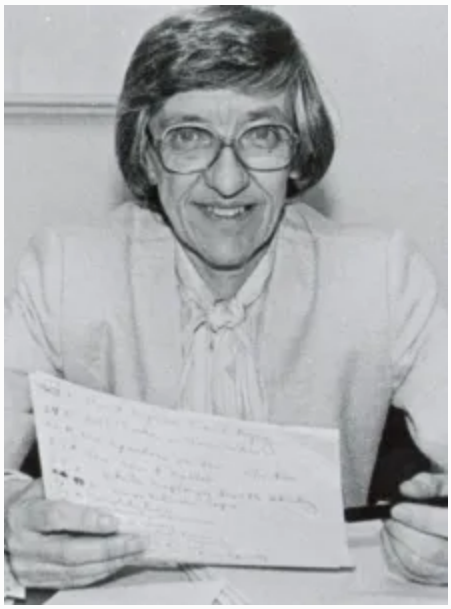
# BETTY TIANTI, LABOR LEADER:

# "THE COMPANY KNEW THAT THEY COULD NOT REFUSE ME"

**Thomas R. Beardsley**

On May 17, 1994, the Hartford *Courant* carried Betty Tianti's obituary. "Betty L. Tianti," the *Courant* noted, "a pioneering union leader who rose from the thread mills of Willimantic to become the nation's first female president of a state labor federation, died Monday [at her daughter's house] in Alexandria, Virginia. She was 64."



The *Courant* summarized Tianti's life. She was born in 1929. She grew up in Plainfield. In 1955 she took a job at American Thread in Willimantic to support herself and her young daughter. She became shop steward, then president of her local branch of the Textile Workers Union of America. She left Willimantic in 1962 to work as an organizer for the national union, traveling throughout the country, especially through the South, where most of the textile mills were then located. She returned to Connecticut in 1970 to head up the state union's Committee on Political Education. In 1985 she became director of the Connecticut AFL-CIO. In 1988 Gov. William O'Neill named her state commissioner on labor. Suffering from acute emphysema, she stepped down in 1990. Tianti died in 1994. She was the first woman to head a state AFL-CIO, and Connecticut's first female labor commissioner. Tianti is an inductee of the Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame; you can read her Hall of Fame biography by clicking here.

In 1992, Tianti was interviewed by Thomas Beardsley, then historian-in-residence at the Mill Museum. Here are excerpts from Tom's interview. (To read the full interview, you will need to acquire a copy of Tom's book, *Willimantic Industry and Community: The Rise and Decline of a Textile City*, published by the Mill Museum in 1993.)

"I was born in Plainfield, Connecticut, in August, 1929, in the year of the Wall Street Crash. I was brought up and went to school in the general area of Eastern Connecticut.

"My parents were both mill workers, and worked in textile mills in places such as Sterling and Moosup. We lived in company mill houses. My mom and dad separated when I was about seven years old. I had three brothers, two older and one younger, and my mom brought the four of us up by herself. My maiden name was Mathieu. My mother was German and French, and my father was French Canadian....

“Those were tough days. It was the Depression. When my father was out of work, he would go down to the mill, to stand around, and wait to be chosen to work. Maybe he got five hours of work a week. We grew our own vegetables, and had a cow, a pig, and chickens. We got by. As soon as my two older brothers were old enough, at 16, they quit school and went to work, getting jobs in the mills. I was the first in the family to go on and finish high school. That was Plainfield High in 1946. I was 17. My parents pushed me to go on to college. I did quite well at school, and went to the University of Connecticut, but lasted for only one semester. I quit and went to work. I didn’t really want to leave college, but none of my friends had gone on to university. In those days, you just did not go....

“I found work at the Ashland mills in Jewett City, and the Cranska linen mills in Moosup. After that I went with a friend to Winchendon, Massachusetts, where this New York leather goods concern was making pocket books.... They moved back to ... New York City. I was around 20 or 21 years of age....

“I met my husband in New York in the early 1950s. He was in the Air Force reserves, and was called up when China bombarded the islands of Quemoy and Matsu in 1954. He was overseas when my daughter was born in October, 1954. I came back to Danielson, Connecticut, and stayed with my mother. Soon after, my husband and I separated and divorced.

“In 1955 I began work with the American Thread Company in Willimantic. I worked in Number Six Mill in the shuttle bobbin department. My first wage was a dollar and three cents a hour. My mother worked the first shift, so I worked the second shift while she looked after my daughter. It was about a 40 minute drive to Willimantic from Danielson, but several of us traveled together. There were close to 2,000 people working at Amweican Thread when I arrived there....

“I had not been working in Willimantic for too long, when I became annoyed by how the piece-work rates were being calculated.... A lot of people agreed with me, and in essence what they said was put your money where your mouth is, and run to become the [shop] steward, so I did!

“I was elected ... and became a shift shop steward for the Textile Workers Union of America, AFL-CIO....

[Shortly afterward, Tianti was also elected Secretary-Treasurer of her local.]

“I still worked full time on the shuttle bobbins, and fixing. I received something like $50 a month to do the union duties, but the work dug into your piece-work earnings, so you can understand why it was such an unpopular job. After shuttle bobbins, I worked as a machine fixer. I think I was one of the first women ever to be a machine fixer. This had been strictly a male domain, but I needed the pay. Anyway, the women were usually more knowledgeable about the machinery, because they had been operating it for the longest time, so they were qualified. I soon worked out how to change the pulleys, without calling a fixer. I knew how to block the pulleys up with the wrenches to take the weight. It was no big deal, but when you were a fixer, the pay was double! Okay, you got your hands dirty, but it came off with soap and water, and you were not working any harder than when you were an operator!

“The company knew that they could not refuse me the job, because the Equal Rights Amendment had just been passed. They knew that if they had refused me, I would have brought in a sex discrimination case against them....”