

# IT HAPPENED HERE NEW JERSEY

## Paterson Silk Strike

Target Age: High School  
Time Period: 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
Featured County: Passaic County  
NJ 350<sup>th</sup> Theme: Liberty

### Common Core States Standards for English Language Arts:

R.CCR.9- Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

W.CCR.9- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

SL.CCR.3- Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

### New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards:

Social Studies: 6.1.12.D.6.a, 6.3.12.A.2

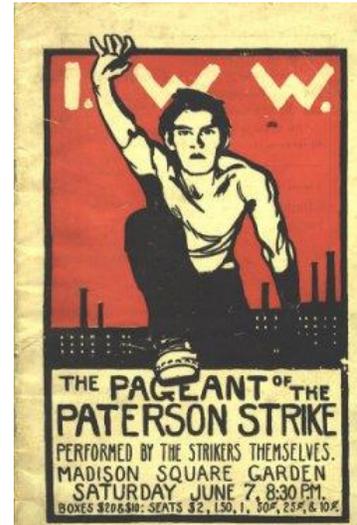
**FOCUS QUESTION:** In what ways did the silk workers of Paterson believe that their liberty was being threatened and violated?

### **BACKGROUND:**

In the late 19th century, Paterson, New Jersey became a manufacturing powerhouse. The Great Falls of the Passaic River provided energy for mills that produced nearly half the nation's silk. Skilled dyers and weavers from Europe produced fabrics for New York's burgeoning garment industry.

Conflicts between the mill owners and workers were not uncommon. But in 1913, when the owners tried to push workers to produce even more with less, the workers decided to strike. The house of Pietro Botto, a skilled weaver from Italy, and his wife Maria, a silk inspector, became the strike's headquarters. Speakers would address crowds of up to 25,000 from the second floor porch.

The Paterson Silk Strike of 1913 lasted 5 months, shutting down some 300 mills and dye houses, and attracting national headlines and support. Although worker demands were not met, the historic strike left behind a legacy of solidarity and common purpose that reached far beyond Paterson.



Courtesy of American Labor Museum/ Botto House National Landmark

The Botto House is now the American Labor Museum, one of the few museums dedicated to the American worker.

**ACTIVITY:**

After reading the two primary documents below and analyzing the pictures from a Paterson silk factory hold a class discussion that contextualizes the strike. Keep in mind industrialization, late 19<sup>th</sup> century immigration, working conditions, and the reforms of the Progressive movement when addressing the following questions.

- What were the real issues behind the causes of the Paterson silk strike?
- Was the strike simply over poor conditions and low pay, or were there greater forces involved?
- What were the differing views and attitudes concerning working conditions and compensation?
- Why was the Paterson silk strike fiercely opposed by the owners of the factories and society as a whole?
- What other factors led many not to support the striking workers' position?

**FOLLOW-UP:**

Active civic participation is essential to a vibrant and enduring democracy. When the people feel strongly and passionately about a cause there are Constitutional protections for their liberties, which allow peaceful protests and demonstrations.

Ask the students to identify a current cause or movement they feel passionate about. In small groups, the students will select an issue and develop ways to protest for change and reform. Ask the students to consider:

- How would they communicate their message?
- Who would be their supporters and opponents?
- Who would be their target audience(s)?
- What objectives are they trying to achieve?

The students should consider developing slogans, songs, literature, posters, activities, and events to promote their cause. Each group will present their cause and plan for action to the class.

**WANT TO LEARN MORE?**

***Places You Can Visit***

American Labor Museum/ Botto House National Landmark  
83 Norwood Street  
Haledon, NJ 07508  
<http://www.labormuseum.net/>

Lambert Castle  
3 Valley Road  
Paterson, NJ 07503  
<http://www.passaiccountynj.org/facilities/Facility/Details/10>  
<http://www.lambertcastle.com/>

### **Additional Teaching Resources**

New Jersey Digital Highway: Paterson Silk Strike

From a project completed by New Jersey high school teachers for high school students, this excellent database of teacher resources and lesson plans focuses heavily upon primary document analysis and critical thinking skills.

[http://www.njdigitalhighway.org/enj/lessons/paterson\\_strike\\_of\\_1913/?part=introduction](http://www.njdigitalhighway.org/enj/lessons/paterson_strike_of_1913/?part=introduction)

Teaching with Historic Places Lesson Plans

Paterson, New Jersey: America's Silk City

An excellent activity for middle and high school students provided by the National Park Service highlighting the importance of Paterson, NJ in the development of the United States.

<http://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/102paterson/102paterson.htm>

### **For More Information**

Steve Golin, *The Fragile Bridge: Paterson Silk Strike, 1913* (Temple University Press, 1992).

Paterson Silk Strike Centennial Alliance

<http://www.patersonsilkstrike.org/>

War in Paterson: The Strike That Changes the Labor Movement

<http://makingpatersonstrike.org/>

Primary Source #1

**Elizabeth Gurley Flynn Remembers the Paterson Strike of 1913,**

Source, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Rebel Girl: An Autobiography*

(New York, 1955), 165-166.

*This account of the strike assemblies at the home of Maria Botto and the women's meetings during the 1913 Paterson silk strike is by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a leader in the Industrial Workers of the World and leader of the Paterson strike. Flynn was 22 years old at the time of the strike. Her career as a radical began in 1906 when she was 16 and joined the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Flynn was especially popular among the women, for whom she held regular weekly meetings.*

The life of a strike depends upon constant activities. In Paterson, as in all IWW strikes, there were mass picketing, daily mass meetings, children's meetings, the sending of many children to New York and New Jersey cities, and the unique Sunday gatherings. These were held in the afternoon in the little town of Haledon, just over the city line from Paterson. The mayor was a Socialist who welcomed us. A striker's family lived there in a two-story house. There was a balcony on the second floor, facing the street, opposite a large green field. It was a natural platform and amphitheatre. Sunday after Sunday, as the days became pleasanter, we spoke there to enormous crowds of thousands of people-the strikers and their families, workers from other Paterson industries, people from nearby New Jersey cities, delegations from New York of trade unionists, students and others. Visitors came from all over America and from foreign countries. People who saw these Haledon meetings never forgot them....

A touching episode occurred in one of our children's meetings. I was speaking in simple language about the conditions of silk workers why their parents had to strike. I spoke of how little they were paid for weaving the beautiful silk, like the Lawrence workers who made the fine warm woolen cloth. Yet the textile workers do not wear either woolen or silk, while the rich people wear both. I asked: "Do you wear silk?" They answered in a lively chorus. "No!" I asked: Does your mother wear silk?" Again there was a loud "No!" But a child's voice interrupted, making a statement. This is what he said: "My mother has a silk dress. My father spoiled the cloth and had to bring it home." The silk worker had to pay for the piece he spoiled and only then did his wife get a silk dress!

We had a woman's meeting, too, in Paterson at which Haywood, Tresca and I spoke. When I told this story to the women clad in shoddy cotton dresses, there were murmurs of approval which confirmed that the child was right-all the silk they ever saw outside the mill was spoiled goods. Tresca made some remarks about shorter hours, people being less tired, more time to spend together and jokingly he said: "More babies." The women did not look amused. When Haywood interrupted and said: "No Carlo, we believe in birth control-a few babies, well cared for!" they burst into laughter and applause. They gladly agreed to sending the children to other cities and, chastened by the Lawrence experience, the police did not interfere this time.

Source: [http://www.njwomenshistory.org/Period\\_4/flynn.htm](http://www.njwomenshistory.org/Period_4/flynn.htm)

Primary Source #2

### **Bill Haywood Remembers the 1913 Paterson Strike**

Source, William D. Haywood, "On the Paterson Picket Line,"

International Socialist Review, 13 (June 1913): 850-851.

*In this excerpt from an article published during the 1913 Paterson Silk Strike by "Big" Bill Haywood, he comments on the women's role in the strike. Haywood was a founder and national leader of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).*

...The women have been an enormous factor in the Paterson strike. Each meeting for them has been attended by bigger and bigger crowds. They are becoming deeply interested in the questions of the hour that are confronting women and are rapidly developing the sentiments that go to make up the great feminist movement of the world.

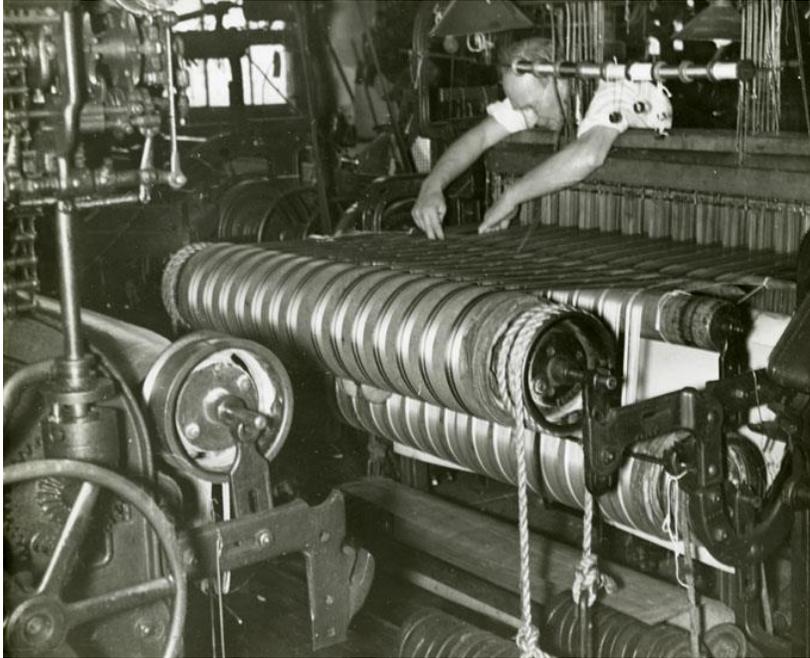
With them it is not a question of equal suffrage but of economic freedom. The women are ready to assume their share of the responsibility, on the picket line, in jail, even to the extent of sending their children away. Hundreds of children already have found good homes with their "strike parents" in New York.

The Mother in Jail.

Among the strikers gathered in by the police was a woman with a nursing baby. She was fined \$10 and costs with the alternative of 20 days in jail. She was locked up, but the baby was not allowed to go with her. In twenty-four hours the mother's breasts were filled to bursting, but the baby on the outside was starving. He refused to take any other form of food. In a few more hours the condition of both mother and baby was dangerous, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn went to see Recorder Carroll about the case. She told him unless the baby was allowed to have its mother it would soon die. Recorder Carroll's reply was as follows:

"That's None of My Business."

Source: [http://www.njwomenshistory.org/Period\\_4/haywood.htm](http://www.njwomenshistory.org/Period_4/haywood.htm)



Courtesy of New Jersey State Archives; Department of State.



Courtesy of New Jersey State Archives; Department of State.

**CREDIT INFORMATION:**

In Classroom Activity:

Pg. 1: Paterson Silk Strike Poster. American Labor Museum/Botto House National Landmark.

Pg. 5 (top): Male silk worker in Paterson factory. New Jersey State Archives; Department of State.

Pg. 6 (bottom): Female silk worker in Paterson factory. New Jersey State Archives; Department of State.

*It Happened Here: New Jersey* is a program of the New Jersey Historical Commission made possible by a grant from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in the program do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities or the New Jersey Council for the Humanities. To access more teaching resources created for this program visit [www.officialnj350.com](http://www.officialnj350.com).