

THE AMERICAN THREAD COMPANY STRIKE OF 1925

Jamie Eves

David Moxon's Forgotten Files: A Folder Comes to Light

It was a historian's dream: stumbling upon a trove of hitherto unknown documents that shed new light on an important historical event. And there they were, dozens of yellowed manila folders crammed into a battered old metal filing cabinet. The sheets of cheap onionskin paper they held were browned and brittle, some bound with rusty paper clips or ancient staples. The rich, pungent aroma of decaying pulp paper filled the air. The majority of the files turned out to be pretty dull stuff: 1940s and 1950s production records and inter-office memoranda left behind in 1985 by the American Thread Company (ATCO) of Willimantic, Connecticut, when, like so many other manufacturers, it left New England for the promise of cheaper labor and lower taxes in North Carolina. But fifteen of the folders – about twelve linear inches – turned out to contain a real historical treasure: internal company records from the hard-fought ATCO strike of 1925, one of the bitterest and most divisive labor struggles in Connecticut history. With 2200 workers out on strike, 1700 replacement workers brought in to take their place, and lasting nine months, it was also one of the biggest. And its outcome – a crushing defeat for the strikers – had signaled the beginning of the end of the Connecticut textile industry.

The public side of the ATCO strike has long been known from contemporary coverage in the Hartford Courant, Hartford Times, Willimantic Chronicle, and other newspapers. And in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the workers' experience was well documented in a fine series of oral histories compiled by the Windham Textile and History Museum and the University of Connecticut's Center for Oral History. But little was known about management's side of the strike. For obvious reasons, ATCO – like most corporations – had kept its internal plans, memos, correspondence, and records confidential, especially about how it had recruited immigrant replacement workers ("scabs") to break the union and implement a 10% pay cut. But now, for the first time, it was possible to examine the activities and responses of both labor and management.

The folders contained several strike-related files that had been created by David Moxon, a British-born ATCO executive who had been assigned to recruit and find housing for replacement workers. Friendly, well liked, able, hard-working, and efficient, Moxon would continue to rise within the company, serving as the agent and general manager of the Willimantic plant in the 1940s. In 1925 Moxon was the superintendent of the plant's manufacturing department. The folders contained several items: Moxon's expense accounts as he traveled to Lowell, Massachusetts; Manchester, New Hampshire; and several other New England mill towns searching for replacement workers. It also contained signed statements

from a number of the replacement workers in which they acknowledged that they were aware that there was a strike in progress in Willimantic; several handwritten letters in English and in French inquiring about possible employment; memoranda instructing officials at the Willimantic plant to pay the traveling expenses of certain replacement workers who traveled to Willimantic from other towns; and a canvass of available (empty?) tenements in Willimantic for the replacements to move into.

The Strike Begins



Above: Connecticut State Police guard the American Thread Company's Willimantic plant during the divisive 1925 ATCO strike. Image from the Hartford Times.

From 1916 to 1919, as World War I raged in Europe and the demand for American-made textile soared, ATCO joined other American textile mills in increasing production. In order to attract the additional workers it needed, the company raised wages by 160%. But when the war ended and demand dropped, ATCO responded by cutting wages – 22 ½% in 1920, 12 ½% in 1923, and another 10% on January 12, 1925. Because most of the 2,500 workers at ATCO's Willimantic plant were paid piece rate, the cuts amounted to a speed-up – a situation where workers labored faster in order to keep their take-home pay from plummeting. Because few workers could work fast enough to keep up with the pay cuts, they found themselves working harder than ever for less money, a circumstance that sparked bitter resentment. Moreover, even as the demand for Connecticut-made textiles continued to fall throughout the 1920s, because of the speed-up production at ATCO actually rose 21% from 1920 to 1925, as workers struggled to soften the wage cuts by working faster and producing more. The result was a vicious cycle: the factory over-produced, prices consequently continued to fall, even more speed-ups occurred,

workers became bitter and exhausted, and accidents became more frequent. Frustrated by the downward spiral and hoping to rescind the most recent pay cut, in February of 1925 the United Textile Workers of America entered into negotiations with the plant's general manager, Don H. Curtis. Curtis refused. A showdown loomed.

Above: Pay envelope from ATCO from 1924. The full-time worker was paid \$9.25 for the week. Below: The Gem Theater on Main Street in Willimantic, where the workers met to organize the strike. Both images are from the Windham Textile and History Museum collections.

TOTAL WAGES EARNED	LESS		AMOUNT WAGES PAID
	RENT	BOARD	
			9.65
WEEK ENDING AUG. 7, 1924 THE AMERICAN THREAD CO. WILLIMANTIC MILLS			

689

No.

Events came to a head on March 5, when a mass meeting of ATCO operatives assembled at Willimantic's Gem Theater, only a few blocks from the factory, and unanimously authorized a strike. About 2/3 of the workers at ATCO's Willimantic plant belonged to the UTWA, one of America's largest industrial unions.



The union had been founded in 1902 and had established a local branch, number 307, in Willimantic later that same year. The union was especially strong in the plant's finishing department, where the majority of the workers were women and wages tended to be low. Most of ATCO's operatives, including the majority in the finishing department, were immigrants; the union's membership therefore included numerous different

nationalities – a polyglot of Connecticut Yankees, French Canadians, Poles, Irish, Ukrainians, Italians, and others. The different nationalities did not always get along with each other, but they were united in their support for the strike. The strikers chose Amy Hooker, a worker at the Willimantic plant, as their spokesperson, although several representatives from the

union's national headquarters were also on hand, to provide advice and leadership. (To learn more about Amy Hooker, [click here](#).) It is clear that the UTWA national viewed the strike in Willimantic as a key event. The plant was one of the largest thread mills in the world, and ATCO (and its parent company, Coats) were industry leaders. Whatever happened in Willimantic would set an example for labor issues throughout the entire textile industry. The union desperately wanted to win.

Four days later, on March 9, approximately 1,800 workers – about half of them from the union's stronghold, the finishing department – walked out. Publically, plant manager Curtis vowed that the factory would continue to operate, but with only a handful of the finishing department's 1,500 hands still on the job, he was privately worried. Things got worse the next morning, when about 400 more workers joined the strike and demonstrations occurred at two of the mill gates. When the boiler operators told Curtis that they, too, intended to join the strike, he reluctantly closed the plant. Only about 300 workers remained in the mill, nowhere near enough to maintain production, and the loss of the boiler operators meant that there would be no power to run the machines anyway. In a last-minute concession, the union agreed that a skeleton crew would remain in the boiler room, to maintain heat in the mill buildings and in the company-owned tenements where many of the workers lived.

Union leaders were confident of victory. Solidarity was virtually complete. According to the *Hartford Courant*, none of the workers were crossing the picket lines, union membership was increasing daily, 2,200 of the plant's 2,500 workers had actually walked out, and on March 11, 2,000 of them paraded enthusiastically through downtown Willimantic to the Gem Theater to attend a rally. Although workers at ATCO's other, smaller plants (in Holyoke and Fall River, Massachusetts; Westerly, Rhode Island; and Milo and Willimantic, Maine) declined to join the strike, they were sympathetic, and along with others contributed to the union's strike fund, which soon grew large enough to last for two or three months. The strikers had strong support from their national union. They opened a store on Jackson Street, only a few blocks from the mill, where strikers could purchase donated groceries at discount prices. They made plans to erect a tent city on the outskirts of the city, in case ATCO decided to evict them from their company-owned tenements. Even some of Willimantic's local political establishment sided with the strikers – mostly Democrats and Main Street merchants who, for business reasons, hoped for a quick resolution (which they knew would happen only if management agreed to rescind the 10% pay cut), and who in any case sometimes resented the mill managers and owners who formed Willimantic's economic and social elite.

However, management had considerable power of its own. Because the demand for textiles was down, there was less pressure actually to be up and running than if it had been a boom period. ATCO was a large corporation, owned by an even larger corporation, and so had plenty of cash reserves and political clout. It could shift some production to its other plants. In truth, it was the company rather than the union that was better situated to sustain a protracted

strike. Even as both sides argued their cases in the newspapers, ATCO began to implement a strategy that nine months later defeated the strikers and broke the union. And David Moxon's forgotten files reveal just how they did it.

The Company Fights Back



Above: Strikers picket across Main Street from ATCO. Image from the Hartford Times.

Protesting a series of wage cuts and speed-ups put into effect in the years 1920-25, 2,200 of the 2,500 workers at ATCO's

mammoth Willimantic Mills plant, one of the world's largest thread factories, angrily walked off the job. With worker solidarity nearly complete and strong support from the national headquarters of their union, the United Textile Workers of America, the strikers were confident of victory. However, the company was better situated to withstand a protracted strike than the union believed. ATCO was one of the world's largest corporations. With deep cash reserves, plenty of political clout, and the ability to shift some of its production to other factories elsewhere in the United States, ATCO was actually in a very strong position. Even as Don H. Curtis, the manager of ATCO's Willimantic plant, closed the mill on March 11, ATCO executives laid plans for winning the strike and breaking the union. The central figure in their effort would be Curtis's subordinate, David Moxon, the Willimantic plant's British-born superintendant of manufacturing. Capable, well-liked, friendly, hardworking, and efficient, Moxon would continue to rise within the company, eventually succeeding Curtis as manager in the 1940s.

At right: David Moxon. Image from the Windham Textile and History Museum collection.

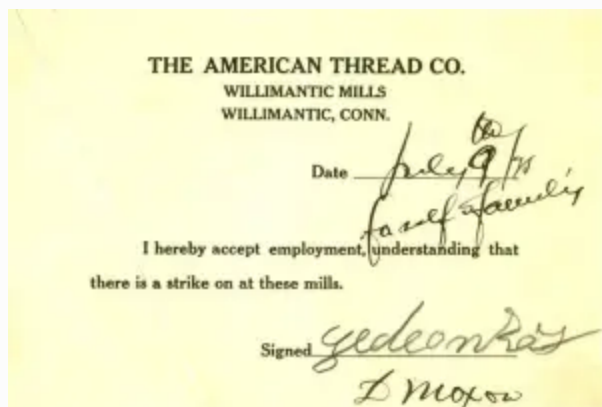
ATCO's plan was to replace the 2,200 strikers with a new, smaller, non-union workforce of about 1,700. The replacements – “scabs” – would be more submissive, agree to work for lower wages, and be few enough in number that management could implement speed-ups without greatly increasing production in times of sluggish demand.

The first step was to make sure that any replacement workers that ATCO hired would be safe from retaliation by the strikers. To that end, someone – Moxon was not senior enough to do it, but it was almost certainly an ATCO executive – convinced the Connecticut state police to

send a detachment of officers to patrol the neighborhood around the plant. (When questioned by a reporter from the *Hartford Courant*, municipal officials strongly denied that the request had come from them, and the Willimantic city council even went so far as to protest to state authorities about the troopers' presence.) The state police couldn't stop the strikers from picketing the mill and attempting to intimidate the replacements with shouted warnings, and a few fistfights did occur, especially among the women, but for the most part the troopers kept the peace.



The next step was to find replacement workers and convince them to come to Willimantic. ATCO put Moxon in charge of this effort. By early June he had set up employment offices in five other New England textile mill cities – Lowell, Boston, and Fall River in Massachusetts; Providence in Rhode Island; and Manchester in New Hampshire – staffing them with ATCO junior executives. According to Moxon's travel vouchers, in June and July he was on the road more than he was in Willimantic. He spent the bulk of his time in Lowell and Manchester, with occasional jaunts to Boston. The effort in Fall River was smaller, and Moxon turned it over to another executive with whom he kept in touch by mail. The vast majority of the replacements would come from Lowell and Manchester, where thousands of laid-off textile workers were desperately seeking jobs. By the end of July, ATCO apparently had all the workers it wanted; in August, Moxon was responding to letters looking for work by saying that no vacancies existed.



The Lowell office was located in two rooms in the old city hall on Merrimack Street. Advertisements were placed in local newspapers, both in English and in French, to catch the attention of the city's large population of French Canadian immigrants. Moxon instructed Albert Caulfield, who was in charge of the office, to screen applicants both for job skills and character – which presumably meant submissiveness to

management. He was especially interested in hiring whole families, who would be easier to control than single workers. Moxon authorized Caulfield to advance the replacements their moving expenses (train fare and the cost of teamsters to haul their possessions to and from the railroad station), with the sums to be deducted from their wages.

On June 22 Caulfield wrote Moxon a typical report:

“Enclosed please find a list of applications filed today, which is self explanatory. Since talking with you this P. M., the two young women i. e. Deloris Dubois and Jeanette Martin have definitely decided to come to Wlltc Tues. on the train due Wlltc at 1:08 P.M. I am going to buy their R. R. tickets for them, (advancing price of same) to assure their coming. This will make three young women due on this train, (the third being Helen Grourk) who will want to be put up at the Elm’s [ATCO’s Willimantic boarding house for single workers]. Joseph Leon Godin also will be in to see you and to look over the plant. If he likes the place he would be ready to move at once, paying all of his own expenses. You will find his family listed on to-day’s (Mon.) list.”

The image shows a handwritten list on aged, yellowed paper. The text is written in cursive and is mostly illegible due to fading and the condition of the paper. It appears to be a list of names and addresses, possibly for replacement workers as mentioned in the text.

The image shows a handwritten 'Traveling Expenses Account' for Mr. L. Moxon, dated July 3, 1935. The document is a ledger with columns for date, item, amount, and balance. It lists various expenses, including travel costs and meals, and ends with a total balance of \$131.10.

DATE	ITEM	AMOUNT	BALANCE
7/1	Travel	10.00	10.00
7/2	Meals	5.00	15.00
7/3	Travel	10.00	25.00
7/4	Meals	5.00	30.00
7/5	Travel	10.00	40.00
7/6	Meals	5.00	45.00
7/7	Travel	10.00	55.00
7/8	Meals	5.00	60.00
7/9	Travel	10.00	70.00
7/10	Meals	5.00	75.00
7/11	Travel	10.00	85.00
7/12	Meals	5.00	90.00
7/13	Travel	10.00	100.00
7/14	Meals	5.00	105.00
7/15	Travel	10.00	115.00
7/16	Meals	5.00	120.00
7/17	Travel	10.00	130.00
7/18	Meals	5.00	135.00
7/19	Travel	10.00	145.00
7/20	Meals	5.00	150.00
7/21	Travel	10.00	160.00
7/22	Meals	5.00	165.00
7/23	Travel	10.00	175.00
7/24	Meals	5.00	180.00
7/25	Travel	10.00	190.00
7/26	Meals	5.00	195.00
7/27	Travel	10.00	205.00
7/28	Meals	5.00	210.00
7/29	Travel	10.00	220.00
7/30	Meals	5.00	225.00
7/31	Travel	10.00	235.00
7/32	Meals	5.00	240.00
7/33	Travel	10.00	250.00
7/34	Meals	5.00	255.00
7/35	Travel	10.00	265.00
7/36	Meals	5.00	270.00
7/37	Travel	10.00	280.00
7/38	Meals	5.00	285.00
7/39	Travel	10.00	295.00
7/40	Meals	5.00	300.00
7/41	Travel	10.00	310.00
7/42	Meals	5.00	315.00
7/43	Travel	10.00	325.00
7/44	Meals	5.00	330.00
7/45	Travel	10.00	340.00
7/46	Meals	5.00	345.00
7/47	Travel	10.00	355.00
7/48	Meals	5.00	360.00
7/49	Travel	10.00	370.00
7/50	Meals	5.00	375.00
7/51	Travel	10.00	385.00
7/52	Meals	5.00	390.00
7/53	Travel	10.00	400.00
7/54	Meals	5.00	405.00
7/55	Travel	10.00	415.00
7/56	Meals	5.00	420.00
7/57	Travel	10.00	430.00
7/58	Meals	5.00	435.00
7/59	Travel	10.00	445.00
7/60	Meals	5.00	450.00
7/61	Travel	10.00	460.00
7/62	Meals	5.00	465.00
7/63	Travel	10.00	475.00
7/64	Meals	5.00	480.00
7/65	Travel	10.00	490.00
7/66	Meals	5.00	495.00
7/67	Travel	10.00	505.00
7/68	Meals	5.00	510.00
7/69	Travel	10.00	520.00
7/70	Meals	5.00	525.00
7/71	Travel	10.00	535.00
7/72	Meals	5.00	540.00
7/73	Travel	10.00	550.00
7/74	Meals	5.00	555.00
7/75	Travel	10.00	565.00
7/76	Meals	5.00	570.00
7/77	Travel	10.00	580.00
7/78	Meals	5.00	585.00
7/79	Travel	10.00	595.00
7/80	Meals	5.00	600.00
7/81	Travel	10.00	610.00
7/82	Meals	5.00	615.00
7/83	Travel	10.00	625.00
7/84	Meals	5.00	630.00
7/85	Travel	10.00	640.00
7/86	Meals	5.00	645.00
7/87	Travel	10.00	655.00
7/88	Meals	5.00	660.00
7/89	Travel	10.00	670.00
7/90	Meals	5.00	675.00
7/91	Travel	10.00	685.00
7/92	Meals	5.00	690.00
7/93	Travel	10.00	700.00
7/94	Meals	5.00	705.00
7/95	Travel	10.00	715.00
7/96	Meals	5.00	720.00
7/97	Travel	10.00	730.00
7/98	Meals	5.00	735.00
7/99	Travel	10.00	745.00
7/100	Meals	5.00	750.00

The accompanying list contained information about 30 potential replacements that Caulfield was sending to Willimantic. Eight were members of the Landry family, six were Godins, three were Barons, two were Martins, two were Drouins, and the other eight were single young adults. Only four – Helen Grourk, John Heanley, Leo Donnelly, and James Foley – did not have French Canadian surnames. The Godin family included the father Joseph, a 47-year-old iron moulder (“could use as general hand”); the mother

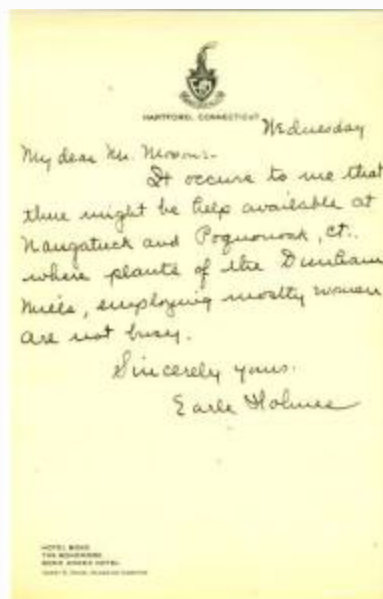
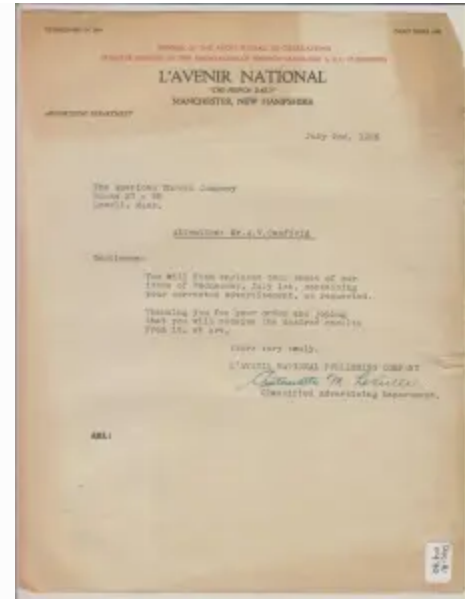
Edouilda, a 45-year-old spinner and spooler; a daughter Anna, a 23-year-old spinner and spooler; another daughter Rose, a 20-year-old spinner and spooler; a son Fred, 19; and another son Ernest, 16. Altogether, Moxon’s files contained 92 sheets listing the names of replacement workers sent to Willimantic by the various ATCO employment offices. The majority of the surnames on the lists were French Canadian. Most spoke at least some English, although several did not. Moxon’s files do not indicate whether he purposely sought out immigrant workers because he thought they would be easier to control, or whether the large number of French Canadians simply reflected the fact that immigrants were more desperate for jobs than native-born Americans, and therefore more likely to apply. Whatever the reason, they were likely to be a more docile work force than the strikers.

Moxon had the replacements sign preprinted forms in which they acknowledged that they knew there was a strike underway at Willimantic.

To entice replacement workers, ATCO initially offered them fairly generous wages, higher than those it had previously paid to the strikers. According to an internal ATCO memo to

Moxon from Robert Branch, the superintendant of the Willimantic plant's finishing department, unskilled general hands in the box shop (normally among the lowest paid workers at the plant) would be offered starting wages of \$13.70 a week, or about \$4.00 a week more than ATCO's lowest paid workers had been paid before the strike. (General hands were paid daily wages rather than the piece rate paid to carders, spinners, twisters, winders, and packers.) Moxon's files are silent about whether or not the higher wages remained in effect once the strike was over, but it is likely that they did not.

ATCO also needed to provide housing for the replacements. To that end, ATCO evicted any of the strikers who were still living in company housing, which included a boarding house for single workers, two villages of row tenements for families, and a number of apartment houses scattered around the city. However, because only a little more than half of ATCO's workforce normally lived in company-owned housing, Moxon also compiled a lengthy list of all the available empty apartments in Willimantic that were owned by private landlords. The files don't say, but it is likely that ATCO pressured some of the landlords to evict tenants who were strikers in order to create vacancies for replacements; it is difficult to believe that so many empty apartments would have existed in Willimantic otherwise.



The Strike Fails

ATCO's strategy of hiring replacement workers proved successful. The plant reopened on May 11, after having been closed for two months, and continued production throughout the



Police escort replacement workers. Image from the Hartford Times.

rest of the strike. As the months dragged on, the union's position grew increasingly weak. By the end of September, it was clear that the strikers had lost and that management had won. A few of the strikers returned to work. Others remained in the area, but took new jobs with other companies. But most simply moved away and never came back. The union was broken. It would not be until

the 1950s that it again became a major factor at ATCO's Willimantic plant, and by then Connecticut's textile industry was already in sharp decline. There are many reasons why the textile industry ultimately failed in Connecticut, but it is clear that the impact of powerful unions was not one of them – not at ATCO, anyway.

The strike also had a major impact on the city of Willimantic. It divided the community into two camps, those who struck and those who came as replacement workers, those who supported the strike and those who didn't. Resentments between the two sides persisted for decades. In time, local lore would claim that the division was ethnic as well, that the French Canadians had come to Willimantic as scabs, taking the jobs that had once belonged to other ethnic groups. But, while it was true many of the replacements were French Canadians, some of them were not. Moreover, many of the strikers were French Canadians as well. Whatever social realities may have distinguished the replacements from the strikers, if indeed any existed, ethnicity was not one of them.

I was left with one final mystery. Most of the old ATCO files I found at the Windham Textile and History Museum were simple production records from the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. David Moxon's forgotten files were the only files from the 1920s. Who had saved them, I wondered, and why? I couldn't help but think that there was still another story here to be uncovered and told.