Chapter Seven – Gastonia

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

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

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

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

As for the mills, rather than being located close together, as they were in Northern cities, they were scattered throughout the region. This first generation industrial labor force rented their homes from the mill owner, shopped for food and other goods in a mill store, went to church in a sanctuary built by the mill owner, and listened to the sermons of a minister who was paid, at least partially, by the local mill. Where mill owners in the North had used ethnic diversity as a way of preventing the unionization of their unskilled workers, mill owners in the South isolated their workers and created the same paternalistic communities that the mill
girls of Paisley had begun to rebel against in the early days of the twentieth century. As one sociologist noted, “Southern textile mill towns were…a closed community isolated from the rest of the world. Here the only economic opportunity was work at the mill, the ‘prison,’ ‘sweatshop’ or ‘death hole’ as it was variously known.”

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

While the 1929 Loray Strike was only one of numerous organizing efforts attempted by southern textile workers, this strike attained its unique standing in history because it was the one strike in the South where the workers were represented by a communist labor union, the newly formed National Textile Workers’ Union. The Loray Mill managers, the Gastonia business community and the leaders of the southern textile industry responded to the strike with a massive propaganda campaign against Ellen and her fellow NTWU organizer, Fred Beal. Mill interests followed this war of words with violent vigilante attacks upon union offices and the tent city that housed striking workers and their families. Almost immediately, community leaders began creating a myth about the strike, a myth that helped to foster a long-standing anti-union bias among workers in the region. For decades this anti-union bias effectively prevented southern workers from organizing in any significant numbers.
The foundation for this Loray myth is the belief that the strike was a well-organized conspiracy by international communism to infiltrate the Carolina textile industry, a narrative that was begun during the opening days of the strike. In truth, it was nothing of the sort. The strike was the result of a confluence of forces into which the communist-backed National Textile Workers’ Union was drawn, as much a victim of the strike as were the Loray workers themselves.

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

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

Fred Beal was the first representative of the National Textile Workers’ Union
to go south, when he traveled from New York to Charlotte, North Carolina on a
motorcycle. His account of his initial three months, written several years later,
provide the best record of how the NTWU became involved in the Gastonia strike and
offers insight into how Ellen would have seen the events that unfolded. According to
Beal’s account, he arrived in Charlotte, about twenty-five miles from Gastonia, on
New Year’s Day of 1929. It was his first trip south. Recounting his thoughts as he
climbed off his motorcycle, Beal wrote, “‘so here I am, down South…A new year and
a new place. I wonder what the year will bring.’ But it was an idle thought. I really
did not try to look into the future. If I had, could I ever have foreseen that before the
year was over a district attorney would be picturing my arrival in Charlotte to a jury
as ‘sweeping into the South like a cyclone, like a tornado, to sink his fangs into the
heart and life-blood of the community?’”¹³

Beal spent the next two-and-a-half-months trying to organize textile workers
in Charlotte. In recounting his first attempt to find a job in North Charlotte, Beal
detailed the following response from the owner of a small, local textile mill. “No,
suh, young man, I’d never take on a Yankee or any other ferriner in my mill, ‘n’ that
thar goes I reckon fo’ all the South. They’d put too many strange ideas in the heads
of mill-hands – some nonsense lak workin’ only eight hours a day. Why, I work nine
hours every day ‘n’ I own this here mill. I guess my help should be willin’ to work at
least ‘leven, ‘n’ by the Lord Jesus Christ, they will!” the mill owner said, adding,
“Work never hurt no one. Read yer Bible! It condemned man to hard work forever
because he sinned. But nowadays the ferriners, like those Rooshin Communists are
tearin’ down religion – but they’ll never make headway in the South, because we are
all God-fearin’ people.”¹⁴ While I suspect this response is a composite pieced
together by Beal from several different encounters, it is representative of the
xenophobia common in the South during this period, and of the attitude of southerners
toward a New Englander like Beal. In fact, these comments are light-hearted in
comparison to the propaganda that would be used against Ellen and Beal in Gastonia.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As she had done in New Bedford, Ellen focused on organizing the women. The day Buch arrived in Gastonia, the Charlotte Observer featured a story about the women’s campaign. Written by Cora Harris, daughter of the newspaper’s editor, the story also appeared in the Gastonia Daily Gazette. “If Gastonia has never realized that militant women are within its bounds, it certainly knows it now,” Harris wrote,
explaining how it took her only a few hours “to discover the prominent part that the
Loray mill women are taking in the strike.”31 Harris visited the union headquarters,
interviewed a family of five that lived on less than fourteen dollars a week in a mill
house that had no electricity. She also attended a mass meeting where Ellen was the
featured speaker. Calling Ellen’s remarks “the crowning speech” of the day, Harris
noted how Ellen directed the crowd in singing union songs, such as “Solidarity
Forever.” Ellen told the assembled workers how hundreds of workers had been
arrested in New Bedford, many of them women, and how they sang such songs
together from their prison cells all through the night. In Gastonia, “the strikers were
bursting their throats at the second trial of their new song,” as Ellen “insisted on
getting up more pep!” Ellen “told the strikers that radicalism was caused by
oppression and that foreign workers in the north would not consider working under
such conditions…‘I am surprised to find such conditions where a section boasted of
100 per cent Americanism,’ she said.” Ellen talked about the low wages southern
workers were paid, and how this helped to increase the profits of the mill owners.
“She further urged the women to ‘step out’ and do their bit for there are 60 per cent
women in the textile industry today…she pointed out the various causes why women
should take such a lead…(and she) warned the strikers not to get excited, but
certainly they must not become intimidated. ‘Resort to no violence, come out and
strike and stay on strike and everyone remain solid and we’ll have a 100 percent
victory.’”32

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\textbf{History of Loray Strike}

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paid For By Citizens of Gaston County

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

Examining the rhetoric of the advertisement, it is evident that mill owners were attempting to vilify the union leadership as anti-American, anti-Christian revolutionaries. At a time when lynchings were still common in the South, the
advertisement can easily be interpreted as a call for local citizens to take the law in their own hands. At one point during the Gastonia strike, the Federated Press News Service reported that “Open threats of violence, including lynching, have been levelled (sic) against Organizers Fred Beal, George Pershing and Ellen Dawson.”48

On Thursday, the *Gastonia Daily Gazette* ran another banner headline, “STRIKE SITUATION VERY MUCH BETTER,” with several news articles reporting how the troops had made the streets of Gastonia safe and that strike leaders were promising food and money for striking workers. In addition, a page-one editorial denied any direct connection between the newspaper and Manville-Jenckes. Obviously, at least some individuals within the community voiced criticism of the first ad. The editorial defended the newspaper’s decision to run the first advertisement as simply a normal business transaction for which they were paid the going rate of $80. They also stressed, that “THE GAZETTE WAS HERE FIGHTING THE PEOPLE’S BATTLES BEFORE BEAL WAS BORN, AND WILL BE HERE WHEN BEAL HAS LEFT THE GASTONIA WORKERS HIGH AND DRY AND HAS MOVED ON TO MORE FERTILE FIELDS, AFTER MILKING THIS ONE DRY.”49

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PAID FOR BY CITIZENS OF GASTON COUNTY

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

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

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

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

To the people of Loray mills and law abiding citizens of the community.
Foreign agitators and a few misguided local people are endeavoring to tear down and disrupt the social, moral and business life of our community and it can only lead to serious trouble and want, and the occasion calls for the coolest thinking and best judgement on the part of the people.
Don’t be misled, think carefully of what you are doing.
To the people of our community, you are offered full protection by the loyal and efficient county and city officers.
Those who desire to go about their regular business the company will back to the limit, and are assured of fair and courteous dealings as in the past.
To those who do not wish to continue in our employ. You must understand that you cannot continue to occupy our houses, nor remain on the premises of the company.
Respectfully,
MANVILLE-JENCKES CO.\textsuperscript{52}

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7. ARE MANVILLE AND JENCKES AMERICANS OR FOREIGNERS?

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In response to the shootings, vigilantes raided the tent city, terrorizing the men, women and children living there. Sixty strike supporters were jailed. Beal escaped, but was later arrested in Spartanburg. On June 18, claiming union guards shot first, local prosecutors charged fourteen union people with the murder of Chief Aderholt, including Beal, Buch and Schechter. The subsequent trial drew national and international attention to Gastonia, and was compared to the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti.\textsuperscript{96} A mistrial was declared when the prosecution, borrowing an idea from a contemporary movie,\textsuperscript{97} produced a life-size wax model of the dead Aderholt in the courtroom. Locals believed the shock drove one juror mad. Built secretly in the basement of the courthouse for a cost of $1,000, the wax model explained why janitors had reported seeing the ghost of the police chief in the courthouse during the weeks before the trial.\textsuperscript{98}

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

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

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

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

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

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

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


4 Scotch-Irish is a North American term. In Britain the more commonly used expression is Ulster-Scot. It refers to Scots, mostly from the lowlands, who migrated to Northern Ireland during the 17th Century under the Plantation scheme begun by James VI of Scotland after he took the English throne. When the English landowners began to oppress the Scots in the early 18th Century, the Scots began migrating on to North America. Many of these individuals went south from Pennsylvania after reaching the U.S. Highland Scots were some of the earliest settlers of the Eastern Carolinas. Most of these settlers were yeoman farmers who were forced to move west as the plantations took the area’s more fertile farmland. Contrary to a commonly held belief in the southern United States, Highlanders represented only a small percentage of the total number of Scottish-Americans.

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

6 Pope, *Millhands and Preachers*, pp. 10-11. The Protestant ministers of Gastonia almost universally supported the mill owners. To have spoken out against the mill owners would have cost the minister his job. Unlike the strikes in Passaic and New Bedford, where the immigrant workers were primarily Catholic, and Catholic clergy often supported the workers, the mill workers of Loray were Protestants and received almost no support from their clergy. The one exception was Pentecostal ministers, many of whom worked in the mill during the week.


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10 Hall, *Like a Family*, p. xx-xvi.

11 Peterson, “Introduction,” p. xviii. Although not immediately apparent, race was a central issue of the Loray strike. The racial aspect of the strike will be discussed later in this chapter.


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

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

16 Single women workers were common in the southern textile mills. Ella May Wiggins, the striker killed during the Loray strike, was another example of a mill worker who had been abandoned by her husband.

17 Charlotte Observer, April 5, 1929.

18 Beal, *Proletarian Journey*, p. 120.

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

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


25 Beal, Proletarian Journey, pgs.126-128.
26 Ibid, p. 129.
27 Revolutionary Age, November 1, 1929.
29 The quotation is from Buch.
30 Salmond, Gastonia 1929, p. 49.
31 Charlotte Observer, April 5, 1929.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid, April 7, 1929.
36 Ibid, p. 119.
37 OHAL, Tamiment Library, Sophie Melvin Gerson.
38 Gastonia Daily Gazette, April 2, 1929.
39 Ibid, April 3, 1929.
40 Ibid.
41 Beal, Proletarian Journey, p. 138.
42 V. B. Weisbord, A Radical Life, p. 182.
43 Bulwinkle is perhaps the dominant leader in the battle against the NTWU and the striking workers. A congressman who served in the years before and after the strike, he is believed to have been the leader of the Committee of One Hundred, the local vigilante group. He was also active in the propaganda campaign against the strikers, the prosecution of the strike leaders for the murder of Chief Aderholt and the defense of the vigilantes charged with the murder of Ella May Wiggins.
44 Charlotte Observer, April 4, 1929.
45 Gastonia Daily Gazette, April 3, 1929.
46 Ellen was a devout Catholic for much of her life. In the South, even today, it is not unusual for a conservative Protestant to question whether or not a Catholic is a Christian.
47 Gastonia Daily Gazette, April 3, 1929. The details included in the ad suggest communications between local mill interests and the Manville-Jenckes headquarters in Rhode Island, which must have supplied information about Beal’s activities in New Bedford.
48 Labor’s News, April 13, 1929.
49 Gastonia Daily Gazette, April 4, 1929.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid, April 5, 1929.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 V. B. Weisbord, A Radical Life, p. 186.
56 Much of the news coverage associated with the strike demonstrated a clear gender bias against the women involved in the report. The actions of Beal and Pershing were reported as the primary story, while the actions of Ellen and the other women involved in the strike were often reported as less important stories, usually with a feature story, rather than news story, perspective.
57 News and Observer, April 6, 1929.
58 Gastonia Daily Gazette, April 6, 1929.
59 Ibid.
61 One aspect of this racism can be seen in the textile mills of the period, where white women and black men never worked together. Black men always worked outside the mill, white women worked inside the mill. Black women were not yet part of the textile mill workforce.
62 Gastonia Daily Gazette, April 5, 1929.
63 Charlotte Observer, April 21, 1929.
64 Revolutionary Age, November 1, 1929.
65 Salmond, Gastonia 1929, p. 66.
66 Charlotte Observer, April 9, 1929.
67 Gastonia Daily Gazette, April 9, 1929.
68 Ibid, April 10, 1929.
Sacco and Vanzetti were two immigrant workers who, because of their political beliefs, they were anarchists, were convicted and executed for a crime that most historians believe they did not commit. Their Boston trial drew international attention.

The movie was *The Trial of Mary Duigan*. In the film, the use of a wax model won the case for the prosecution.


Ibid.