# LABOR'S SCHOOLHOUSE

## Lessons from the Paterson Silk Strike of 1913

*By Garret Keizer*

Organizers of the 1913 Silk Strike in Paterson, New Jersey. Front row, from left: Hubert Harrison, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and "Big Bill" Haywood. Back row: unknown, Patrick L. Quinlan, unknown, and unknown. Photographer unknown. Courtesy the American Labor Museum, Haledon, New Jersey, and Jeffrey B. Perry

Around the time that Donald Trump became the Republican Party's nominee for president, my wife and I visited the American Labor Museum at the Botto House National Landmark, in Haledon, New Jersey. Several Muslim children, three whose parents came from Bangladesh and another whose parents came from Morocco, were tending the museum's Immigrant Garden. Education director Evelyn Hershey worked beside them, highlighting the garden's history, redirecting the hose. It was hard to watch her young helpers without wondering how fraught the words "immigrant" and "Muslim" might soon be for them.

The first people to plant here were Pietro and Maria Botto, who came to Ellis Island from Biella, Italy, in 1892. A skilled weaver from a region renowned for its weaving, Pietro was fleeing military conscription. (He'd already served a six-year stint in the Italian Army.) He was twenty-six years old; his wife, a bride at fifteen, was twenty-two. They had a one-year-old daughter. Like many of their fellow passengers, the Bottos carried most of their belongings in a trunk. Unlike many of the 43 million immigrants currently in the United States, they came with some reasonable assurance of a welcome.

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Pietro's skills made it easy for him to find work in New Jersey's burgeoning textile industry. Maria worked at home, "picking silk" for imperfections and looking after the household, which soon included three more daughters. By 1907, the Bottos had managed to save enough money to purchase a plot of land in Haledon, a "trolley suburb" of Paterson. There they built the twelve-room, cement-block house that still bears their name.

Other Paterson workers were also finding their way to Haledon, some for recreation, some to put down roots. The trolley tracks made for a quick commute, and the rolling terrain reminded the Piedmontese immigrants of home. In addition to renting out their upstairs apartments, the enterprising Bottos supplemented their income by running a kind of workers' weekend resort, cooking meals for as many as a hundred guests at a time. Not far from where my wife and I watched the children water the tomatoes stands the bocce court over which Pietro presided with a ball of measuring string he kept in his pocket. Farther away on the terraced lot, once the site of rabbit hutches and a chicken coop, is the grape arbor where the Bottos set up tables for their guests to play cards. Of course, they also made their own wine.

After the volunteer gardeners had gone home for the day, Hershey gave us a tour of the house, which includes a kitchen, a dining room, and a parlor with period furnishings, many once belonging to the Bottos. We saw their polenta pot, a hand-pumped vacuum cleaner, Maria's black Victorian bathing costume, a mandolin, and cherished pictures of Piedmontese landscapes. A slender woman with dark hair and an amiable North Jersey accent, Hershey has worked at the museum since graduating from college in the late 1980s. She grew up hearing stories of how her grandmother, employed in a Pennsylvania hosiery mill, signed her first union card on a co-worker's back, how she lay down in front of the factory gates before being arrested during a strike. I had the impression that Hershey feels very much at home here.

Upstairs is a meeting room with rotating exhibits and, through doors at one end of a central hall, a small balcony attached to the front of the house. Hershey seemed to know we wanted to stand there. Pointing over the rooftops of what is now a densely populated, lower-middle-class town measuring about a square mile and holding more than eight thousand people, many of them Latino, she invited us to imagine an undeveloped expanse of field cresting to form a natural amphitheater. It was from this balcony that, during six months of Sundays in 1913, speakers such as Upton Sinclair, John Reed, and Industrial Workers of the World organizers Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and "Big Bill" Haywood addressed crowds numbering from 3,000 to 25,000 people. Most were strikers from the silk mills of Paterson; a few were sympathetic artists and intellectuals from New York. Photographs show the spectators gathered in their Sunday best, several of them perched on the limbs of trees. A witness observed the crowds taking special care not to trample the Bottos' front lawn.

Hershey told us that sometimes when school groups visit, a student will step onto the balcony and intone, "I have a dream." Wrong speech, wrong era, but, to her thinking at least, the right idea. A dream had drawn the Bottos to Haledon, the chance of owning the "slice of the earth" promised in developers' advertisements. The strikers had a dream as well, more than a little utopian for the times: an eight-hour workday ("Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will!" went the slogan); an end to child labor; and, as promulgated by the I.W.W. (or the Wobblies, as they were called), the formation of "one big union" that would be open to all. The Sunday gatherings of 1913 included nine nationalities, each moving to the front of the crowd at the sound of its own language.

"Regardless of their birthplaces," proclaimed the I.W.W. newspaper *Solidarity*, the Paterson strikers of 1913 "ARE AMERICANS in the true sense of the term." But when another strike broke out in Paterson, in 1924, the mayor, a politician depressingly ahead of his time, vowed to scrutinize the papers of everyone who'd been on a picket line, with an eye toward their deportation. The Bottos had not faced deportation for their part in the 1913 strike, though Pietro never worked in the mills again.

My wife grew up in Haledon, one town over from mine. We met in the regional high school. We walked the sidewalks hand in hand, past the close-built houses of her hometown, and then, on the couch in her parents' living room, we watched as the same houses seemed to roll behind the credits for *All in the Family*, a televised half-hour of blue-collar minstrelsy that aired on Saturday nights. The show rang true and the show rang false, in roughly equal measure. We knew our share of Archie Bunkers, but we also knew our share of Archie Bunker look-alikes who would have told the bigot to shut up. Some of both lived in Haledon.

I suppose that my affection for the girl began rubbing off on her town, or maybe its radical ghosts were already nudging my subconscious, but I soon began to feel that Haledon had something over on the more affluent suburbs to the north. A lower rung on the ladder of upward mobility, it was also a wider one. My fancy deepened as Haledon grew more diverse and my infrequent visits there became more susceptible to nostalgia. On the Monday after Election Day, I summoned the courage to check the returns for my beloved Haledon, where I've always wanted to believe that "America still works." According to the latest tally, at least 768 people voted for Donald Trump. More than three times that number voted for somebody else. So my wishful notion was safe, which is more than I could say for my nation.

Kathy and I both remember when the defunct trolley tracks were still embedded in the pavement on Belmont Avenue, but neither of us recalls ever hearing about the Paterson Silk Strike of 1913 or the Botto House on Norwood Street, in school or out. We could not have heard of the American Labor Museum, which wasn't in existence until 1983, though the Botto House was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1975, the same year we married and moved out of state.

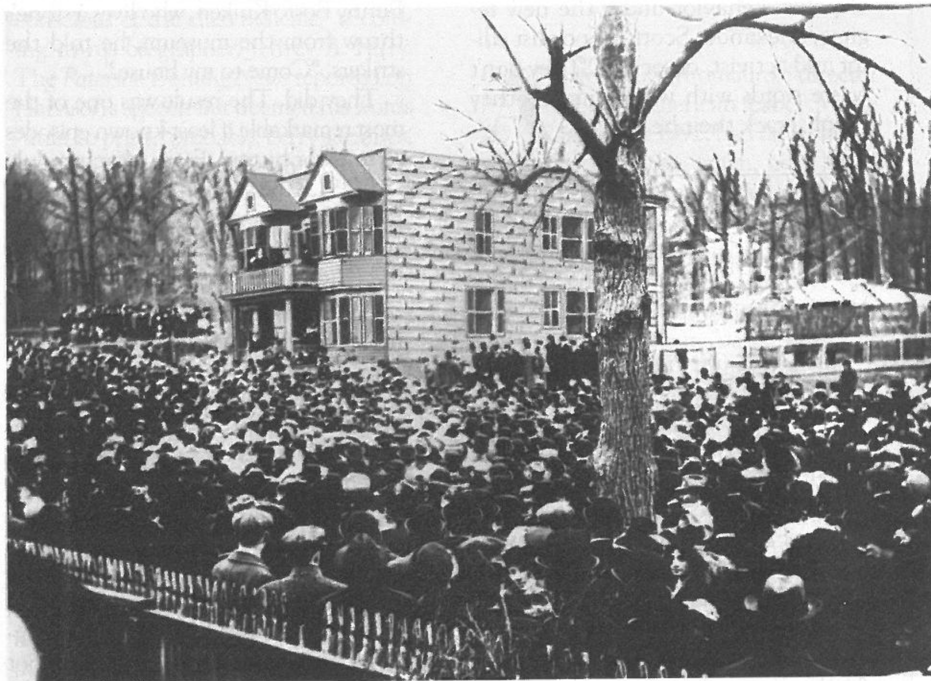
We do remember being told by our teachers and parents that Paterson was once called the Silk City of the World. Intended as a proving ground by manufacturing boosters allied with Alexander Hamilton, who saw the advantage of its mighty falls, America's first planned industrial city began producing silk

goods in the 1840s. By 1910 it was producing half the silk draperies, upholsteries, and clothing in the United States. More than 20,000 men, women, and children worked in 276 mills, one of them large enough to employ 8,000 workers in a virtual city within a city.

Conditions for the workers, especially those at the lower skill levels—dyers' helpers, for instance—would be familiar to anyone with a knowledge of industrial history in the United States or Apple factories in present-day China. Children as young as eight were employed to clamber up the giant looms to remove impurities and fix jams. (Paterson schools were open at night for any children with the stamina to crack open a book after a ten-hour workday.) One mill owner nailed his windows closed to reduce distractions. Another, who exclusively employed young women and girls, believing them more docile than males, withheld every new hire's wages for the first six months.

Docility was not that easy to come by, however. From 1881 to 1900, there were no fewer than 140 strikes in Paterson. The first recorded strike by women and children occurred as early as 1828. In some instances, militancy was buoyed by the skill levels of the workers. Not least of all in the silk industry, where the costly raw material could not be produced domestically (attempts to raise silkworms had failed) and where it took ten to twelve years to train a skilled weaver, the elite strata of the labor force had a strong sense of their own worth. Industrial regimentation was new to them. They were direct heirs to a "long tradition of artisan independence," notes historian Steve Golin, such that "the habits and attitudes of the handloom weaver outlived the handloom" once machinery became ascendant. Those die-hard habits included prerogatives not easily reconciled with the constraints of a wage slave. A silk-industry journal of the time makes the revealing complaint that "No Paterson mill-hand, with a proper self-respect, can be kept at [a] spinning frame, or loom, when a circus is in town."

Some of the workers, the Bottos among them, also had come to America with strong unionist traditions, including socialist and anarchist politics. A common epithet for Paterson in those days was Red City. This was not entirely an exaggeration. After practicing with his pistol in a Paterson back yard, one determined anarchist went back to Italy and assassinated King Umberto. Not surprisingly, some of Paterson's strikes were marked by violence, notably a dyers' strike in 1902, in which anarchists played a leading role. In contrast, the Silk Strike of 1913 was distinguished by its nonviolent character, at least on the strikers' part, a stance encouraged by the I.W.W. Leading figures from the union had been invited to Paterson fresh from organizing a successful strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, the previous year. It was at the Lawrence strike that the mill girls adopted the memorable slogan "bread and roses," a demand for the sustenance of life and its sweetness too.



A strike rally at the Botto House in 1913. Photographer unknown.
Courtesy the American Labor Museum, Haledon, New Jersey

The other distinguishing feature of the 1913 engagement was its quick escalation to the scale of a general strike. The first tremor was a walkout of 800 silk weavers in late January. On February 25, 5,000 mostly Jewish weavers walked off the job and marched to the office of Paterson's I.W.W. local. By early spring, 300 mills were out of operation. Within the next six months, 4,800 people were arrested, of whom 1,300 were sent to jail.

The numbers of people arrested and jailed are probably less significant than the diversity they represent. For half a year, skilled workers picketed with unskilled workers, women with men, "wops" with "sheenies," as two of the more prominent groups were derisively called. In effect, the strikers were overturning what had long been a strategy of the mill owners, whose agents would go to Ellis Island with the aim of recruiting as diverse a workforce as possible, hoping that language differences and ethnic rivalries would serve as a check on collective action. (Prejudice could be rife even within the same ethnic group. "If a girl came home and said she was going with a Napolitano," noted one northern Italian woman, "oh, her father almost killed her.") On the first day of the strike, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn exhorted the strikers not to be "tricked by racial prejudice, for they'll try to tell you that the Jews are going to work and then they'll tell you that the Italians have gone back."

What triggered the 1913 strike, and perhaps what makes it most relevant to us today, was the ruthless appropriation of technology for the bottom line. The introduction of the so-called four-loom system enabled mill owners to double their production while laying

off half the workforce, which they undertook to do with no increase in pay for the weavers who remained. The strikers were hardly Luddites; destroying the new looms was not one of their demands. But they weren't dunces either. They understood that the touted benefits of technology are always contingent on who owns the means of production and on whose behalf those means are employed. Such an understanding feels almost as antique today as a general strike. During the presidential debates, for example, I never heard Donald Trump mention automation in his demagogic lamentations for the loss of American jobs, or Hillary Clinton mention automation by way of deflecting his attacks on "horrible trade deals." Both were constrained by prevailing pieties. More secular in their outlook, the Paterson strikers would have had fewer scruples about offending the gods of high tech and their tweeting evangelists.

A strike in late winter might seem rash, though the workers were not without a strategic rationale. They were holding the industry's spring sales season hostage, even while forfeiting their wages at a bleak time of year. Given the likelihood of hunger and the risk of violence, some of the strikers sent their children out of the city to be cared for by sympathetic host families. One of the most poignant photographs at the Botto House museum shows three rows of Jewish children, posed as in a school picture, just before their evacuation, sober-faced in their caps, knickers, and pinafores. It takes a moment to realize that some of these children may also have been on strike. Evelyn Hershey says that whenever school groups visit the Botto House, "I point out to them that this was a home of child laborers."

Along with an end to child labor and an eight-hour workday, the strikers demanded a minimum wage of twelve dollars a week for the dyers' helpers, a return to the improved work schedule that ribbon weavers had won in an 1894 strike and lost thereafter, and an increase of a dollar a week for hard-silk weavers. By covering all three major arms of the silk-industry workforce, the 1913 strikers prefigured the broader inclusiveness of the "social justice unionism" advocated by progressives in today's labor movement. They also demanded a promise of no retaliation for union activities. But if the workers seemed united as never before, so were the mill owners and the Paterson police department, the latter now led by a hardliner whose biases were in sharp contrast with the pro-labor sympathies of some of his predecessors. Speaking of police behavior under the new regime, Alexander Scott, a Socialist editor and activist, observed, "They don't waste words with workingmen—they simply crack their heads."

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When I.W.W. organizers arrived in the city, they were arrested almost as soon as they got off the train. (Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was arraigned on what may be the most adverbially loaded charge on record, for "conspiracy to ... raucously and riotously and tumultuously disturb the peace of New Jersey.") At the point when peaceful assembly within the Paterson city limits seemed almost impossible for the strikers, a cry went up that was soon to attain the status of a slogan: "On to Haledon!" In her 1955 autobiography, *The Rebel Girl*, Flynn recounts the dramatic moment when "with Bill [Haywood] at the head they started to walk toward this little Socialist oasis of free speech in a desert of suppression."

A year before the strike and a little more than a century before Bernie Sanders would launch his presidential campaign with a call for "political revolution," Socialist Eugene Debs won 6 percent of the national popular vote in his bid for the presidency. In the same election, the "little oasis" of Haledon chose German immigrant and Socialist William Brueckmann as its mayor and two additional Socialists as justices of the peace. Married to a weaver, Brueckmann was openly supportive of the strikers and offered them sanctuary in Haledon. He promised they would not be harassed by the town's sole policeman, "a little pink-cheeked man" said to have weighed only ninety pounds. The first Haledon rally was held in a park too small for the thousands who had marched there. It was then that Pietro Botto, on strike along with his daughters, suggested an alternative venue. As quoted by his eighty-eight-year-old granddaughter, Bunny Botto Kuiken, who lives a stone's throw from the museum, he told the strikers, "Come to my house."

They did. The result was one of the most remarkable if least-known episodes in labor history. From March to July of 1913, the strikers came to the Bottos' house every Sunday to be exhorted by speakers and to enjoy what Flynn called "a sort of picnic ... that would stimulate them for the rest of the week." A sort of church service too, complete with collection plates and songs. "We're going to learn how to sing in Paterson," Haywood declared, "and the next time we meet in Haledon we'll have bands and music. We are going to learn to sing in many different languages." John Reed led the singing and Flynn herself passed the plate. When Upton Sinclair came to the Botto House to address one of the largest gatherings in May—"I just could not stand it any longer, and I let my books go and came down here to congratulate you"—he called the crowd "the finest exhibit of solidarity ever seen in the Eastern States."

According to Bunny Botto Kuiken, when Paterson detectives were rumored to be near, her mother and her aunt took Sinclair to the back door and showed him an escape route through the woods. They performed the same office for other speakers, including Flynn's Wobbly comrade and lover, Carlo Tresca, "one of the worst men in the United States today," according to a contemporary New Jersey prosecutor. But there were no assaults on the Botto House rallies, where it seemed to Haywood "as if the whole population of the northern part of New Jersey was present."

One wishes that more of the speakers' remarks had been recorded. The testimonies of those who heard them, many recounted in Steve Golin's masterful history of the strike, *The Fragile Bridge*, attest to their power. Flynn, all of twenty-two at the time, was known as a

charismatic orator, beloved by the strikers, women and girls in particular. "If I could be a second Miss Flynn," one of them wrote to the *Paterson Evening News*, "I would be more honored than if I could be a queen." On one occasion Flynn and her fellow speakers were joined by the Harlem Socialist Hubert Harrison, "the most class conscious of the race radicals, and the most race conscious of the class radicals," according to his biographer, Jeffrey B. Perry. The *Paterson Evening News* reported on Harrison's speech but deemed his words "unfit to print," probably, Perry surmises, because they were the most openly critical of capitalism.

That an outspoken African-American radical was invited to address a gathering of white immigrant strikers both tempts and belies idealization. The I.W.W. was more advanced than many Socialists on matters of race and had gone so far as to organize "mixed locals" of black and white timber workers in Louisiana. But although a Wobbly organizer in Paterson noted that "the silk bosses … won't hire Black men and women," and in spite of there being a well-established black population along a section of the Passaic River known familiarly as "the African Shore," racial discrimination was not at issue in the Paterson strike. The strikers were willing to give ear to a black activist—and Maria Botto, not well at the time of the strike, was treated by an African-American doctor—but their sense of solidarity went only so far. According to Jimmy Richardson, a Paterson native who has devoted his life to the study of black history in his city, white silk workers would not have worked side by side with black ones, nor would the mill owners have thought to hire blacks except for the most menial chores. Even so inglorious a task as canal-digging fell to the Irish.

Despite these regrettable limitations, the Botto House rallies aimed at what the American left has seldom achieved and must soon achieve if it is to have any hope of survival, which is to say, a compelling embodiment of the kind of society it is fighting for. What Upton Sinclair and other less famous observers believed they had glimpsed in Haledon remained an inspiration among the Paterson working classes for as long as the strike of 1913 remained in living memory. In a poem published in a 1928 issue of *The New Masses*, a third-generation weaver wrote:

> Gold and green and crimson
> Are the flowers I am weaving
> On the Jacquard looms.
> Beautiful, beautiful!
> They remind me now
> Of a summer meadow in Haledon.

Angelica Santomauro, director of the American Labor Museum since 1992, had never heard of the Botto House when, as a Jersey City math teacher, she was assigned a junior high social-studies course. "I was teaching a class of beautiful, multicultural children an elitist history," she says. "The heroes I was presenting to them were all white males, presidents of the United States, military generals, and corporate magnates, and I thought, this isn't making any sense."

She enrolled in a course at Rutgers University called Introduction to Labor Studies, which in her words "changed my life." It also changed her social-studies curriculum. Her revised lessons sparked the formation of the Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Grade Student Union, one of whose demands was that the boys' bathrooms have doors on the stalls, just as the girls' bathrooms had. The union prevailed and the boys got their doors.

Santomauro is understandably proud that the secretary-treasurer of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. referred to the Botto House as "Labor's Schoolhouse," and part of the museum's mission is to bring labor history into the schools, where it has too often been absent. (There are more than 5,000 chapters of Future Business Leaders of America in high schools nationwide, but you will search in vain for a single chapter of Future Labor Leaders of America, for the simple reason that no such organization exists.) In addition to offering arts programs for children and a lending library devoted to labor subjects, the museum partners with the Passaic County Cultural and Heritage Council to hold an annual workshop for teachers. Last year's was about labor and race relations in New Jersey; this year's included a segment on the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s Young Workers Program, a national initiative to promote



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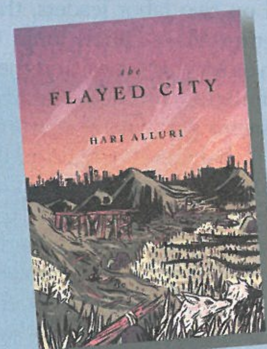

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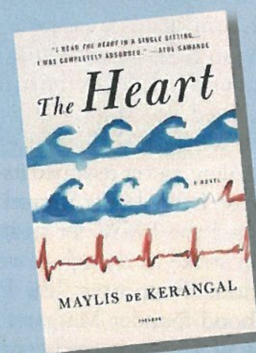

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unionism among a new generation. At a time when union membership in the United States accounts for little more than a tenth of the workforce (at my birth it was almost a third), the American Labor Museum seems determined not to become the reliquary of a dead tradition.

Like the period rooms on the museum's first floor, its educational programs emphasize immigration almost as much as organized labor. Less than four months after Donald Trump took office, Hershey kicked off a new arts program called "Celebrate Immigration in America" with a presentation at a local high school on two labor leaders, the Irish immigrant Mary Harris Jones (better known as Mother Jones) and the Mexican immigrant Ernesto Galarza. The tie-in seems particularly relevant in an era of globalization, when the line between unionism and nativism can become blurred. Americans tend to regard their standard of living as an export, forgetting that many of the ideas that made it possible were imported goods. They "came over on the boat" with the Bottos and their mandolin. The problem with our current political climate may not be a want of manners so much as a loss of memory. The handmaid of nativism is amnesia.

Except for the rehiring of a few laid-off weavers, the 1913 strikers got none of their demands when, hungry and demoralized, they finally capitulated at the end of July. Ironically, child labor helped to defeat the strike, as the mill owners began outsourcing work to annexes in Pennsylvania, where the wives and children of coal miners were more easily brought to heel. Though some gains were just over the horizon (an eight-hour workday was six years away), the defeat of the strike must have seemed devastating at the time. The I.W.W., blamed by some for the strike's failure, never regained its footing in the East. Labor leader Samuel Gompers berated the I.W.W. for treating the Paterson strike as though it were "the revolution." Supporters like Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger (the I.W.W. also promoted family planning) grew disaffected and sought new alliances with middle-class reform movements, a maneuver whose ultimate wisdom may soon be facing its severest test. As the I.W.W. and its Socialist allies traded recriminations, one Wobbly said bitterly, "I regret there was a Haledon."

Some in Haledon may have regretted that there was a strike. One of the Botto daughters was fired from her job; another sought to make herself more employable by denying her connection to the family. Pietro was effectively blackballed, and Maria, probably worn down by exhaustion, died two years later. Mayor Brueckmann was indicted for "malfeasance in office" for permitting the Haledon rallies and for allegedly joining a picket line. In his absence, the Haledon town council voted to withdraw permission for any further rallies. Pietro Botto followed suit.

"I am not sure any more that the [American] working class is capable of a revolution, peaceful or otherwise," John Reed said not long after the strike. Recent events prompt me to wonder if he spoke too soon, if he ought to have confined his skepticism to revolution from the left—though that may also be a case of speaking too soon. Reed had his reasons for disillusionment. His *Pageant of the Paterson Strike,* sponsored by the I.W.W. and New York philanthropist Mabel Dodge, had been performed at Madison Square Garden by hundreds of strikers depicting themselves—and in the process fracturing the very solidarity the pageant was written to celebrate. Those who had stayed behind to picket in Paterson envied those who got to perform in New York. Then as now, celebrity and solidarity were an uneasy match.

Reed eventually died in Soviet Russia, as did Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. Hubert Harrison would soon leave the Socialist Party, convinced that too many of its members cared less about being workers than they cared about being white. Hardly the best-remembered figure among those who spoke at the Botto House, Harrison might justifiably be regarded as the most prophetic.

Perhaps the saddest outcome of the strike was its virtual erasure from collective memory. Never mind that Jersey City social-studies teacher Angelica Santomauro had never heard of the Botto House; Bunny Botto Kuiken, who traipsed over its lawn beside her beloved grandfather Pietro until his death in 1945, and lived in the house first singly and then with her husband until 1982, was for a long time ignorant of what had happened there. None of her relatives ever mentioned the strike when she was growing up. Yet she kept coming across old photographs of thousands of people standing outside her house. It was only through her own research and by pressing reticent neighbors and family members that she learned the full story, and largely through her efforts that the house was put on the National Register of Historic Places. Since 1992 it has been displayed prominently on the Haledon town seal.

I suppose I could go door-to-door in Haledon to see how many people recognize the image or know what it refers to, but, as with the schoolchildren who shout "I have a dream" from the Botto House balcony, their understanding might be more intuitive than I could learn through a poll. And I might not be able to make myself understood to everyone who answered the door. With an enrollment of a little more than a thousand, the Haledon elementary school reports that its students come from no fewer than twenty-seven linguistic backgrounds. There always was and always will be more than one immigrant garden in Haledon. Call that a shaky prediction, or call it a militant vow.

At least the children I saw weeding the vegetables next to Pietro's bocce court knew the story and the names of the people who first lived there. When a visiting delegation of Bangladeshi trade unionists came to the Botto House to pay their respects, the kids knew about that too. After finishing the garden project and the snack that followed, one of the girls brought Kathy and me dishes of strawberries flavored with mint leaves. I thought of the bread and roses the striking mill girls of Lawrence demanded as their just deserts in 1912. And I remembered how the Paterson strikers of 1913 responded when the mill owners tried to give strikebreaking a patriotic gloss, something along the lines of making America great again by trumping the alien agendas of the "wops and sheenies."

"We wove the flag; we dyed the flag; we live under the flag," the strikers said, "but we won't scab under the flag." Or hate under it either, one wants to add, though that remains to be seen. ■