strikers, and Eli Keller, the general organizer of the Textile Mills Committee, Amy Schecter, press agent for the Workers International Relief, received a sentence of two months.”

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

The speed-up affected unskilled workers far more than it affected skilled workers.

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

One of the more interesting events during August was a Sunday afternoon picnic at Sylvan Grove, attended by more that 6,000 men, women and children. The event was organized by Ellen, under the banner of Workers’ International Relief, with
the assistance of a committee of forty striking workers. The afternoon included races for the boys, women and fat men. There were scrub ball games and numerous speakers, including Weisbord and Keller. The event ended with “a monster parade around the field…headed by the Tuna Portuguese Orchestra.”\textsuperscript{85} Clearly, Ellen drew upon her childhood experiences at the children’s field days sponsored by the Barrhead Cooperative.

Ellen had added the responsibility of directing the WIR to her other responsibilities when William Schwarzfeller left New Bedford. She continued this until Eva Stone arrived from Boston at the end of August. The importance of Ellen’s contribution as a strike organizer was so significant that the communist leadership asked that she be released from the WIR assignment so that she could concentrate her energies on organizing women workers in New Bedford. In a report on Work Among Women, the leadership noted, “the work (in New Bedford) has not been carried on systematically. Just one council of working women has been organized. There is no special committee responsible for this work. Ellen Dawson who has been sent up for this work by the Party, is occupied with many other duties. She is taking care of clerical work for the Workers International Relief office.” The committee asked that Ellen “be released from all other work and be assigned to work amongst women.”\textsuperscript{86}

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Deportation was a very serious threat. It was one of the most effective means the United States government had for eliminating radical labor activists who challenged the established system. It should be noted that at the time, the U.S. Immigration Service was part of the U.S. Department of Labor. Deportation was also
an intimidating force that helped to silence other immigrant activists who remained in the country. In fact, an unnamed official of the Labor Department was quoted in a New Bedford newspaper saying that he “would deport the Red Agitators.”

In New Bedford alone, at least three of the strike leaders were ultimately deported, including one women who was forced out of the country more than twenty years after the strike. Augusto Pinto, one of the Portuguese leaders of the New Bedford strike, who worked with Ellen, was deported in October, 1931, when the U.S. Immigration Service “forcibly placed (Pinto) on a ship bound from Providence to Lisbon. When he arrived in President Salazar’s Portugal, a fascist dictatorship where militant labor leaders were not welcome, Pinto was sent to prison in Cape Verde and reportedly died en route, sending a shudder through New Bedford’s Portuguese community. During the middle of the strike, Pinto had been quoted as saying, “There is no liberty in this country, just a statue.” For Augusto Pinto, that statement was most certainly true.

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

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

The case of the local Textile Mill Committee strike leaders, including Pinto, came to trial in New Bedford on March 6, 1929. Superior Court Judge David Dillion released the defendants, saying: “Such a disposition will end the recent industrial warfare so far as the court is concerned, invite industrial peace and encourage the repair of the damage already done to the defendants and to almost everyone else in New Bedford.”¹⁰⁸ As for the leaders from outside New Bedford, their trial came to court on March 12. The *Daily Worker* described it as, “A deliberate attempt to ‘get’ the leading figures in the New Bedford textile strike.” Included among the eleven leaders were Ellen, Murdoch, Beal, Schecter and Rubinstein.¹⁰⁹ This group was also freed and the *Daily Worker* reported that: “Preparations are under way for a huge mass celebration of the freeing of the workers. The celebrations will be in the form of a mass meeting to be held this Sunday afternoon, in the large Bristol Arena and is to be held under the auspices of the New Bedford locals of the N.T.W. In addition to the local leaders, leaders of the national union and nationally known labor leaders will address the meeting.”¹¹⁰

The mass demonstration in celebration of the newly freed leaders of the National Textile Workers’ Union clearly indicates that the group had not given up the fight for improving the lives of New England’s unskilled textile workers. This is supported by the fact that a week after the celebration, several of the newly freed activists were working to organize workers in several New England textile communities, including New Bedford, Lawrence and Easthampton, Massachusetts, and Providence, Rhode Island. Ellen was in Fall River, Massachusetts, trying
organize textile workers there. She was unaware that in less than a week she would be headed south to North Carolina to face a new, and decidedly different challenge.\textsuperscript{111}

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

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


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

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


New Bedford’s first textile mill, the New Bedford Steam Mill Company, founded in 1845, failed six years later.


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

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

The Morning Mercury, April 10, 1928.

Ashley Scrapbook.


Ibid, p. 49.

Ibid, p. 74.

Evening Standard, July 22, 1928.


Evening Standard, April 18, 1928.

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

Georgianna, The Strike of ’28, pp. 82-83.

In Britain, speed-up was known by several different terms, including scientific management and Taylorism, and in the southern U.S. it was known as the stretch-out.


Morning Mercury, April 18, 1928.

Ashley Scrapbook.

Morning Mercury, April 18, 1928.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

In The Strike of '28, Georgianna spells her name Donnelly. However, local newspaper accounts from the time of the strike spell it Donneley. I have elected to use this spelling.

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

Evening Standard, April 24-25, 1928.

Communist Party USA Files, Reel 104, Dilo 1367.


Vera Buch Weisbord also speaks about the courage of women versus men in her biography, A Radical Life (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).


Evening Standard, May 4, 1928.

Daily Worker, May 17, 1928.

Morning Mercury, April 23, 1928.

Ibid.

Morning Mercury, May 14, 1928.

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

Morning Mercury, May 9, 1928.

Ibid.

Ashley Scrapbook. The newspaper was not identified in the scrapbook.

Morning Mercury, May 28-30, 1928.

Ibid, June 22, 1928.

Georgianna, The Strike of '28, pp. 103-104.

Ashley Scrapbook.

Evening Standard, April 18, 1928.

Morning Mercury, August 3, 1928.

Dilution – using unskilled workers, especial women, to do the job of skilled workers – was discussed in the third chapter – “Red Clydeside.”

Ashley Scrapbook.


Morning Mercury, June 27, 1928.

Morning Mercury, July 2, 1928.

Ibid.

During the strike police rented trucks from local businesses to transport the large number of arrested demonstrators. One of the individuals who rented his truck was A.D. McMullen, a furniture and piano mover.

Ibid.

Morning Mercury, July 2, 1928.

Morning Mercury, July 7, 1928; Ashley Scrapbook. After serving more than a month, guard troops had not been paid for their services, as the mayor and militia officers argued about whether they should be paid by the city or the state.

The U.S. President can also mobilize state militia forces by “federalizing” them. This is usually done only in time of war.

Morning Mercury, July 11, 1928; Ashley Scrapbook.

Morning Mercury, July 14, 1928.

Ibid, July 17, 1928.

Georgianna, The Strike of '28, p. 117.

Ashley Scrapbook.

Morning Mercury, July 24, 1928.

Ibid, July 25, 1928

Ibid.

Ibid, July 31, 1928.

New York Times, August 1, 1928.
Despite its stated commitment to gender equality, women in the communist labor movement were often relegated to secondary assignments. This is just one example.

It is believed that this notation refers to the Tapolcyani case. However, the time frame is not totally clear since the FBI report of Ellen Dawson’s activities ends in 1929 and the transmittal letter accompanying the report is dated February 25, 1943. Despite an appeal, the U.S. Department of Justice has declined to provide additional information.

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