

# **The Wobblies in Lancaster:**

## **The 1907 Silk Mill Strike**

**By Richard Cullen Rath**

**O**n November 4, 1907, between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, three to four hundred male and female weavers—more than half of the total work force—walked out of the Stehli Silk Mill in Lancaster, PA. They had recently formed a union with the help of the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), also known as the “Wobblies.” The strikers were demanding better working conditions, higher wages, and the reinstatement of thirty-five workers who had just been fired.<sup>1</sup>

The Stehli Mill stood on the southeast corner of Martha and Marshall Streets on the north side of the city of Lancaster (the building still stands, although silk is no longer produced there). It was one of the city's several silk mills, and was one of the largest in the country at the time. Emil J. Stehli, a resident of New York, owned and, ostensibly anyway, managed the plant. However, he was not in Lancaster during the strike. The main responsibility for day-to-day operations fell on the shoulders of Jacob Schneebeli, the superintendent, who lived on Lime Street in Lancaster.

The November strike failed, doomed from the start by an unlucky convergence of local events, national economic and political trends, ineffective strategy and bad luck. Neither the IWW nor local business had any interest in preserving the memory of this event, so there is little record of what happened. The IWW's own records from before World War I were for the

most part impounded and destroyed by the federal government, which prosecuted and extradited many of the Wobblies' leaders for their radical views. What remains is sketchy and partially destroyed.<sup>2</sup> The company probably wished to forget that the strike ever took place, and the Wobblies moved on to more fertile fields. Nonetheless, enough can be pieced together from newspaper reports and the remaining file papers of the IWW to gain an understanding of the causes of both the strike and its failure.

What is interesting is that a union with the radical anarcho-syndicalist reputation of the Wobblies was able to gain such a strong foothold in a community as reputedly conservative as Lancaster. There were two main reasons for their ability to garner a following in the city. First, Lancaster was probably not as conservative then as it is considered to be today. Even today, Lancaster's conservatism is largely a county-wide, rather than city-wide, phenomenon. City elections tend to put more liberal Democrats in office, while county elections are dominated by staunchly conservative Republican voters.<sup>3</sup> It is probable that city dwellers who worked in factories, then as now, were less conservative than the population of the county as a whole. Secondly, the faction of the IWW which organized the union at Stehli's was from a more moderate wing.

## Events Preceding the Strike

The IWW was formed in Chicago in 1905 from a series of earlier unions, mostly western in origin. The largest of these, the Western Federation of Miners, made up more than half of the members. The IWW was an industrial-type union, which welcomed males, females, whites, blacks, Asians, and the various European immigrants, skilled or not, into its folds. Industrial unions were organized by the factory rather than by the type of work done. These policies set it in opposition to the skilled-trade unions, such as the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which were organized by the type of work being done and were more exclusive.<sup>4</sup>

There were a number of schisms and factions in the IWW's first few years which almost destroyed it. The most divisive issue was a debate as to whether the union ought to become politically active or pursue a course of direct action instead. The political activists sought election for their members, or lacking that, candidates who were sympathetic to their cause, generally socialists. Those who believed in direct action sought to implement their vision of society extralegally, using any means necessary.

As many of the IWW's constituents were ineligible to vote, the majority favored direct action at the point of production, where by sheer dint of numbers they were a force to be reckoned with. These members thought political action to be useless, and proposed an alternative to capitalist economic structures called "anarcho-syndicalism," wherein the producers would take control of the means

of production, and society would be organized cooperatively by industry.<sup>5</sup> This side, centered in Chicago, eventually won out and became the IWW as it is usually remembered. Among their ranks they counted "Big" Bill Haywood, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and Vincent St. John.

On the other side, Daniel DeLeon, whose followers worked out of Detroit, was the leader of the politically active schism which consisted mostly of members of the Socialist Labor Party. This wing was more passive-resistive and peaceful than the Chicago faction. DeLeon's group eventually broke off and became known alternately as "the Detroit IWW" and "the Worker's International Industrial Union," but prior to the Lancaster strike there was still an uneasy peace between the socialist and anarcho-syndicalist factions.<sup>6</sup>

This truce led to an increase in IWW activity in the years 1905-07. Economic conditions were good, and the union met with a number of successes and half-victories in its dealings with management. The Wobblies called a great number of strikes in this period of their history. In 1905 alone, they claimed twenty-four strikes involving about 15,000 workers, although this was probably an exaggerated figure. They contended that only two of the strikes were outright failures.

In the East, textile walkouts in Skowhegan, Maine, in 1906, and Paterson, New Jersey (not to be confused with the 1913 Paterson strike), in March 1907, although small, met with success. The IWW claimed that one thousand members in its Paterson, New Jersey, silk workers Local 152 took part in the strike there. The IWW's first nonlocal industrial union was born as a result of the organizational efforts of the Detroit Wobblies in Paterson. IWW-affiliated tube stampers in Bridgeport, Connecticut, struck and forced management to meet all their demands. An electrical workers' strike in Schenectady, New York, introduced the "sit-down" strike to the IWW's arsenal of tactics, but failed to have most of their demands met. The East, especially the textile business, were strong areas for DeLeon's faction.<sup>7</sup>

Western activities were on a larger scale than the eastern strikes and tended to be affiliated more with the Chicago faction. In Portland, Oregon, a sawmill strike which was initially successful was called off after half of its demands were met, partially because the AFL sent in replacement workers, and partially because the strikers found other jobs. A mining strike in Goldfield, Nevada, lasted from 1906 to 1908 before being forcibly broken up by federal troops sent in by President Roosevelt. The last strike contributed to a slow split with the Western Federation of Miners, which provided more than half of the IWW's overall membership. This defection was already in process when the Lancaster strike was called.<sup>8</sup> Thus, while the union was meeting with some successes, it was stretched thin by the second half of 1907.

## The Silk Workers Strike

Late in the summer of 1907 Rudolph Katz undertook a trip to Lancaster, paid for from IWW coffers, to set up a local there. At about the same time that Katz made the trip to Lancaster, he was elected to the executive board of the union. On September 24 he was able to report to the board that "through the hard and persistent work of a few people sympathetic to the cause" a union had been formed at the silk mill which garnered general support from the workers.<sup>9</sup> The mood of optimism which reigned among the members of the fragile new union was to lead them into action at a bad point in economic terms.

Until October 1907 the national economy had undergone an expansion of unprecedented scale, making big businesses strong, and also allowing them to be relatively accommodating to labor interests. President Roosevelt was justifiably proud of the progressive turn of economic events during the first few years that he held office, but they were soon to turn to what he considered to be one of the worst blemishes on his record.

October's newspaper headlines were rife with references to a shaky and declining stock market as well as bank troubles on a national scale. This was the onset of the Panic of 1907. It proved to be a temporary setback to business, but it nearly wiped out the IWW, and severely weakened its new outposts to the point that many went defunct, and strikes were not called nearly as much.<sup>10</sup>

The crisis left the IWW stretched so thinly that the Lancaster local was basically left to its own devices soon after its formation. Katz's organizational tactics and rhetoric were geared toward the booming economy of September. When the panic hit in October, Emil Stehli fired the union agitators first, which served him two purposes: first, it cut wage expenses, and second, it removed a source of conflict. Thus, he directly attacked the union head on, calculating that he could outlast any backlash by capitalizing on the state of the economy.

On November 4 the members of the Lancaster local silk workers' union walked off the job at Stehli's mill. The general demeanor of the strike smacked of the influence of Rudolph Katz. He was DeLeon's right hand man, and a prominent figure in the strikes staged by the Detroit faction. The Lancaster strike was handled in a manner which foreshadowed the tactics used in the Paterson strike of 1912, which was organized and led by Katz. Both strikes were orderly and peaceful to the point of passivity. Katz was jailed for two and one-half months for his efforts in Paterson, and the 1912 strike fizzled out in much the same manner as the Lancaster strike.

There was a difference between the two in numbers and conditions, though. The Paterson workers had a long tradition of labor organization, and new manufacturing methods caused some workers to be laid off while others worked longer hours without receiving additional compensation. This set off a new

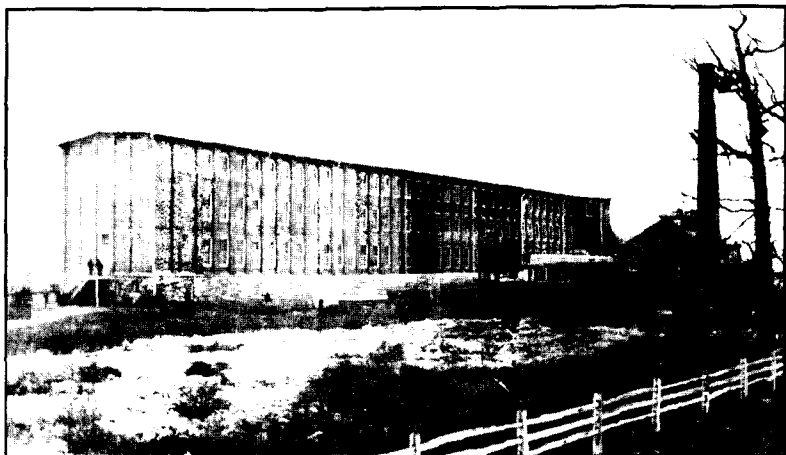
round of walkouts there, this time organized by the more confrontational Chicago faction, including Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. This was the most famous silk strike, and it lasted five months, ending in defeat for the Wobblies.<sup>11</sup>

The role played by the IWW in the Lancaster silk workers strike is not altogether clear. The IWW was not mentioned in any of the local papers by name. Even the local labor sheets were not particularly sympathetic, possibly because the Wobblies were an industrial, rather than a craft, union which was known for its radical views. They reported nothing that was not said in either of the mainstream papers.<sup>12</sup> All the local papers reported only that a union had recently been formed at the silk mill. The *New York Times* mentions it as a failed strike of the IWW in the midst of a number of successes. They also wrongly report it as having taken place in 1906. Brissenden merely lists the strike as one in a series. The union's file papers were mostly destroyed by the Federal government during the sedition trials of World War I.<sup>13</sup>

Katz's activity in the Lancaster strike was more ideological; he was not personally on hand to lead the strike. The actual leaders were from a committee of officers from the local. They were listed in the *Intelligencer* as follows: President, William D. Stroble; vice president, William Storm; financial secretary, Frank Barto; recording secretary, Miss Mabel Lineweaver; trustees, George Wittlinger, August Miller, Harry Houser and Jacob Laird.<sup>14</sup> Mr. Storm's occupation was listed as clerk in the city directory. There were no listings for any Lineweavers in the city directory, although the current phone book does include some people of that name. There were no listings for George Wittlinger or Jacob Laird, although there was a listing for a silk weaver by the name of John Laird. The rest of the committee were all weavers and lived close to the factory.

The *New Era* reported that the committee was asking for a "straight ten-hour day" instead of the current ten-and-three-quarter-hour day. The *Intelligencer* at first printed a set of demands which differed from those printed in the *New Era*, claiming that the strikers wanted a cut in hours from ten and three-quarter hours per day with Saturday afternoons off to either nine-hour days with Saturdays off or else eight-hour days with Saturdays worked. However, the front page of the next day's *Intelligencer* agreed with its competitor, although no mention was made of the change. The strikers also wanted rolls of silk measured in slightly shorter American measures rather than the current French measurements.<sup>15</sup>

The weavers demanded a twenty percent increase in wages. Nationally, silk workers earned wages of about \$390 per year in 1909. This worked out to about thirteen to fourteen cents per hour, based on a sixty-hour work week. In Pennsylvania, which was one of the top silk-producing states, silk workers averaged about \$315 per year in 1909. This was lower than the 1899 rate nationally and came out to about eleven or twelve cents per hour.



The newly-built Stehli silk mill and boiler house as seen from the southeast (1898).

These figures may all have been too high, though. The strikers asserted that in the countryside mills as well as the textile mills of New Jersey, employees were paid better than at Stehli Company. An editorial in the *Intelligencer* asserted that the wages for Lancaster silk workers were the lowest he had ever seen, being about half that paid by mills in other parts of Pennsylvania. Estimating from the editorial, wages at the Stehli mill could have been as low as six cents per hour, although this is probably exaggerated. Because the strikers were asking for a twenty percent wage increase, it would seem most probable that they were making ten cents per hour and were demanding something closer to the national average, twelve cents per hour.<sup>16</sup>

The workers' final demand was for the reinstatement of thirty-five workers who had been fired. There were conflicting reports on the front page of each Lancaster paper on Tuesday, November 5. The *Intelligencer* reported that the thirty-five had been fired some time ago, while the *New Era* reported that the people were given a two-week notice on the previous Thursday. The latter paper alleged that the layoff was part of a plan to cut costs in light of the recent economic downturn, while the former, quoting the workers rather than the management of the mill, reported that the thirty-five had been laid off supposedly because of lack of work, but had been immediately replaced by newcomers. The strikers maintained that the firings were a ploy of the superintendent to break the new union, and that the mill had large orders which would go unfilled because of the strike.

The *Intelligencer* also gave the owner's side, which agreed with the statements in the *New Era* and additionally professed that the union had conferred with the superintendent, Mr. Alfred Schneebeli, of North Lime Street, and given him their demands. He promised to pass them on to President Stehli,

who was, however, out of town at the time. It was said that Schneebeli was endeavoring to dissuade some of the workers from considering a strike at about 1:30 P.M. When word of the superintendent's action spread through the plant, the union called the strike immediately. Schneebeli's means of dissuasion were not reported. The president of the company never had a chance to consider the union's demands before the strike was called, but he never considered them later, either.

Schneebeli hired a small security force to protect the mill. The unit was led by Charles Broome, who owned a detective agency which he operated out of his home at 439 Lancaster Avenue, in the west end of town. He was assisted in this endeavor by Constable Edwin M. Gerlach, who lived down the street at 536 Lancaster Avenue.<sup>17</sup> They were empowered to obtain as many men as they needed to maintain order. A force of six was reported in the *New Era*, while the *Intelligencer* reported that the men were at the mill at 5:30 A.M., and were supposed to stay there as long as there was any possibility of trouble. About 125 strikers gathered peacefully in front of the plant that morning. Both men and women were present, and some of the women yelled out "scab" at some of those people entering the factory to work. There were no other incidents, however.<sup>18</sup>

A short while after the start of the strike, the committee sent two young men to IWW headquarters in New York City for advice, support and possibly financing. They arrived in miserable condition and met with James Connolly, an outspoken Irish immigrant who was a member of the more radical Chicago wing of the IWW. Connolly was later to reemigrate to Ireland, where he lost his life in the 1916 Easter uprising. He was a severe critic of the Detroit faction and Katz. Connolly fed the two young men and gave them some clothing, but no money or moral support. He then sent them back to Lancaster, remarking that Katz was wrong to start a strike so soon after the formation of the local. The young men arrived back in Lancaster totally demoralized, and as news of their trip spread, it disheartened the rest of the strikers.<sup>19</sup>

The economic panic also set the strike back further. In York, PA, three silk mills went out of business during November as a result of the economic downturn, leaving about 1000 weavers unemployed.<sup>20</sup> Many of these people were hired by Stehli to break the strike. Stehli steadfastly refused to recognize the union, much less negotiate with it. He was never totally shut down by the walkout, and claimed that as time went on, many workers were defecting from the strikers and going back to work. The strikers made the same claim in reverse, though.

By luck and stubbornness, Stehli and company were able to wear down the union. By November 25 the strikers were rumored to be going back, but they denied it, saying that they were preparing a number of public demonstrations which would illuminate their plight to the public. However, they had distributed the last of their funds from the local coffers as relief money the

previous day. Hunger was one of the most effective weapons in management's strikebreaking arsenal. On December 2 the strike was called off by the leaders of the union, who admitted that they had been losing people for a while. Some of the weavers went back to work, but the contested thirty-five were not rehired, and those who had maintained a high profile during the strike were not rehired either.<sup>21</sup>

Three weeks after the failure of the Lancaster strike, on December 22, James Connolly addressed the General Executive Board of the IWW in New York City concerning activities among the harbor workers of Baltimore. Rudolph Katz was present, and interrupted Connolly to ask a question in regard to the silk workers of Lancaster. DeLeon's right-hand man then proceeded to confront Connolly and the board about what had been said to the two strikers who had been sent to the New York headquarters. Katz then asked Connolly if he knew who had said this. Connolly admitted to speaking to the two strikers, but disagreed vehemently with Katz's interpretation of events.<sup>22</sup> The upshot of the exchange was to show that the Lancaster strike had innocently fallen victim to the internal squabbles between the two factions.

Although morale may have been a major factor in the failure of the strike, Connolly's remarks were not the main cause. Katz's accusation more probably reflected the split in the IWW's structure rather than a burden to the strikers. The two most important reasons for the failure of the strike were, first of all, that management was able to keep the mill in operation throughout the strike by hiring workers from the closed York mills; and secondly, that the local had called the strike while it was too new: it did not have enough resources or support to fight Stehli.

Another reason for the failure of the silk mill strike was overextension, as the IWW was involved in so many other strikes during this period. Among their other fronts were: the electrical workers in Schenectady, New York; textile workers in Skowhegan, Maine; silk workers in Paterson, New Jersey; the piano workers of Paterson; loggers in Eureka, California; sawmill workers in Portland, Oregon; sheet-metal workers in Youngstown, Ohio; tube-mill workers in Bridgeport, Connecticut; miners in Tonopah, Nevada; foundry workers in Detroit; smelter men in Tacoma, Washington; and mine workers as well as hotel and restaurant workers in Goldfield, Nevada.<sup>23</sup>

The economic situation gave Stehli a reason for his refusal to negotiate. The mill was much better suited to surviving tough times than a fledgling union with severely limited financial resources. An editorial in the *Intelligencer* claimed that because of deflation, real wages were actually going up, but the strikers had not realized this. It also claimed that the factories were unable to raise money as a result of the recent panic, and predicted the failure of the strike as early as November 5.<sup>24</sup>

A lack of sympathy in the local press may have contributed to the failure of the strike also. Both daily papers gave the existence of a union nominal



coverage, but that is all. The *Intelligencer* seemed to be a little more responsive to the plight of the employees than the *New Era*, but still gave them little more than cursory attention. The latter paper reported strictly from the information given by the management of the mill. The local union papers were hardly more sympathetic.

## Conclusions

Thus the strike at the Stehli Silk Company, which lasted from November 4 to December 2, 1907, ended in failure for a wide variety of reasons, extending in scale from the personal rebuke given by James Connolly to two very young strikers on their first trip to the big city of New York through internal disputes of a young union, the effects of community mores, all the way up to the national banking and industrial panic of 1907, and in part, to the conflicts inherent among capitalism, socialism and other international ideologies. What the Wobblies were able to do was ineffective, and they were not able to even gain a hearing from management for their complaints.

The union was not able to force Stehli to negotiate for two reasons. First, management kept the mill in operation to a large degree by hiring new workers from the massive labor pool made available by the closing of the York mills. Secondly, through his financial superiority in a time of generalized economic hardship, he was able to garner the power necessary to keep his mill operating on a reduced level which allowed him in turn to ignore his workers with impunity. In short, he was financially equipped to outlast them.

Thus ended one of the less representative chapters of Lancaster's history. The faction of the IWW responsible for the silk mill strike of 1907 was not a group of wild-eyed bomb-throwing anarchists, but neither were they wholly compatible with other Lancaster unions. So it was that industrial unionism in Lancaster met with its demise very soon after it had arrived.

## Endnotes

1. *Lancaster Daily Intelligencer*, 11/4/07, 1.
2. Phone conversation with Margaret Rauscher, archivist for the labor collection at Wayne State University's library in Detroit; 7/9/90.
3. This conclusion is drawn from the 1990 election results for the city and county as reported in the *Intelligencer*, 11/5/90.
4. Stewart Bird, Dan Georgakas, Deborah Shaffer; *Solidarity Forever: an Oral History of the IWW*; Chicago: Lakeview Press, 1985; 2-5.
5. Bird, et al. *Oral History of the IWW*; 2-5.
6. Paul F. Brissenden, *The IWW: a Study in American Syndicalism*; New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1919; 219-22.

7. Fred Thompson and Patrick Murfin, *The IWW: Its First Seventy Years*; Chicago: Industrial Workers of the World, 1976; 35-37.
8. See Foner, *IWW*, 82-93 for a list of strikes.
9. *IWW Collection*; "Minutes of the General Executive Board of the IWW from October 4 1906 to September 15, 1911," Box 7, Folder 1; 9/24/07; unpublished; Detroit: Archives of Labor, Wayne State University. All references to the *I.W.W. Collection* were obtained over the phone from Ms. Margaret Rauscher, archivist for the Labor Collection at Wayne State University in Detroit.
10. Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Volume IV: The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1917*; New York: International Publishers, 1965; 78-79. Brissenden, *IWW: Study in American Syndicalism*; 215.
11. Foner, *IWW*, 351-72.
12. *The (Lancaster) Labor Leader*, November 9, 1907.
13. *New York Times*, (3/17/12, 5:2). Brissenden, *IWW: Study in Am. Syndicalism*, 203.
14. *Intelligencer*, 11/5/07, 1.
15. *Lancaster New Era*, 11/4-5/07, 1; *Intelligencer*, 11/4-5/07, 1.
16. *Intelligencer*, 11/7/07, 1. Wage information was calculated from figures in the *Thirteenth Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1910: Abstract of the Census...with Supplement for Pennsylvania*; Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census; Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913; 552, 738, 752, 760.
17. Of the names listed in the local papers, all but Stehli's are represented, most in fair quantities, in the current phone directory for Lancaster. Addresses and occupations as well as a list of labor unions and the correct spellings for Schneebeli and Barto's names (spelled "Schneebl" and "Bartow" in the papers) were supplied by the following pages of the *City Directory of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1907-1908 Edition*: 31 for unions; 221, 252, 361, 434, 486, 508, 550, 643, 693, 701 and 703 for names and residences; 809 for location of Stehli Mill.
18. *Intelligencer*, 11/5/07, 1; *New Era* 11/5/07, 1.
19. *IWW Collection*, 12/22/07; Foner, *IWW*, 105.
20. *Intelligencer*, 11/16/07, 1.
21. *Intelligencer*, 12/2/07, 1.
22. *IWW Collection*, 12/22/07.
23. Brissenden, *IWW: Study in American Syndicalism*, 203.
24. *Intelligencer*, 11/5/07, 2.

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