The Great Textile Strike

Honea Path and the General Walkout of 1934 · 1934

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

> **Content note:** This chapter includes accounts of people killed, injured, or held captive. Preview these stories before class: The Honea Path Massacre; Saylesville and Woonsocket.

GUIDING QUESTION

Did the federal government protect or abandon Southern textile workers during the 1934 General Strike?

PART 1

Before you read

1. Read the guiding question. Write down what you already know, or think you know, about it.

2. Predict one way your answer might change after reading the sources.

PART 2

Read

In the depths of the Great Depression, some four hundred thousand textile workers walked off the job in one of the largest strikes in American history—the largest the South had ever seen. It was called off after about three weeks, and Southern textile organizing was set back for decades.

The strike of 1934 was a response to the 'stretch-out'—the management practice of assigning workers more machines for the same pay—and to the failure of the New Deal's cotton textile code to deliver on the promise of Section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act, which guaranteed the right to organize. The United Textile Workers called the strike for Labor Day weekend, and from Maine to Alabama workers walked out. In the South it was met with state-sanctioned force: governors mobilized the National Guard, sheriffs

deputized mill loyalists as special officers, and Georgia's governor declared martial law and detained strikers behind barbed wire. At Honea Path, South Carolina, six strikers were shot dead at the Chiquola Mill on September 6, and a seventh died later. The union called off the strike on September 22, accepting a federal mediation report that won almost nothing, and thousands of strikers were blacklisted.


TROOPS ATTACK TEXTILE STRIKERS WITH BULLETS, BAYONETS AND TEAR GAS

On the left are shown guardsmen at the Woodside Mill, Greenville, S. C., laying down a barrage of tear gas against textile strikers in an effort to disperse them from the area. The other picture shows the troops ready to attack pickets, who are determined to keep the mills in the area closed. It was in this state that the fifteenth picket was murdered by the militia.

National Guardsmen lay down tear gas against pickets at the Woodside Mill, Greenville, South Carolina, during the General Textile Strike of September 1934. Unidentified press photographers, "Troops Attack Textile Strikers with Bullets, Bayonets and Tear Gas," Daily Worker (New York), September 22, 1934. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

PART 3

Timeline

For each event, write one sentence on why it mattered.

1933

The NIRA Promise

Section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act guarantees workers the right to organize; the textile code limits hours, but mill owners widely evade enforcement.

1934

The National Walkout

Beginning around September 1, some four hundred thousand textile workers strike from New England to the Deep South.

1934

The Honea Path Massacre

On September 6, deputized mill men open fire on pickets at the Chiquola Mill in Honea Path, South Carolina; six die that day and a seventh later.

1934

The Strike Called Off and the Blacklist

The union ends the strike on September 22; across the South, mill owners blacklist strikers, and many families lose company-owned homes.

PART 4

Key terms

Write the letter of the matching definition beside each term.

_____ **General strike**

_____ **Flying squadron**

_____ **Blacklist**

_____ **NRA code**

_____ **Board of inquiry**

A. A list, shared among employers, of workers who should not be hired, often because of union activity.

B. Rules for wages, hours, and production that industries wrote under the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act.

C. Groups of strikers who traveled by car and truck from mill to mill to shut down production.

D. A strike in which workers across a whole industry stop work at once; in 1934, textile workers from Maine to Alabama walked out.

E. A group appointed by the government to investigate a dispute and recommend a settlement.

PART 5

Primary source workshop

These excerpts are quoted word for word, including the spelling and language of their time.

DOCUMENT A

Statement on the Receipt of a Report on the Cotton Textile Strike

Franklin D. Roosevelt, September 20, 1934

> The excellent report of the board of inquiry for the Cotton Textile Industry presents findings and recommendations which cover the basic sources of difficulties, and does this in a way which shows the wholly fair and reasonable approach with which the board undertook its task. It is, I think, a good example of the practical way in which industrial problems can be calmly discussed and solved under a republican form of government. It is, of course, greatly to be hoped that a fair solution can be had because of the good-will and intelligence which undoubtedly exist in the industry as a whole including both workers and plant owners.

Context: Roosevelt endorsed the report of the Winant Board, which he had appointed during the strike of roughly 400,000 textile workers. The union called off the strike two days later, but the board's recommendations did little to stop the stretch-out or protect returning strikers.

Source: Franklin D. Roosevelt. Statement on the Receipt of a Report on the Cotton Textile Strike. The American Presidency Project, UC Santa Barbara. 1934-. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-the-receipt-report-the-cotton-textile-strike

Historical context

What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience

Who was meant to read, hear, or see it?

Purpose

Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view

Whose perspective does it show, and whose is missing?

DOCUMENT B

Interview with Sue Hill, Uprising of '34 Collection

Sue Hill, Early 1990s

> My daddy was not on the mill ground, he was across the street when they shot him. ... But when they started shooting, people just started running. They were running away from the mill, they shot them in the back, most of 'em, and my daddy was across the street, they shot him five times.

Context: Hill's father was one of the strikers killed on September 6, 1934, when deputies and armed men fired on pickets at the Chiquola Mill in Honea Path, South Carolina. Her account was recorded for the documentary The Uprising of '34.

Source: Sue Hill Interview, Uprising of '34 Collection (L1995-13). Georgia State University Library, Southern Labor Archives. https://webapps.library.gsu.edu/ohms-viewer/viewer.php?cachefile=L1995-13_AV0371.xml

Historical context
What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience
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Purpose
Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view
Whose perspective does it show, and whose is missing?

Corroborate
Compare "Statement on the Receipt of a Report on the Cotton Textile Strike" (Franklin D. Roosevelt, September 20, 1934) with "Interview with Sue Hill, Uprising of '34 Collection" (Sue Hill, Early 1990s). Where do they agree, where do they differ, and what might explain the differences?

PART 6

Discuss

1. What did President Roosevelt praise about the board of inquiry's report, and what did he say would make a "fair solution" possible?

2. Roosevelt issued his statement two weeks after the Honea Path shootings. What does he leave unsaid, and why might a president who needed both Southern political support and labor votes choose those words?

3. Sue Hill's testimony was recorded for a 1990s documentary that broke decades of community silence about 1934. How do memory and silence affect historians' use of oral history?

4. The strike ended when the union accepted the board's report, but many strikers were blacklisted and promised protections were not enforced. Do workers today have stronger or weaker protections when they strike? Argue.

PART 7

Write: claim, evidence, reasoning

Answer the guiding question in one paragraph, using the documents and the reading.

Claim	Answers the guiding question directly in one or two sentences.
Evidence	Cites at least two primary sources by name and at least one fact from the reading.
Reasoning	Explains how each piece of evidence supports the claim.
Sourcing	Notes at least one limitation of a source: who made it, when, and why.

PART 8

Exit ticket

1. In one sentence, how would you answer the guiding question now?

2. What piece of evidence would most change your mind?

Keep exploring

LABOR

The Flying Squadrons

Mobile labor organizing in the Piedmont South.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/flying-squadrons

TRAGEDY

The Honea Path Massacre

Six dead at the Chiquola Mill gate in about three minutes; a seventh died later.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/honea-path-massacre

IMPACT

The Stretch-Out

The speed-up that detonated the 1934 strike.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/the-stretch-out

TRAGEDY

Saylesville and Woonsocket

The National Guard fires on strikers in two Rhode Island mill towns.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/saylesville-massacre

Places: Massachusetts, Rhode Island, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, Alabama, Tennessee

SOURCES AND CREDITS

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Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, et al. Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World. University of North Carolina Press. 1987

Image: Unidentified press photographers, "Troops Attack Textile Strikers with Bullets, Bayonets and Tear Gas," Daily Worker (New York), September 22, 1934. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

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