Jacob A. Zumoff, *The Red Thread: The Passaic Textile Strike* (New Brunswick, Camden, and Newark, New Jersey & London: Rutgers University Press, 2021)

Few strikes in the United States of the 1920s were more heralded by left-wing activists than the uprising of wool workers in northern New Jersey in 1926–1927. Known as the Passaic textile strike, the massive work stoppage involved picket lines at mills in four other communities and galvanized 15,000 unorganized workers, the bulk of whom were immigrants, half of whom were women. Fought to establish a union and turn back a wage cut of 10 percent, the Passaic strike was a momentous, heroic, uphill battle in an industry plagued by overproduction and foreign competition. It lasted for more than a year.

Harkening back to the 1913 Industrial Workers of the World Paterson Silk Strike of 1913 and a harbinger of the mass strikes of 1934 that prefaced the establishment of the Congress of Industrial Organizations in the later 1930s, the mobilizations of New Jersey textile workers in 1926 occupied a 1920s class relations landscape harshly hostile to trade unionism and labour militancy. Led by members of the Communist Party, such as the energetic if egocentric, 25-year-old former Harvard Law School student, Albert Weisbord, his teenaged assistant, Jack Rubenstein, and the seasoned, 40-year-old pioneer of American Communist movement fund-raising, Alfred Wagenknecht, the Passaic insurgence unleashed a rabid round of red-baiting and violent police suppression.

Between February 1926 and February 1927, police arrested more than 900 strikers, about half of them for "disorderly conduct." One 19-year-old militant, Nancy Sandosky, hailed as the strikers' "Joan of Arc," was arrested 20 times. Weisbord and Rubenstein were hauled off by the police on dozens of occasions, their bail totaling thousands of dollars, their jail time considerable. For all of those arrested, many of whom were subjected to fines of $2 to $52, the crippling bail levied was over $600,00, or more than $8.5 million in today's currency. This repression was complemented by vigilante threats from the Ku Klux Klan and orchestrated legal suits alleging that Weisbord had breached a promise to marry a young complainant who, when it came time to proceed in the courts, could not be located. The mill owners, viciously anti-communist, made it a condition of any negotiation that the popular and dynamic Weisbord, repeatedly endorsed by the strikers as their spokesperson, be removed from the United Front Committee of Textile Workers (ufc) that he established. It was a demand welcomed by the American Federation of Labor-affiliated (afl) United Textile Workers Union (utw), which did nothing to organize the New Jersey strikers and little to protect them yet regarded control of the strike as it progressed as its due.

Jacob A. Zumoff, an astute historian of American communism in the 1920s, has produced a succinct and sympathetic account of the Passaic strike and its significance. In 200 pages Zumoff outlines the abysmal working conditions and destitution of the mill workers that led to widespread grievance and willingness to follow a class struggle leadership. His account is especially strong on the recalcitrance of the mill owners, and their reliance on the ruthless repression of the police. This, in turn, prodded the resentment of liberal political and intellectual forces and cultivated widespread labour movement support for the Passaic strikers. A critic of the Stalinization of the American Communist Party, Zumoff is nonetheless insistent that this process of degeneration had not proceeded sufficiently far by 1926 to negate the positive

contribution that revolutionaries affiliated with the Comintern could make to the unfolding class war in New Jersey's textile sector.

Especially noteworthy was the audacity of Weisbord and others to take on the struggle of the unorganized and largely unskilled mill workers abandoned by the business unionists in the United Textile Workers. This entailed an imaginative cultural edifice that revolutionaries sustained, to support the strike and broaden understanding of it nation-wide. Wagenknecht's International Workers Aid produced a seven-reel silent film, *The Passaic Textile Strike*. It proved an aesthetic bridge between the melodrama commonplace in worker-made films of the time and the later social realism of radical 1930s cinematography. The James P. Cannon-led International Labor Defense (ILD) organization advocated for the class war prisoners of Passaic, featuring the men and women arrested and the children of their families in an outpouring of articles and fund-raising campaigns appearing in and promoted by the *Labor Defender*. Weisbord and radical journalist Mary Heaton Vorse published agitational pamphlets on the strike, and a *Textile Strike Bulletin* provided workers with information to counter the disinformation prominent in the mainstream newspapers. The General Relief Committee's *Hell in New Jersey*, a 48-page photomontage booklet, were distributed widely across the country, an amazing 150,000 copies circulating among workers and sympathetic unions. Wagenknecht's relief efforts, in particular, highlighted the ways in which the Communist Party – not without its shortcomings on women – addressed the material well-being of families and children, establishing soup kitchens feeding 1,000 children daily. A Council of Working-Class Housewives, in which Weisbord's partner, Vera Buch, was especially prominent, trained women to run meetings, schooling them on a variety of issues, from the causes of poverty to the patriarchal subordinations of the proletarian household. Women were the foundation of the strike, their pedagogy of the oppressed and exploited was a textbook of picket lines and mass meetings where, in the words of one journalist writing in the liberal publication, *Survey*, "the shawled women of Passiac" became workers' leaders (114).

Zumoff is not unaware of how the Communist Party faltered in its treatment of the "Woman Question," doing too little to extend the boundaries of struggle into significantly advancing women into leadership positions in the strike and raising important considerations of broad emancipation that reached beyond the exploitation of the shopfloor and into the domestic sphere – liberation from housework; communal childcare; equality of the sexes; legal abortion. But he is adamant that the Communist Party nonetheless empowered women in broadening their horizons of participation in the class struggle.

This two-sidedness is central to the interpretive edge of *The Red Thread*. Zumoff's book recognizes the positive role of the Communist Party in stamping the Passaic strike with class struggle militancy. In this, he is undoubtedly right. If the Stalinization of the American Party had not so eviscerated revolutionaries within its ranks that they were incapable of sustaining the politics of class struggle in Passaic, however, there is evidence aplenty that its deleterious consequences – evident in a factionalism that conditioned mechanical reliance on Comintern directive and wooden application of abstract programmatic positions – at times inhibited the course of the class war and the creation of militant workers' organization.

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The Party never quite managed, in the mid-1920s, to exorcise the demon of so-called "dual unionism." With William Z. Foster at its trade union helm and adhering to Leninist prescriptions of "boring from within" that were never meant to be a "one size fits all" admonition, the Communist Party was captive to a particularly dogmatic and wooden anathema to independent unions. The tragedy of this policy was that it constituted a reliance on the mainstream unions of the AFL at a historical juncture when these organizations were at a particularly low, and discernibly reactionary, ebb. In specific sectors, one of which was the worsted woolen mills of northern New Jersey, it was abundantly clear, and should have been especially so to revolutionary communists, that these business unions were both incapable of organizing the unorganized and decidedly uninterested in doing so. Yet American Communists clung to the position that such AFL bodies were the *only* "legitimate" working-class organizations. This limited revolutionaries involved in trade union struggles unduly, forcing them to always bow to craft conservatism and anti-communism when, in certain circumstances, it may well have been both possible and advisable to take another stand. Weisbord's activities in Passaic, as much as they effectively constituted a variant of independent unionism by establishing a *de facto* industrial union under the auspices of a United Front Committee (UFC), flew in the face of Foster's inflexible animosity to organizing workers outside of the AFL. Yet without the UFC, Passaic's working-class militancy would never have developed as it did. It was entirely predictable that the UTW would demand, as the price to be paid for a few Passaic workers to be admitted to its ranks when the strike was winding down and it was the only trade union recourse remaining, that Weisbord, in the words of Cannon, be forced to "walk the plank." To be sure, at the point that the Communist Party hierarchy was forced to concede that Weisbord and others must be displaced, recognizing that the strike was lost, it was perhaps inevitable that something be preserved in the necessary retreat. Getting workers into the UTW, as opposed to throwing in the towel completely, may well have been the best outcome to be secured in a bad, and seemingly worsening by the day, situation.

The result, which Zumoff details honestly and thoroughly, was a sorry denouement. By the summer of 1927, with the strike defeated and the mills back at work, less than 1,200 workers belonged to the UTW. This was more than the number affiliated with the AFL union before the strike, but a mere fraction of the thousands of workers who walked off their jobs a year-and-a-half earlier, militantly embracing the United Front Committee and pushed to new levels of commitment and understanding by Weisbord's powerful oratory. In no mill did the UTW sign a majority of the workers to affiliation, nor did any of the industry establishments win union contracts. Weisbord's vibrant United Front Committee was wound down. The strike's inspirational leader was himself driven away from the mill workers he motivated to militant action, although he did seek election as a Passaic city commissioner in the spring of 1927, securing more than 1,000 votes.

Defeats occur. There is no dishonour in them. But the Communist Party in 1927 presented the ending of the mill workers' strike and the passing of the reigns of worker organization from the United Front Committee to the UTW as a victory. Communists dressed up this dressing down in a rhetoric of achievement, rather than making it clear that what happened was a reluctant acceptance of

a necessary falling back and regroupment. This conditioned disillusionment. New Jersey workers knew full well that the militant battle of Passaic, for all its exhilarating resilience, won them little in immediate gains and cost them greatly. A Communist Party capable of telling the truth to the workers whose consciousness it advanced might have recouped something from the disappointment of defeat. That, however, was not in the cards.

Instead, as Cannon later acknowledged in letters to Theodore Draper and published as *The First Ten Years of American Communism* (1962), "the alacrity with which the party leadership agreed" to the UTW's anti-communist demands should have been painful for all dissidents to stomach. What the nascent Stalinist leadership of the United States Communist Party regarded as a "clever 'maneuver'," selling the Passaic defeat as an accomplishment, soured the taste of possibility acquired by workers through their courageous and intrepid stand over the course of 1926–1927.

The bitter consequence of such misrepresentation would be evident as Stalinization ran its course within the international Communist movement in the late 1920s. Passaic would loom large in the Comintern's rebuke of the American Party leadership. Overtaken by its programmatic embrace of "Socialism in One Country," the increasingly Stalinized Comintern took a decided sectarian turn into a Third Period of "red unionism" and attacks on "social fascism" in all of its varied forms. Foster was chastised by the leader of the Red International of Trade Unions, Solomon Lozovsky, for having, during the 1918–1928 period in general, and in the Passaic struggle in particular, "danced a quadrille the whole time around the AFL and its various unions." As Moscow disciplined its factionalized American Party leadership, Foster was emasculated, Cannon and his followers were expelled as Trotskyists, and the heirs of the Passaic imbroglio, Jay Lovestone and his allies, were ousted as a Bukarinite right danger. Among the architects of the 1926–1927 New Jersey strike purged in this 1928–1929 settling of accounts were Albert and Vera Weisbord, Jack Rubenstein, and a number of other militants. In Passaic, the Communist Party branch was reduced from 80 to seven, and its representation among the militant textile workers was wiped out entirely. Weisbord, whose finest hour as a communist organizer was in the Passaic struggle, never regained the heights of influence he experienced in 1926. He remains a somewhat enigmatic figure.

Zumoff's *The Red Thread,* well researched and accessibly written, will serve as Passaic's epitaph for the foreseeable future. But the meaning of the strike itself, as he suggests, is anything but dead. It is very much with us now. Workers today face difficulties in the transformation of capitalist work and in the ideological war waged against them, not unlike that of the 1920s. How they fight, with whom they ally, and the nature of the leadership they embrace will determine outcomes that take us into the future. Rethinking what happened in Passaic, for which this study is essential reading, will be useful in addressing such considerations. The past is never entirely dead, and its lessons, even as they are revealed in defeats like Passaic, can inform and inspire the present, even help chart the course to a better future.

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