Mary Heaton Vorse

Garrison, Dee

Published by Temple University Press

Garrison, Dee.
Mary Heaton Vorse: The Life of an American Insurgent.

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Vorse worked every day during the summer of 1910 at Provincetown, only to destroy all she had written. During that summer her moods fluctuated from depression to an ecstatic sense of freedom. Her Provincetown house seemed even more a haven. To balance the fears she felt as a thirty-six-year-old widow liable for the sustenance of so many, she built a determination out of past success and grit. That summer of adjustment, of knowing that she was now the only person responsible for a young family’s welfare meant an entire shift, she wrote, “a slow revolving on its axis of my whole approach to existence.”¹ She need no longer pretend that writing was something she could take up or put down when she wanted. For the rest of her life, concern for work must—could at last—he placed first.

Vorse never wavered in her resolve to support her family through freelance writing. This was a momentous decision, for the cushion of the Marvin fortune was lost to her. Ellen’s will provided one thousand dollars a year to Mary’s father, already growing senile. After Ellen’s death, Hiram lived with Mary for a year before his admission into McLean Hospital where he died in 1914. The remainder of the Marvin inheritance was divided equally among Mary’s five half-brothers and half-sisters. As a final reproof of Vorse’s willful life style, her mother left her not a penny.²

In the fall of 1910 Vorse returned to Greenwich Village where she moved the children and her father into an apartment near Sheridan Square. Her stories began to sell easily once more. In the pleasantly shabby neighborhood, with its vital mix of immigrants, artists, and reformers, she reshaped her goals. The next two years marked a crucial turning point in
her life. Three intense emotional experiences of that period increased her awareness of the lives of poor women and inspired her lasting commitment to radical politics. Vorse outgrew the last vestiges of habit and thought that characterized the often-indulged daughter of a privileged family.

The first transforming experience came that winter when Vorse joined with other middle-class women in a crusade against infant mortality in New York City, where poor, mostly immigrant, mothers often were required to work long hours for subsistence wages. They suffered poor health and were unable to nurse their babies during the working day. When breastfeeding is impossible, pure milk assumes central importance in infant survival.

Yet most of the milk sold to working-class mothers in New York City before 1912 was produced in unsanitary conditions. Unsterilized and insufficiently chilled before sale, it was often contaminated by bacteria that produced scarlet fever, diphtheria, typhoid fever, tuberculosis, infant diarrhea, and intestinal infections. During the summer months when temperatures rose, the infant-mortality rate skyrocketed in the immigrant sections of the city. Watered milk, although illegal, was common. Large-scale milk producers and distributors knew that profits realized from selling dirty milk far outweighed the nominal penalties imposed by law. In the crowded working-class sections of American cities, sewerage was inadequate, disease rampant, and the water supply scanty and often contaminated. Human life was cheap for many workers in the industrializing countries, the lives of their children cheapest of all.

In 1910, the wealthy Mrs. J. Borden Harriman formed the New York Milk Committee and waged a year's campaign to raise funds for milk depots to distribute free or low-cost pasteurized milk. The city agreed to take over these new depots at the end of the year if the women's New York Milk Committee could show that the infant-mortality rate had been appreciably lowered. The results of the Harriman-led campaign amazed even the most sanguine. Seventy-nine depots were opened in 1911, some sponsored by the New York Health Department and some by private sources. In 1911 the infant mortality rate fell 8 percent. In 1912 the rate fell another 5 percent.³

Vorse joined as a district leader in the drive launched by the New York Milk Committee. She solicited funds and supervised their collection in her area. As a member of the writing section of the committee, she publicized the need for pure milk. Many commentators of the time blamed the high death rate of infants of the poor not on polluted or watered milk, but on the neglect of children by ignorant immigrant mothers, on inher-
ent ethnic traits, or on urban congestion. Vorse wrote an angry rebuttal of these alleged causes. Through the presentation of statistical data, she showed that the children of working mothers frequently died from drinking contaminated milk. The wealth of a few, she charged, was "paid for all over the world by the lives of little babies."

That judgment shook her world view so completely that it forced her to rethink her entire political outlook. As a well-fed member of society, she had been aware of an underclass among which she moved and which she sometimes encountered in person, but knowledge of working-class poverty had not before touched her so directly. Her new position as a widow, alone responsible for the care of two children, determined her response. She was now a female wage earner, decidedly an anomaly among the women of her class, not just in philosophy, as previously, but in actual economic standing as well. "A society that allowed children to die because their parents didn’t make enough money," she wrote, "seemed senseless and vicious. . . . I was the sole support of my children. I saw myself poor, and my own wanted and beloved children dying because I couldn’t make enough money."

One other event in 1911 stands out as preparation for the realignment of Vorse’s life. One late March afternoon she heard women shrieking on the street below her Village apartment. She descended the stairs and ran with the crowd eight blocks to the Asch building, a ten-story structure off Washington Square. Here about five hundred garment workers, most of them young Italian and Jewish immigrant women, were struggling to escape the fire consuming the three top floors where the Triangle Shirtwaist Company was located.

The firemen were helpless. Their ladders reached only to the sixth floor. The building’s single fire escape, eighteen and one-half inches wide, had collapsed, grotesquely deformed by the weight of the throngs that tried to descend it. By the time the firemen unrolled their lines, the Triangle workers were jumping the nine floors from the inferno to the street below. Only four minutes after the firemen arrived, the fire hoses were almost completely buried under the multitude of bodies. Spectators, many of them relatives and friends of the trapped workers, joined firemen and policemen holding up huge fire nets. The jumping garment workers drove the nets into the sidewalk with such force that the men holding the nets turned somersaults over onto the bodies.

Inside the building, cloth and barrels of oil fed the flames, which ran within the fireproof walls. The terrified workers could not escape through the eighth- and ninth-floor doors. It was company policy to keep the doors
locked. This illegal action had forced workers to leave by the elevator exits where handbags could be checked daily for possible stolen materials. In flight from the flames, the women forced several doors, all of which opened against the flow of the panic. One hundred and twenty-five workers sought to pass down a thirty-three-inch-wide stairway. Trampled bodies soon jammed the flow from above. The women clawed the clothes off each other in their rush to get through. As a black porter worked in the basement to keep the elevator motors going, the elevator operators, in blinding smoke, made desperate, random guesses as to where the floor openings were. The elevators managed a few trips down before the bodies of women jumping in terror jammed the elevator shaft from above.

In less than forty-five minutes after the fire began, 146 workers were dead.

Standing in the dense crowd near Washington Square Park, Vorse heard people ahead of her crying, “Another’s jumped! Another’s jumped! All on fire!” She watched as four women, their dark skirts aflame, sprang from the high windows in headfirst dives to the ground. Within a few hours almost twenty thousand people had assembled in the streets near the Asch building, among them sobbing relatives and friends of the Triangle’s workers. The people stood vigil throughout the night as the dead were counted and identified.

Vorse realized that political corruption and official neglect killed the Triangle women. She also remembered the outcome of the 1909 “Uprising of the 20,000” and the role the Triangle Shirtwaist Company had played in that struggle. In that year, the immigrant garment workers had walked out in protest against severely exploitative working conditions. Through hunger and cold, through beatings and incarceration, the young women workers had maintained an unparalleled unity. The Triangle management had attempted to smash that unity by hiring local gangsters to attack the pickets—a common practice, but refined in this case. Triangle also hired prostitutes and pimps to attack as many as ten pickets in one day. The pickets had then been arrested for “assault” by the waiting, watching New York police. Vorse knew that many of the policemen she saw restraining the crowds about the Asch building on the day of the fire had only two years before used their clubs on the Triangle pickets. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company was one shop that had refused to yield to a critical demand of the 1909 strikers—the improvement of safety conditions.

The tragedy of the Triangle fire engendered massive outrage among East Side garment workers, middle-class reformers, and diverse radicals. Protest meetings helped set the tone for the dramatic funeral parade:
120,000 marched in silence. This demonstration brought added pressure on officials to enforce and to strengthen factory laws and safety regulations, although it was to be four years before the new state and city industrial codes were wedged into law and many years more before they were adequately enforced. Vorse could not forget the words the garment worker Rose Schneiderman used to memorialize the Triangle victims: “I would be a traitor to those poor burned bodies if I came here to talk good fellowship. We have tried you good people of the public and we have found you wanting. . . . The life of men and women is so cheap and property is so sacred. There are so many of us for one job it matters little if [we] . . . are burned to death. . . . Too much blood has been spilled. . . . It is up to the working people to save themselves.”

After the fire, the owners of the Triangle firm were acquitted of a charge of negligence. They soon reopened their shop in a condemned building, and again proceeded, with official cooperation, to defy the safety “laws” of New York. Triangle’s new shop held an extra row of sewing machines that blocked the outside exit.5

Vorse’s understanding of the brutal handicaps suffered by working women led her to a new political stance. This shift occurred when she reported the famed 1912 textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Vorse’s path to Lawrence had been prepared by her presence at the Venetian general strike in 1904 and by the activating effect of A Club. She had shared the vulnerable anguish of working mothers. She had reacted against the heedless rich, made wealthy by the sale of contaminated milk that killed the babies of the poor. She had understood the cause of the Triangle tragedy—and she was ready to reorient her life.

Nineteen twelve was to be a banner year for progressives. The combined presidential votes given to Theodore Roosevelt, Eugene Debs, and Woodrow Wilson buried the supporters of President Taft. Feminism became a prime subject for discussion. Alice Paul, fresh from the militant Pankhurst suffrage movement in England, returned to the United States to shake up the lethargic image of American suffragists. American Bohemianism came to a boil in Greenwich Village. Socialist sentiment was widespread in the nation, and at the polls. The muckraking movement was at its height. An increasing number of young people at Ivy League colleges were certain that progress lay in denouncing their parents’ world; labor radicals were turning to dynamite in the West. When the Industrial Workers of the World came east to organize the workers in Lawrence, Mas-
sachusetts, the Greenwich Village intellectuals had a first-hand chance to learn about class warfare.

Situated thirty-five miles north of Boston along the Merrimac River, Lawrence was founded by a group of manufacturers in 1845. Its textile employees were at first chiefly native New Englanders and the new immigrants driven to the United States by the potato blight in Ireland. Beset by disease, death, industrial accidents, and nativist hysteria, the miserably poor Irish built the dam, canal, and giant factories in Lawrence in the 1850s.

In the 1890s the character of the working population in Lawrence underwent a sharp change, as Italians, Poles, Russians, Syrians, and Lithuanians replaced the native Americans and western Europeans in the textile industry. By 1911, seventy-four thousand of the eighty-six thousand inhabitants of Lawrence were first- or second-generation immigrants, with one-third of these southern and eastern Europeans. Most of the new immigrants were Italian, living within a one-mile radius of the Lawrence mills. There, by 1912, twenty-five separate nationalities spoke fifty different languages. This diversity went far to explain the difficulty of organizing the new American working class.

The influx of southern and eastern European immigrants provided an enormously profitable source of cheap labor for the mill owners. Although profits and living costs rose, wages declined, partly because the employers had effectively crushed union organization in their Lawrence plants before 1912. Indeed, the somnolent American Federation of Labor craft unions had shown little interest in organizing the impoverished "Dagos" and "Hunkies" in Lawrence. In 1912 the little capitalist utopia in Lawrence fattened upon the lives and labor of these men, women, and children, whose average work week was fifty-six hours, although 21 percent worked more, with no overtime pay.

The worker's misery did not end at the factory gates. Nearly all the workers lived in the congested tenement area, where one-third of the population resided on less than one-thirteenth of the city's land. High rents compelled tenement families to take in boarders. Five or six persons to a room was common. Immigrant wives were often responsible for doing the cooking and laundry for the lodgers, as well as for earning a wage in the mills.

Rats, filth in the halls, frequent fires, defective plumbing, inadequate toilet facilities, and rooms without windows compounded the misery of tenement life. The majority of mill workers subsisted on black bread, coffee, molasses or lard, and a cheap cut of stew meat once or twice a
Fuel was extremely expensive. Inadequate storage facilities forced the slum dwellers to buy coal in small bags, at 40 to 80 percent over the price of coal sold by the ton. The workers in the greatest woolen center in the country could not even afford the overcoats they produced. Margaret Sanger in the winter of 1912 found that only 4 out of 119 workers' children in Lawrence wore underwear beneath their ragged garments.

Mortality and health statistics complete the agonizing tale of working and living conditions in the textile town. With other textile centers, Lawrence had one of the highest death and infant-mortality rates in the country. The unhealthy conditions in the textile factories filled the weavers' rooms with fine fibers. One-third of the spinners died before they had worked ten years. Respiratory infections killed almost 70 percent of the Lawrence workers, whose average age at death was less than forty. A medical examiner wrote in 1912 that a "considerable number" of children died within two or three years of entering the mills and that "thirty-six out of every hundred of all men and women who work in the mill die before or by the time they are 25 years of age."

Such were the conditions that drove the Lawrence textile workers to revolt—conditions, incidentally, that were at this time no worse than in other textile centers in New England and the South. The 1912 statement of the strike committee in Lawrence seems curiously understated: "We hold that as useful members of society, and as producers we have the right to lead decent and honorable lives; that we are to have homes and not shacks; that we ought to have clean food and not adulterated food at high prices; that we ought to have clothes suited to the weather."

The Lawrence strike of 1912 began in January when the state put into effect its new law forbidding women and children to work more than fifty-four hours a week. Rather than cut profits, the mills responded by cutting the wages of all workers. The loss of twenty to thirty cents a week meant a great deal to families already on subsistence wages. Suddenly the daily suffering could no longer be tolerated. Within a week, twenty-three thousand textile workers had left the factories. With their families, they represented about 60 percent of the city's population; one-half of the textile workers were women and children. The strikers presented four moderate demands: a 15 percent increase in wages with a fifty-four-hour week; abolition of the bonus system; double pay for overtime; and no retribution against returning strikers.

The by-now-familiar scenario of American labor conflict continued. Lawrence mill owners, politicians, legal officials, small merchants, and religious leaders aligned themselves in opposition to worker demands. The
city police, state militia, company guards, and Harvard student militia were quickly moved into place to protect the hallowed rights of property. Arrayed against these forces in Lawrence was a new labor organization, the Industrial Workers of the World. The IWW, or Wobblies, as its members were often called, represented a dramatic new departure in American labor history—the creation of an anticapitalist industrial union designed to challenge the evil effects upon the American working class of rapid industrialization.7

In the fifty years after Mary Vorse's birth, the physical production of American industry increased fourteen times. Such enormous growth generated a demand for labor power that could be met only by recruiting labor from overseas. Less skilled immigrants provided the sweated labor at the bottom ranks of the United States' industrial economy. By 1912 the low-paid, dangerous, heavy work in American factories outside the South had become the virtual monopoly of southern and eastern European immigrants.

Yet the American Federation of Labor, formed in 1886, adopted the attitude that the unskilled foreign born were "unorganizable." The AFL came to consist largely of skilled craftsmen, often dominated by an openly antisocialist, racist, and male-supremacist philosophy that all but barred the entry of the immigrant, unskilled, black, or woman worker into its ranks on equitable terms. The AFL concentrated on organizing the minority of skilled workers, whose numbers shrunk proportionately each year as machinery and modern technology transformed the industrial labor force. Thus the AFL organizational policy had two negative results. One was that large numbers of American industrial workers remained unorganized until the CIO was formed in the 1930s. The other was that by chiefly serving the minority of skilled craftsmen, the AFL showed little interest in organizing each industry as a whole. Yet, without the solidarity of industrial unionism, the separate AFL craft unions within each industry or firm could easily be defeated during strikes by the unified power of the great corporations.

An indigenous labor organization committed to industrial unionism had developed in response to the AFL's failures. In 1905, leaders of the Western Federation of Miners and a collection of miscellaneous labor radicals assembled in Chicago to form the Industrial Workers of the World. The IWW sought the destruction of capitalism, scorned politics, and counted on the nonviolent general strike to make the revolution and to form the workers' republic. It forsook the rampant racism, nativism, and sexism of the AFL and became the most open, militant labor organization.
in American history. The Wobblies were known as the singing workers. Long after the IWW was smashed, its songs were still heard wherever protestors gathered, in the 1930s, the 1960s, and even the 1980s. The prime years of the IWW were between 1912 and 1917. Its later history was written in blood and ended in tragedy.

In practice, the IWW, no less than the AFL, concerned itself with immediate bread and butter gains. “The final aim . . . is revolution,” said a Wobbly leader, “but for the present let’s see if we can get a bed to sleep in, water enough to take a bath in and decent food to eat.” Despite its radical argot, the IWW rarely practiced sabotage or initiated violence.

Three of the Wobblies’ most colorful and effective organizers, Joe Ettor, William “Big Bill” Haywood, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, arrived in Lawrence to direct the fight. By March 1912, the IWW had enrolled more than ten thousand members in its Local 20. Most of the new union members had been in the United States less than three years. To the dominant classes in Lawrence, it seemed for a time that the IWW might really activate the revolutionary potential of the poor.

Even those commentators most hostile to unionism admitted that the Lawrence strikers exhibited a fighting solidarity not seen before in American labor battles. The marvel of the Lawrence strike was that the IWW organized the “unorganizable,” blending many ethnic groups and rivalries into one smoothly functioning, high-spirited unit. The gray masses flowing passively in and out the mill gates had suddenly become singing, vibrant, and unafraid. The sight of as many as twenty thousand disciplined workers walking in endless file through the mill district in the famous moving picket line, and of daily parades of three thousand to ten thousand people singing radical and Wobblie songs, tremendously alarmed the respectable elements and earned Lawrence its epic status in American labor history.

The brutality of Lawrence mill owners and city officials was so blatant, and so widely reported in an increasingly sympathetic press, that employer arrogance became an all-important factor leading to the textile workers’ victory. Publicity brought large monetary contributions for strike relief into Lawrence from trade unions, socialists, and ethnic groups across the country. Despite the beatings and bayonetting practiced by the police and militia, the workers remained remarkably nonviolent through the long nine weeks of the strike, even when two strikers were killed and hundreds arrested and jailed. A clumsy plot to plant dynamite and blame it on the IWW failed when it became clear to many Americans that the plan was instigated by a Lawrence businessman and the president of the
American Woolen Company himself. The state’s arrest in February of IWW leaders Joe Ettor and Arturo Giovannitti, for a murder of which they were obviously innocent, was equally inept. The arrests fueled worker resistance. Before a jury found Ettor and Giovannitti innocent more than eight months later, the case had become an international labor cause.

Still, the combined forces backing the owners were far superior to the power of the united textile workers. The strike could have easily been lost if the removal of the strikers’ children from the city had not elicited such callous repression from the Lawrence authorities. Early in February the strikers, aided by Margaret Sanger, who would later win fame as a leader of the birth control movement, sent 245 of their children to friends and relatives in New York City and Vermont for safekeeping during the strike. The exodus of the pale, ragged children of Lawrence aroused public resentment against the starvation wages paid to the textile workers.

While the antilabor Hearst newspapers charged the strikers with inhuman neglect of their families, the mill ownership made plans to prevent further departures of the children from Lawrence. On February 22, seven youngsters were arrested when their parents attempted to send them from the city. Two days later the Lawrence police arrested fifteen children and eight adults as they attempted to board the train for Philadelphia. The officers took the mothers to jail and put the children in the city poor farm. The public exploded in fury. The liberal papers resounded with indignation. Beating and imprisoning strikers was acceptable, but police prevention of lawful travel exceeded even the conservatives’ limits. Petitions streaming into Washington led to congressional and Bureau of Labor investigations. Reporters, middle-class reformers, social workers, magazine writers, Senators, and upper-class women, including even the wife of President William Taft, traveled to Lawrence to see for themselves how workers lived.

Mary Vorse was among those who were curious about what lay behind the seizure of children. After reading the account in the morning newspaper, she persuaded Harper’s Weekly to send her to Lawrence. The article she wrote would lose the magazine advertising business from the American Woolen Company.

Vorse traveled to Lawrence with Joe O’Brien, a free-lance reporter whom she had met in New York in the winter of 1911. O’Brien was thirty-seven, an open-hearted, red-headed Irishman from a small farm in Virginia. He had left home when he was fourteen and gone to work in Boston as a cub reporter a few years later. There he was known for his
propensity to steal city vehicles for fun and abandon them in the Boston train station.9

O'Brien—the hard-drinking, high-spirited socialist and suffragist—won Vorse's love with his blarney and joie de vivre. "This is dawntime in my soul," his note to her read. "The dawn and the singing in my soul and my melted listening heart all belong to you. . . . I pray to the god inside of me . . . to make me work very hard and always be kind, so that my Mary will put her folding-up rose-leaf of a hand in mine and go with me to the edge of life and find contentment and singing things." She responded: "Dear, in this little piece of time you have made yourself more a part of my life than anyone else ever has. And you come into an inner piece of my spirit that I have kept closed always."10 Warmed by new love, they were light-minded and gay as they boarded the midnight train for Lawrence.

The street lamps were still on when they arrived in the city. They walked through streets empty of people. Both were stunned by the menacing presence of hundreds of armed soldiers who stood guard at the mills and patrolled the crossings. For the first time Vorse saw troops called out against American strikers. "We got breakfast, not talking much, for our familiar New England town had become strange and sinister," she wrote.11

At strike headquarters, Vorse met the IWW leaders. She listened to the one-eyed giant, Bill Haywood, talk to reporters and respond to the problems of the strikers. Vorse had her first glimpse of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, who was to become a close friend. "She stood there, young, with her Irish blue eyes, her face magnolia white and her cloud of black hair, the picture of a youthful revolutionary girl leader." Joe told Mary of his first meeting with Flynn six years before. He had been sent by his newspaper to cover the court hearing of Flynn, then fifteen years old. She and her father had been arrested for talking socialism on Broadway. The judge asked Flynn if she thought she could win converts in that way. Flynn replied, "Indeed I do." The judge sighed sadly. "Dismissed," he said. Flynn had been arrested five more times since then in the IWW's free-speech fights in Washington, Montana, and Pennsylvania. Now in her early twenties, and an immensely skillful speaker, she came to help organize the workers in Lawrence, bringing her mother and her baby with her. Vorse heard Flynn address the workers: "She stirred them, lifted them up in her appeal for solidarity. . . . It was as though a spurt of flame had gone through the audience. . . . Something beautiful and strong had swept through the people and welded them together, singing."12

The mass meeting over, Vorse and O'Brien shared coffee with Hay-
wood, Flynn, and Carlo Tresca, Flynn's anarchist lover. (Tresca, the historian David Montgomery commented, was the "one man who actually incarnated the conservative's fantasy of the agitator who could start an uprising with a speech.") An aged New England farmer approached them, accompanied by a young Jewish worker. The old man had come over a hundred miles, he said, to read the Declaration of Independence to the workers, so that they could understand their rights of free speech and free assembly. Haywood gently advised him that if the workers gathered to hear him read, they would probably all be arrested. The farmer decided to take the chance. Off he went, tenderly guided by the scrawny Jewish youth.

Drama crowded upon drama. Haywood told Vorse how on the day the children and their mothers were arrested in the railroad station, the police mauled a group of women pickets. Two Italian pickets had assumed they were safe from violence because they were pregnant. Both miscarried as a result of the police attack. A similar event occurred a few days later.

Women at Lawrence not only led the picket lines, they ran the soup kitchens, organized relief, voted in all strike decisions, and were elected to the Strike Committee. The Wobblies held special meetings for women and encouraged rank-and-file women leaders. As Elizabeth Gurley Flynn said: "The IWW has been accused of putting women in the front. The truth is, the IWW does not keep [women] in the back, and they go to the front." Women strikers in Lawrence formed large parades, linking their arms together, jeering and hooting at police, militia, and management officials, creating a vast disturbance, and helping each other to escape when arrests were being made. Streets were often patrolled by groups of girls who attacked strikebreakers with red pepper, rocks, and clubs. The IWW understood that the support of women was a key to winning the strike, for almost half the Lawrence strikers were women and the men were dependent on the encouragement of their wives at home. Indeed, only about two-thirds of the female activists during the strike were textile workers; the others included housewives, shop clerks, a teacher, and a midwife.

That first afternoon in Lawrence, Vorse visited the workers' slums. In the dreadful-smelling, sunless flats she met families who lived six to a room, supported by the labor of their children. On the walls near the mills, she saw samples of the recruitment posters that were spread throughout Europe by American mill owners. The posters showed well-clad workers with full lunch baskets standing in front of comfortable homes. She wrote that the leading Irish priest in Lawrence had "hated workers' children being sent away into socialist homes, so he instigated Colonel Sweetser,
the commanding officer of the militia, to stop them as they were leaving.” Wherever Vorse and O’Brien went, they were followed by several Italian workers who were intent upon protecting them from the militiamen. Joe O’Brien’s instinct for direct action led him to suggest retaliation against the violence. “My boy,” Haywood said to O’Brien, “the most violent thing a striker can do is to put his hands in his pockets and keep them there.”16

The unity created among people in struggle against vast forces, their commitment and courage, her realization of the human cost of profit making—all these affected Vorse profoundly. In 1904 in Venice, she had been awed by the spiritual quality of a mass of united workers. Again, in Lawrence, the most remarkable aspect of the strike seemed to her to be the sense of community born among the strikers. Men and women who had never known each other, had never directed large groups, now all at once were maintaining relief depots, organizing mass demonstrations, picnics, and concerts, and living, singing, and marching in solidarity. The spirit of unity lifted them from isolation and poverty into a larger purpose, the individual temporarily forgotten for the common good.

A peculiar fusion also occurred among the outside observers. Lincoln Steffens, Fremont Older, William Allen White, and Vida Scudder were only a few of the reporters and writers who formed lifelong friendships as a result of the strike. Like Vorse and O’Brien they were moved by the almost religious spirit of the Lawrence workers. As the writer Ray Stannard Baker remembered: “I shall not soon forget the curious lift, the strange sudden fire, of the mingled nationalities at the strike meetings . . . and not only at the meetings did they sing, but at the soup houses and in the streets. I saw a group of women strikers, who were peeling potatoes at a relief station suddenly break into the swing of the The Internationale . . . It is not short of amazing, the power of a great idea.”17

Of all the strike sympathizers in Lawrence, Vorse found most interesting a woman doctor who had moved her practice to Lawrence at the beginning of the strike. The doctor came when she learned that the tuberculosis rate among children who worked in the mills was shockingly higher than that among other Massachusetts children of the same age. The doctor was lonely in Lawrence. The townspeople of her own class spurned her because she sided with the workers.

The meeting with the doctor led Vorse to do a series of interviews with the leading men of the town, all the ministers, and several prominent local women. It seemed to Vorse that these “decent people, who were like those I had lived with all my life, were indifferent only because they were ignorant of the conditions under which the Lawrence workers lived,”
much as Vorse had been ignorant. "If they knew the cost in lives, if they knew that one child in five died before it was five years old, if they knew the overcrowding," Vorse reasoned, "they must know at last what the people were striking about... against death and privation." 

Armed with this information, Vorse approached the town notables. Not one of them was responsive. They believed that the workers were misguided but dangerous aliens who preferred to live as they did in order to save money. Twenty years later, when Mary Vorse had lost her naivety, nice women in Kentucky would tell her identical things about the miners in Bloody Harlan County.

The publicity engendered by the strike embarrassed Massachusetts industrialists. The governor of Massachusetts notified mill owners that he would soon withdraw the militia. Fearing that further public exposure might threaten the notoriously high woolen tariff, the owners capitulated in mid-March. Although the workers' advance in Lawrence was only temporary, it was an important victory. Within a few months of the settlement, 245,000 textile workers in New England received wage increases as an indirect result of the Lawrence fight. As soon as the mill owners granted the wage increase, however, they passed along the cost to the consumers in higher prices for woolen and cotton goods.

The experience at Lawrence did not inspire Vorse to become a revolutionary or labor leader. She was too critical to believe in a perfect society and too comfortable to accept the life of a union organizer. Most important, her choices were severely restricted by the need to care for and support two small children. But she could do one thing. She could try to make others as angry as she was.

The new career of labor reporter was born at Lawrence, when, as never before, American readers had been provided generally accurate and comprehensive coverage of strike events in mainstream journals and the large dailies. Strike leaders at once realized the vital contribution of sympathetic publicity to maintaining worker resistance and gaining liberal support. Not until the consolidation of the CIO victories, over two decades later, did the labor wars end, and with them the demand for labor journalism. Today, its survivors are channeled almost exclusively into the pages of the union newspapers and the small radical press. But for thirty years after Lawrence, the byline of Mary Heaton Vorse would represent the work of one of the earliest and most important of the new labor reporters. "I wanted to see wages go up and the babies' death rate go down," she wrote. "There must be thousands like myself who were not indifferent, but only ignorant. I
went away from Lawrence with a resolve that I would write about these things always.”

Mary Vorse wrote this twenty-three years later in her autobiography, *A Footnote to Folly*. She made Lawrence into a powerful self-drama, the sudden turning point of her life, the moment that forever determined her future devotion to labor journalism and radical politics. But in fact Mary did not experience such a drastic conversion. Like most people, she moved more slowly into a new path, pulled along as much by a changing society and the influence of others, as by her own accumulated experiences.

Nevertheless, the heroic scenes of Lawrence did confirm and strengthen her growing class awareness. Returning home from Lawrence, she and Joe O’Brien together decided they could best contribute to the labor movement by telling the worker’s story. “We knew now where we belonged,” she said, “on the side of the workers and not with the comfortable people among whom we were born. . . . Some synthesis had taken place between my life and that of the workers, some peculiar change which would never again permit me to look with indifference on the fact that riches for the few were made by the misery of the many.”

They knew, too, that they wanted to work together. In April, they were married, both the children “coming down with measles to celebrate.”