Amy Hooker: Union Organizer

Jamie Eves, Windham Town Historian, 13 June 2019

For several years now, I have used bits and pieces of spare time trying to track down information about Amy Hooker, an early 20th-century Connecticut labor leader about whom little is known ... even though she appears in a song by state troubadour Hugh Blumenfeld!

"I saw Eugene Debs rise up on Wobbly legs
I heard Amy Hooker dressing down American Thread
They took up the strikers' signs from back in 1925
When the cutbacks ate our grandparents alive."
–From "How Long" by Hugh Blumenfeld

In 1925 Amy Hooker was 38, single, and the President of the Willimantic Textile Union Council, an affiliate of the United Textile Workers of America, a former craft union that had recently metamorphosed into an industrial union. She was about to lead one of the bitterest, most divisive strikes in Connecticut history, and in the process stand up to one of the state's most powerful corporations.

Hooker was born (probably) in New Britain, CT, where she was baptized at St. Mark's on Sept. 9, 1887. Her father, Dwight Freeman Hooker, had worked as a joiner. Amy became a textile worker at an early age. The 1910 United States Census found her, 23 years old, living with her parents Dwight and Alice in Newark, NJ, and working in a factory making straw hats. She never went to school beyond the 6th grade, although she learned enough to be a union leader and later a private art teacher. In 1920 the Census recorded her living as a lodger in Scotland, CT, only a few miles from Willimantic, and unemployed. She subsequently showed up in several Willimantic street directories, living in the Thread City in the late 1910s, 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. She moved around a lot, residing in a series of low-rent, working-class apartments, almost all of them in older buildings later demolished in Willimantic's 1970s urban renewal.

Hooker was living in Willimantic in 1925 when the American Thread Company announced a 10% cut in the piece rates it paid its workers. The cut came on top of other cuts made a few years earlier, as ATCO attempted to bring wages back to pre-World War I levels. On Feb. 17, a delegation of workers affiliated with the United Textile Workers of America and led by Hooker (her title, according to the Willimantic *Chronicle* and Hartford *Times*, which reported on the event, was president of the Textile Union Council) met with plant manager Don H. Curtis. Curtis declined to rescind the pay cut. That evening, Hooker and other labor leaders called a "mass meeting" at Willimantic's Central Labor Hall. Four hundred workers — 1/6 of the factory's labor force — attended. They voted 320-80 to strike if the cut was not canceled. Two weeks of "determined" negotiations followed. On March 5, a second mass meeting at the Labor Hall, chaired by Hooker, unanimously voted to strike. They were promised support by Mary Kelleher, a UTWA organizer from Pennsylvania. The strike began on March 9 at 7:15 a.m. Over

the next several months, ATCO replaced the 2,500 strikers with 1,700 replacement workers. By September, the strike was mostly over. The Union lost.



Tracing Hooker's movements before and after the strike is like chasing shadows – the 1920 Census showed her as unemployed; the 1930 Census recorded her living in Hasbrouck Heights, NJ (a suburb of Passaic, the scene of another bitter 1926-27 textile strike – one wonders if she went there to participate), with her older married sister Carrie and working at her old occupation as a straw hatter; and 1920s, 30s, and 40s Willimantic street directories failed to list any occupation for her (although such information was recorded for almost everyone else who was employed). Was she blacklisted in Willimantic after the 1925 strike failed, and had trouble finding work? Why had she come to Willimantic from New Jersey in the first place? Was it because, like many working class Americans, she was following friends and relatives? Her sister Mattie and brother Dwight also lived in Willimantic, although she never lived with them. Why did she return to New Jersey? Was it simply to reconnect with her sister, or was she somehow involved in the Passaic strike? Why did she come back to Willimantic in the 1930s? Did she perhaps live with a lover? No – the people who lived at the same addresses as she did all changed with each move, and the majority were working class couples. Were her friends in the union taking care of her after the strike?

The 1925 ATCO strike was debilitating for the Union, Willimantic, and Hooker. It lasted nine months — or more, depending on how you measure these things — and involved thousands of workers. The union was fairly new at the ATCO mill, and most of its members were women and immigrants. Several of the women strikers were arrested for verbally abusing strikebreakers; in June Celia St. George, Jeanette St. George, and Caroline Kozek found themselves in court and fined $10 for name calling. To protest the eviction of strikers from their tenements – and to dramatize that the evictions would leave families homeless – the union conducted a parade of baby carriages. In June, the UTWA also erected tents on the outskirts of Willimantic, to house evicted strikers. In July the UTWA ominously threatened a general strike against ATCO's other

plants – and perhaps even other textile factories – if no further progress occurred, although the general strike never materialized. Evictions began in earnest that month, with deputy sheriffs removing furniture from the homes of strikers Joseph Aubin, Moise Morrisette, Nelson Chamberland, Marie Theroux, and William Chalifoux. None of the evicted families opted to move into any of the twenty tents the UTWA had erected, which as of July 16 were occupied by only "two or three caretakers." Tempers frayed. When a state police officer claimed to have been "manhandled" by strikers, Willimantic Police Chief Allan MacArthur ordered that all parades and marches cease. Amy Hooker organized a committee of herself, two women strikers, and three men to beg MacArthur to rescind his decision. He did, but only after Hooker promised that pickets would stay on the sidewalks, and confine all parades to the morning hours. In September, the UTWA opened a commissary store at 166 Jackson St. in Willimantic to provide food and clothing for strikers and their families.



ATCO's strategy of hiring replacement workers proved successful. The plant reopened on May 11, 1925, after having been closed for two months, and production continued throughout the 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. In July the next year, plant manager Don Curtis announced the strike over. Hooker and Mary Kelleher insisted that it was still on, but if it was, it was in name only. In August, 1933, the UTWA officially declared the strike over. The 1700 to 1800 workers then at ATCO – some strikebreakers, some former strikers like who asked for their old jobs back – did not belong to a union. The union was broken. When in 1934 a general textile strike occurred on the east coast of the United States from Maine to Georgia – and involved several smaller mills in Willimantic – ATCO was not involved. "In Willimantic," declared the Hartford *Courant*, "the large American Thread Company mills with 1800 employees have not been unionized." The 1934 strikes, too, failed. The UTWA would not return to ATCO's Willimantic plant until the 1950s, and by then Connecticut's textile industry was already in sharp decline.



There is only one known photo of Amy Hooker, taken many years later. She is the older woman on right. This photo — of Amy standing next her niece Mildred Bartholomew — was probably taken sometime around 1950, when she was 63 and living with her sister Carrie Hooker Varley in Hebron, CT. At the time Amy was unmarried (in fact, she never married), taught art to private pupils, was active in the Grange organizing musicals and first aid training, and was otherwise leading a quiet life. Who would know that, a quarter of a century earlier as a young woman of 38, as President of the Willimantic Textile Council — an affiliate of the United Textile Workers of America — she stood on picket lines in Thread Mill Square and the stage of the Gem Theater and — in words of one-time Connecticut State Troubador Hugh Blumenfeld — "dress[ed] down American Thread." She paid a great price for her temerity, never again finding employment in the Thread City. A quiet life. Except for 1925, when she led a union, organized pickets, headed marches down Willimantic's Main Street, bargained with plant managers, police chiefs, and mayor, and stood on a stage in Willimantic's Gem Theater rallying thousands of angry workers. Even quiet people have their day.

There is a lot more I would like to know about Amy Hooker. I will keep chipping away, checking further sources during odd moments I have free. She is someone whose story should be told.