The General Textile Strike of 1934 and the affects

Many mill workers found hope in FDR to improve their working conditions. In 1933, the National Industrial Recovery Act was passed in response to the economic depression beginning in 1929. This bill set up the NRA (National Recovery Administration) and the first objective was to implement industrial codes. Some of the major points in the Textile Code was to set minimum wage at twenty-five cents an hour, set a forty hour work week, and outlaw the employment of children under sixteen. However, mill workers focused on a small section of the code. Section 7A of the Textile Code stated all workers have the right to organize, collectively bargain, and select a representative. For the first time, many Southern workers felt that they had the law on their side of the labor fight.

In 1933 and 1934, there was an unusually high number of strikes in the United States. Some say the mill workers were inspired by the strikes in big cities like Chicago and San Francisco. Southern mill workers had an underground and grassroots organization into the UTWA (United Textile Workers of America) because often the mill workers would take action against those trying to organize or would not allow them to meet on company property.

On September 3, 1934 the UTWA went on strike. It is estimated that between 400,000 and 500,000 walked out of the mills. Although the strike was peaceful at first, it quickly became violent. The union organized groups of workers out on strike to go around to other mills in the area to persuade them to also go out on strike and organize. These groups were called the Flying Squadrons. The mill owners quickly became worried about these squadrons and deputized men to watch over their mills. In Honea Path, SC, men shooting, from an upper floor of the mill, down into the crowd killed seven strikers. In other parts of the South the National Guard was called in. In Newnan, Georgia, National Guard arrested several members of the flying squadron and charged them with treason, insurrection, and rioting. They loaded their prisoners into truck and hulled them an old internment camp from WWI at Fort McPherson.

The strike was also hard on the family. There wasn’t a paycheck so after the first week hunger was a problem. Also the previously tight knit community was being torn apart by the division of those who did strike and those who didn’t. On top of all that, the protestant ministers were against the strike. Moral was affected when those on strike went to church on Sunday and were told they were sinners.

The consequences of the General Textile Strike of 1934 were great for the mill workers involved. The settlement between the workers and management was that the mills would not discriminate and take back everyone, including the unionist, who had worked at the mill previously. That did not happen. Workers who were on strike were fired and many of the more vocal were blacklisted. Many mills required a recommendation from your last mill to be hired at a new one. Once the workers were let go, they often didn’t have anywhere to go. The mill owned the whole town, so you couldn’t get a job at the mill grocery store or clothing store. Those who were blacklisted could not find work in the region and many had to either go back to farming or immigrate out of the Southeast.

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Another consequence is that the labor movement was set back in the South after the strike because many felt the union had abandoned them after the strike. The 1934 textile strike was historic because it was the first time in Southern history that many mills across the South had gone on strike and not just a few mills here or a town there. One positive result from the strike was it lead to the more strict Wagner Act or the National Labor Relations Act of July 1935. This act had the teeth to enforce labor laws were the NRA could not.

The General Textile Strike of 1934 is a key moment in the New South. It reinforces the anti-union sentiment in the region and starts the South towards the Sunbelt economy. Also students will find it interesting because, if they are natives, this is the story of their grandparents and that unique mill village culture.

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