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Hello Girls on Strike: Telephone Operators, the Fort Smith General Strike and the Struggle for Democracy in Great War Arkansas

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Hello Girls on Strike:
Telephone Operators, the Fort Smith General Strike and
the Struggle for Democracy in Great War Arkansas

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in History

by

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Abstract

In September 1917, Fort Smith telephone operators formed a local of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. Soon after, company leaders dismissed two of the women who were instrumental in the formation of the union. After many attempts to meet and negotiate with the company leaders, the remaining operators walked out and began striking on September 19. This strike lasted almost four months and brought chaos into the city including the indictments, trials, and convictions of the mayor, J. H. Wright, and chief of police, Jim Fernandez. The election after Wright's conviction saw the first female votes in Arkansas history. This strike is an ideal example of the federal government's relationship with the labor community at the beginning of World War I and Southwestern Bell Telephone Company's relationship with labor unions inside their own corporation. However, the strike offers an interesting divergence from the usual relationship between male and female labor unions and the support each of them received from both the public and the federal government. The historiography on this strike is severely limited, and this work attempts to demonstrate why the Fort Smith strike is so vital to women's labor, labor unrest, and the federal government during the beginning of the United States' involvement in World War I.

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Chapter One

Introduction

On December 10, 1917, darkness descended on Fort Smith as the local power plant shut down, leaving residents grappling with how to continue their normal routines. They walked wherever they needed to go, and they visited neighbors or stores to speak with those they needed to contact, all while remaining in the dark. They had lost access to streetcars the day before, no longer had newspapers to keep them informed and entertained, and, most daunting of all, they had already endured almost four months of deafening silence without the use of their telephones. Outside of their city, the world was at war, but the general strike shut down the mines and other plants that aided the war effort. With their nation, and the world, at war and their city screeching to a halt, the citizens must have wondered if this is what the apocalypse felt like. No, this was not the apocalypse but rather the escalation of a strike that had begun with a small group of women and ended with an all-out general strike of every industry in the city.

Losing access to resources was not the only thing Fort Smith residents had endured. They had witnessed the arrest, indictment, conviction, and removal from office of the mayor, who was sympathetic to the strikers. His removal, at least in the eyes of the city's labor movement, symbolized local democracy in peril. He would run again for his position. Females—at least those who were white and had the means to pay their poll tax—in the city had the great privilege of voting for the first time in Arkansas history, in the primary election in which they helped elect a new mayor, promoted by business leaders to usher in the new year and the end of the strike plaguing the city. All the while, federal conciliators flitted in and out of the city promising negotiations and an end to the strike while the telephone company refused time and again to come to the bargaining table. This might sound like an elaborate tall tale too wild to be true, but

it is not. This is the story of the female telephone operators' strike against the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company, the failure of federal mediators, the general strike that followed, and how it propelled a struggle over who would rule Fort Smith that saw the triumph of business interests over the labor movement and its allies.

On September 19, 1917, female telephone operators working for the Southwestern Bell Telephone Exchange in Fort Smith walked out of the building to protest the firing of two employees who had been active in the creation of a new union for the employees there. When the telephone company refused to reinstate the operators or negotiate with the operators, a strike broke out that lasted until December 1917 and only ended with the involvement of a mediator from the federal Department of Labor. Throughout the entirety of the strike, the women demanded the reinstatement of the two dismissed operators but also highlighted the low wages and harsh treatment they endured while working at the exchange. The strikers enjoyed public support throughout the strike, despite its length, and were able to stand strong against the company's continual stubbornness and attacks.

The operators' strike finally ended in December soon after federal officials convinced the city's labor movement to call off the general strike. The operators ended the walk-out only after the local union received assurances from the federal conciliator that the fired women would be put back to work, but, due to the stubbornness of the company leaders, the conciliator failed to deliver. He was unable to convince Southwest Bell to reinstate the two dismissed operators. The strike shows how Fort Smith's elite used the conflict to reassert their control over the city.

Frustratingly, local newspapers did not mention names of most of the striking telephone operators. Of those striking, newspapers only named the operators mentioned in the court injunction or testified in the different court cases throughout the event. The two dismissed

operators who sparked the entire event, Mrs. Nora Boger and Miss Mamie Garret, were not mentioned by name until November after the creation of the League for the Enforcement of Law.¹ For these reasons, this work may appear to neglect the humanity and individuality of the striking operators, but this is not without great frustration. This account gives names as often as possible and regrets the inability to bring the stories' and the experiences of the other operators to light.

The historiography on this particular strike is limited. Stephen H. Norwood's *Labor's Flaming Youth: Telephone Operators and Worker Militancy, 1878-1923* mentions the Fort Smith strike in a mere five paragraphs in a chapter discussing state suppression of telephone operators and their unions. This is an important contribution as it appears to be the first mention of the strike in a scholarly work, but it leaves an incomplete, and somewhat inaccurate, analysis of the strike. Norwood argues the federal government "immediately dispatched a Labor department mediator to effect a settlement" because they "viewed this as a threat to the war effort."² In reality, the federal government observed the strike from afar for several weeks before stepping in to arbitrate the strike. Additionally, Ben Boulden's *Hidden History of Fort Smith, Arkansas* briefly discussed the events of the Fort Smith strike in one chapter. His focus on this event, however, is limited to discussing the removal of the mayor from office that resulted in the first female votes in the South. He begins by detailing the first woman in Arkansas to vote and the events surrounding this vote, and then moves into brief discussions of two strikes, the telephone operator strike and a strike of the female employees of the Holland-American Fruit Products Co. canning factory, that preceded the election. He gives a brief description of the formation of the

¹ "Refuse to Negotiate on Strike Unless Discharged Operators are Reinstated," *Fort Smith Times Record*, November 4, 1917.

² Stephen H. Norwood, *Labor's Flaming Youth: Telephone Operators and Worker Militancy, 1878-1923* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990), 160-161.

union and the beginning of the strike. He then jumps directly into detailing an incident of vandalism on the telephone company, not mentioning a crowd that had occurred around the same time, and launches into a narration on the arrest, trial, and conviction of J. H. Wright. Boulden then spends the next two paragraphs discussing the new mayor and the end of the strike, mentioning only in passing that the general strike that shut down the city. This brief chapter leaves out many details and nuances that show how unique and important this situation truly was. Thus, his contribution to the knowledge of this event is significant and needed, yet it is incomplete in its analysis.³

Likewise, there are a few books that focus specifically on women telephone operators, their working conditions, and their unionization but very few, like Norwood's *Labor's Flaming Youth*, of these works mention Fort Smith or the 1917 strike. One such work is Kerry Seagrave's *The Women Who Got America Talking: Early Telephone Operators, 1878- 1922*, which includes three chapters discussing the evolution of female telephone operators from 1878 to 1922, two chapters on the horrible treatment the operators experienced, and one chapter on strikes and unions regarding telephone operators but never once mentions Fort Smith or Arkansas as a site of a prominent telephone operator strike. Furthermore, of the strikes she does mention in that chapter, the longest one only lasted a few weeks, and few required federal intervention whereas the Fort Smith strike dragged on for four months resulting in the Department of Labor mediation. As such, it is all the more important to look at the Fort Smith strike when discussing telephone operator activism during the early 20th century.

In relation to labor and World War I, Valerie Jean Conner's *The National War Labor Board: Stability, Social Justice, and the Voluntary State in World War I* details the prewar

³ Ben Boulden, *Hidden History of Fort Smith, Arkansas* (Charleston: The History Press, 2012), 163-168.

relationship between the federal government, the creation of the National War Labor Board (NWLB)-, and the onset of federal intervention into labor dealings with policies and voluntarism. This book is important for this study because it shows how the federal government's interactions with labor disputes changed with the creation of the NWLB. Prior to the creation, most Americans felt that "the work of harmonizing the relations among businessmen and between employers and employees was best left to private interests" rather than government intervention.⁴ This helps explain the reluctance of the Department of Justice and Department of Labor to intervene in the telephone strike until it led to a general strike that jeopardized the war effort. There is little doubt that the Fort Smith general strike—where a relatively minor strike metastasized into a threat to war production—helped convince federal authorities of the necessity of the establishment of a the National War Labor Board with the authority to resolve labor dispute quickly through mediation.

David M. Kennedy gives additional insight into labor policies and the government's relationship with labor during the war in his book *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*. He maintains strikes continued to break out during the war not only because many labor leaders were anti-war but also because they saw it as a way to further their agendas within their unions. Kennedy also argued business owners found excuses not to raise workers' wages, although they were making incredible profits, and "they were resolved that the war should provide no opportunity for workers to improve their wages or working conditions or, worse still, to spread the blight of unionism."⁵ Wilson's administration, according to Kennedy, aided this mentality. They were amenable to workers' plight and included many progressive

⁴ Valerie Jean Conner, *The National War Labor Board: Stability, Social Justice, and the Voluntary State in World War I* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 3.

⁵ David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 70.

elements into the government contracts such as eight hour work days, high wages, and even equal pay for women.⁶ However, the government did not do this because it overwhelmingly supported labor but more because it knew this would keep workers from striking and would increase production for the war effort. Kennedy asserts this lukewarm support from the government is particularly evident in its stance on unions. Wilson allowed union organization and participation but was ill prepared to deal with any strike that occurred in order to force corporate recognition of said unions, an act that took place many times over the war. Kennedy states, “workers might organize, said the government-in fact they were encouraged to organize-but the administration was quite unprepared in the midst of war to require employers to recognize truly independent unions.”⁷ This problem continued with the creation of the National War Labor Board which further gave laborers the right to unionize but restricted the unions from having any power backed by the government.⁸

Furthermore, Kennedy points out several aspects that, while not specifically addressed to the Fort Smith strike, could shine a light on the failure of the strike for the operators. Kennedy stated at the beginning of American involvement in World War I, “[employers] were resolved that the war should provide no opportunity for workers to improve their wages or working conditions or, worse still, to spread the blight of unionism.”⁹ This mindset might explain the rigid stance of the Southwestern Bell Telephone Co. in dealing with the striking operators--a stance that is not fully explained by newspapers and other sources of the time. Additionally, Kennedy points out many of the major unions, such as those affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, were hesitant to allow female participation or support female workers in strikes and other

⁶ Ibid., 261.

⁷ Ibid., 267.

⁸ Ibid., 267.

⁹ Ibid., 70.

movements, thus causing many female labor organizations to fail in gaining any progress.

Although it appears the striking operators experienced great support and favor from other unions, the lack of support from major, national unions could have failed to bring widespread government attention to Fort Smith and draw pressure from Wilson himself on the company.

Finally, Venus Green analyzes the history of the Southwestern Bell Company from 1880 to 1980 in *Race on the Line: Gender, Labor, & Technology in the Bell System, 1880-1980*. In this hundred-year history, Green details the beginnings of the company and how it rose to be a monopoly at the beginning of the 20th century. She also traces the development of technology and how that led to stricter policies for operators and harsher working conditions. Green argues the standardization of the exchanges occurred slowly only when the locations faced problems which led to variations across the nation for some time and that the eventual streamlining of technology and procedures across the company created an unrealistically high expectation for productivity from the operators which required harsh methods to actually achieve from the workers. Green's detailing of the supervising of the operators through listening in, chief operators walking behind them and observing, and service test calls are consistent with the descriptions given by the Fort Smith operators in how they were treated at that exchange.¹⁰ Additionally, one of the local company's arguments of fair treatment was the presence of "resting" rooms for the operators' breaks where they often provided free lunches, but Green maintains this was simply a way to exercise even more control over the women by not allowing them outside to ensure they would return to their stations at the right time and "prevented them

¹⁰ Venus Green, *Race on the Line: Gender, Labor, & Technology in the Bell System, 1880-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 46-48.

from talking about improper subjects (i.e. unions) by keeping them under the matrons' constant watch."¹¹

Green also spends an entire chapter breaking down unionization and labor unrest within the Bell System. Unlike local company leaders' claims later in the Fort Smith strike, Green argues that unionization among telephone operators was quite common within the company and they often used the unions to negotiate for better working conditions. However, the nature of the women who worked for Southwestern Bell made obtaining their specific demands difficult. Southwestern Bell selected telephone operators on a very exclusive criteria including only hiring "ladies," ensuring white women only, native born females with no accent, and women who were young, single, and most likely lived at home.¹² Because these were the types of women Southwestern Bell hired, paternalism was rampant amongst the unions. Green argues that unionists and operators alike felt the women were inept and "in need of male guidance and protection" and "by accepting others' definition of them, telephone women were never able to effectively fight the introduction of technology that degraded their work."¹³ Green maintains that operators had a habit of "not trusting themselves and accepting the 'white lady' rhetoric of 'protection'" and "frequently yielded leadership to their allies, who then changed operators' spontaneous demands to conform with male craft union ideology that was not useful for addressing operators' problems."¹⁴ This patriarchy within the labor system could help to explain why the Fort Smith operators often expressed at the beginning their only demand was the rehiring of the two dismissed operators and union recognition, but soon the Fort Smith Central Trades and Labor Council shifted the focus to higher wages and better working conditions.

¹¹ Ibid., 86.

¹² Ibid., 62-66.

¹³ Ibid., 88.

¹⁴ Ibid., 90.

Lastly, Green analyzes the Southwestern Bell Company response to labor unrest from its employees. Green argues “the company harassed union members, fired them, and, when it could, forced them to withdraw from the union by making them sign loyalty oaths” while also obtaining “spies and agents to infiltrate the unions to gather information and to foment dissension and dissatisfaction among union members.”¹⁵ She also maintains the company would do whatever it took and would ask as high as the federal government “to grant and enforce injunctions.”¹⁶ Each of these tactics Green mentions were also methods used by the local company managers at the Fort Smith exchange and show a consistency in the pattern from the Fort Smith situation with the national tendencies of the company. Green also helps explain why local leaders responded the way they did to the strike by detailing some early union victories but affirming that those victories were only attainable before the company became consistent in dealing with unrest and “after 1900, managers countered operator resistance intransigently and repressively.”¹⁷

Green’s analysis of the rise of the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company, the selection and treatment of its operators, and unionization and unrest specific to this company is vital to the historiography of this subject. It helps give a necessary foundation to understanding not only the lives of the telephone operators and their reasonings for striking but also their deference to male union leaders and the changing of demands. It further provides much needed understanding of the company’s actions when local primary sources do not offer much insight into that aspect. However, in all her analysis of labor unrest and federal intervention into strikes against the telephone company, Green does not mention Fort Smith in her text. Instead, she relegates it to a

¹⁵ Ibid., 97.

¹⁶ Ibid., 97.

¹⁷ Ibid., 93.

footnote in which she points to Norwood's brief explanation and does not do any examination into how this event relates to the history and attitude of the company in regards to labor.

Fort Smith and the region had long been a hotbed of labor militancy, what the historian James Green called "grass-roots socialism." More than that, Arkansas women were very involved in socialism and activism, serving on executive boards for different unions and some, like Freda Hogan Ameringer, were instrumental to the socialist movement in the state.¹⁸ Additionally, national unions such as the United Mine Workers of America were strong in the area and just three years prior had been involved in a violent outbreak at some Sebastian County (the same county as Fort Smith) mines after company leaders tried to operate the mines on a nonunion basis. Union members experienced great public support, as would the telephone operators in 1917, and much of their support came from the socialists.¹⁹ The more militant Working Class Union (WCU), though formed in Louisiana, was based in nearby Van Buren, Arkansas. Not only had the WCU opposed U.S. participation in the Great War, but also it had organized draft resistance efforts in eastern Oklahoma.²⁰ The strong presence of trade unionism, various strands of socialism, and even more militant forms of radicalism in the Fort Smith area may have convinced the city's business people that they needed to assert their power.

In 1917, Fort Smith only had a population of 28,870, and the strike took place at the beginning of American participation in World War I alongside other much larger strikes. In light of this, it is easy to understand how scholars overlooked the strike, relegating it to a few small mentions in books. It also appears to be neglected even further in the town it actually occurred in

¹⁸ Michael Pierce, "Great Women All, Serving a Glorious Cause: Freda Hogan Ameringer's Reminiscences of Socialism in Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 69 (Winter 2010): 293-324.

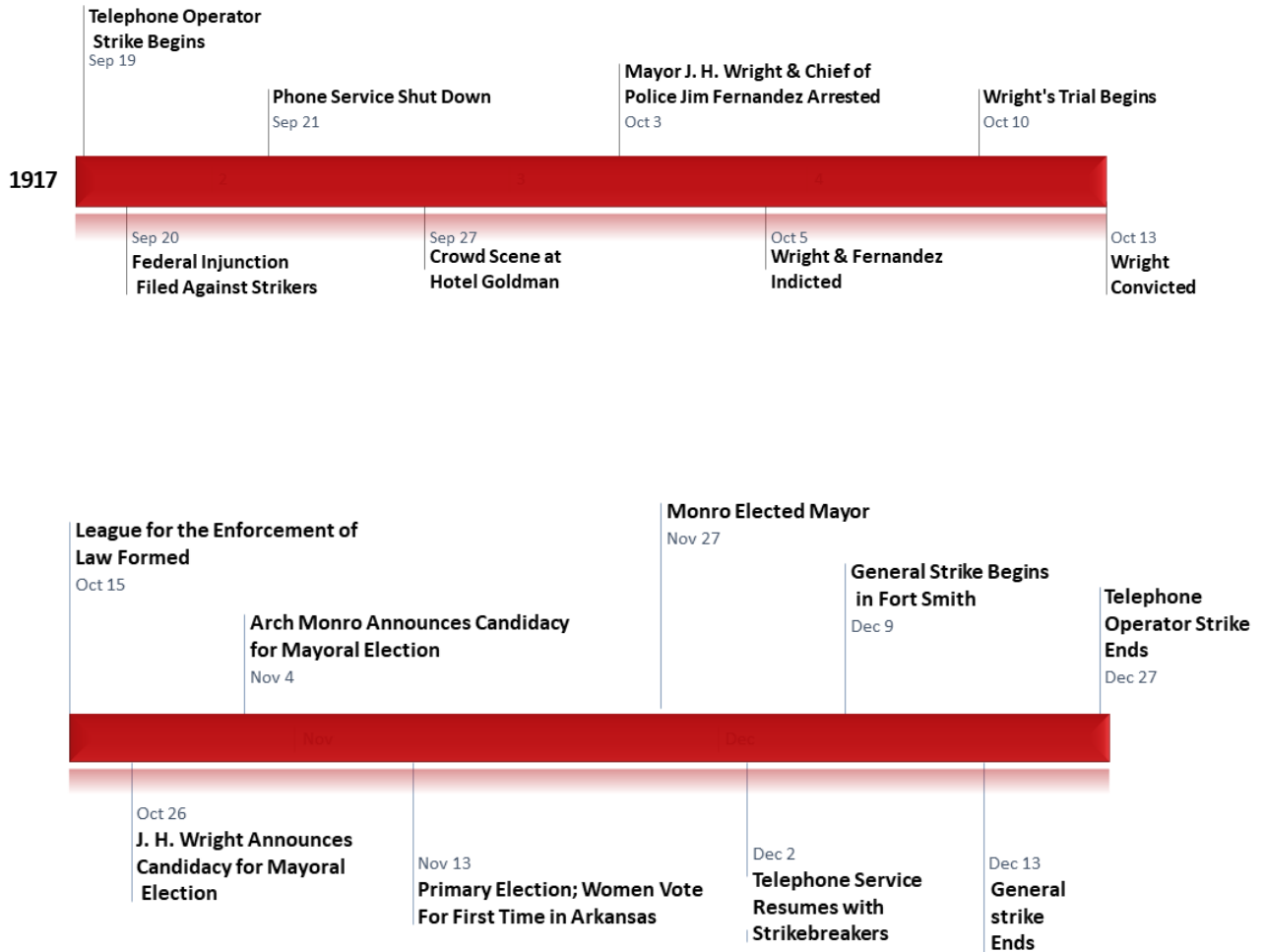
¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 294-295.

²⁰ Nigel Anthony Sellars, "Working Class Union," *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=WO021> (accessed April 13, 2020).

as many of the local libraries and archives have little to no information on the strike, and if they do it primarily deals with the mayoral election similar to Boulden's work. However, the strike not only brought great change to Fort Smith through the election and female votes but also federal intervention into a female labor event and much more. It is also very indicative of the telephone company's attitude towards labor and provides further affirmation to the limited historiography. This is why this event should no longer be ignored by history but vital to the study of women's labor, labor unrest, and the federal government in the early days of World War I.

Appendix

Fort Smith Telephone Operator Timeline



Chapter Two

Beginnings of the Strike

In September 1917, 72 employees of the Fort Smith branch of the Southwestern Bell Telephone Co. joined together and created a local of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.²¹ This local was a first for Arkansas, but the union had already gained much traction across the nation with over 40,000 members nationwide making it one of the largest female unions in the United States.²² However, Fort Smith managers promptly dismissed two employees who were instrumental in founding the local union even though each had been a “trusted employee of four years” before dismissal.²³ After union members tried to meet to no avail with the managers about the discharged employees, Miss Bertha Moore pulled the fire alarm and signaled for the other operators still working to walk out of the exchange and begin striking on September 19 at 3:00 p.m.²⁴ Most of these operators were between the ages of 15 and 19 years old according to a federal investigation the Department of Labor conducted just a few years prior.²⁵ When these women walked out on September 19, they began a strike that would last until December and deeply divide Fort Smith before it was over.

The causes of the strike were remarkably simple. The telephone operators simply wanted the company to recognize their local union and reinstate the operators management had dismissed for their involvement with the union. Simple negotiation and mediation between labor leaders and company leaders should have resolved the strike quickly and prevented it from

²¹ “Phone Girls Organize,” *Arkansas Gazette*, September 12, 1917.

²² “Operators’ Union Long Established,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 16, 1917.

²³ “Central Council to Air Troubles Phone Operators,” *Southwest American*, September 18, 1917.

²⁴ “Telephone Operators Go Out on Strike at 3 pm,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 19, 1917. “Phone Girls Strike,” *Southwest American*, September 20, 1917.

²⁵ US Department of Labor, Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Investigation of Telephone Companies* (Washington D.C., 1910), 157.

tearing apart the whole city, but, as demonstrated by Venus Green, Southwestern Bell Company leaders were unwilling to mediate or negotiate, and they dug in their heels and refused to make any concessions. That is exactly what happened in Fort Smith, and this attitude from company leaders caused the strike to drag out over several months.

The formation of the union was almost as straightforward as the causes of the strike. Local chapters of telephone operators' union had formed across the United States around the same time as the Fort Smith local. D. L. Goble, a regional official in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers union who had helped organize the local, made it clear that operators across the nation were joining the union and provided evidence of the benefits of joining the union. His data showed the wages of operators who were members of unions was almost twice that of those who were not in a union²⁶ Finally, while not mentioning what exactly needed to be bettered, newspapers reported the union formed "for the betterment of their condition." The union did not immediately ask for any demands of the company, though, and only presented any demands when the company retaliated against those who had joined the union.²⁷ With the promise of higher wages and the prominence of this type of union across the United States, a local chapter forming in Fort Smith was inevitable.

Once the strike commenced, the Fort Smith Central Trades and Labor Council, with Jack Adams at the lead, took over negotiations with the company managers. The Central Trades and Labor Council included representatives from the majority of unions within the city, approximately 25 in total, so it was natural for it to provide help to the fledgling local.²⁸ Several

²⁶ "Among the Labor Unions," *Southwest American*, September 9, 1917.

²⁷ "Striking Girls Are Restrained By U.S. Court," *Southwest American*, September 21, 1917.

²⁸ "Mayor Calls Mass Meeting to Avoid General Walk Out," *Fort Smith Times Record*, December 6, 1917.

times the Council tried to meet with the managers, but each time the company refused stating they would only deal with the women individually and not collectively.²⁹ Mr. Charles Arthur Vedder, the local exchange manager, refused to give specific reasoning for letting the two operators but would only say “the company felt justified in its action.”³⁰ Union members disagreed, however, stating the only justification possible was a seldom-invoked rule that prohibited operators from talking amongst themselves during work.³¹ Throughout the entirety of the strike, company leaders held tightly to the argument that they were justified in dismissing the two operators, and this brought trouble to any person who tried to arbitrate the strike.

Simply refusing to work was not enough for the operators; they knew that the only way to convince the managers to meet for negotiations was to prevent the company from continuing operations. The company first turned to the untrained wives of male employees to operate the switchboard. Thus, strikers attempted to prevent them from entering the building. They also tried to stop the delivery of supplies to those already at the exchange. This, unfortunately, caused a fight on September 20, 1917, when strikers tried to keep a grocery delivery out of the building. Luckily the violence was not severe. Picketers broke packages of eggs, sugar, tea, cheese, bacon, oranges, and pepper, and only one striker, Bessie Stockton, experienced injuries, albeit severe, and she blamed her injuries on telephone employees. Picketers also intercepted a stove and stopped its delivery into the building.³² This was the first attempt from the company to use strikebreakers, but it would be far from the last.

²⁹ “Telephone Operators Go Out on Strike at 3 pm,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 19, 1917. “Phone Girls Vote Strike if Adjustment is not Made,” *Southwest American*, September 19, 1917.

³⁰ “Phone Girls Vote Strike if Adjustment is not Made,” *Southwest American*, September 19, 1917.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² “Fight at Exchange Building,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 20, 1917.

The 52 striking operators called a public mass meeting the same day as the scuffle at the exchange building to inform citizens of Fort Smith the reasons for the strike and attempt to gain public support. Several people spoke throughout the meeting and testified of the inhumane treatment they experienced while working for Southwestern Bell including humiliation, persecution, and “barbarous third-degree methods” to obtain information on other operators.³³

After the formation of the union, the treatment got even worse. Jack Adams of the Central Trades and Labor Council said the women “were taken behind the switchboards by superiors, imported from Little Rock and St. Louis since the union began, and were ‘quizzed.’”³⁴ Although they told the public of the harsh treatment, the speakers emphasized the fact they were not striking for higher wages or better working conditions but simply for recognition of the union and the reemployment of the two dismissed employees. Police officers mingled throughout the crowd to monitor the situation, but no violence broke out. However, unknown entities cut electrical wires to the exchange.

Several representatives of national unions spoke throughout the meeting to give their support and offer legitimacy to the newly formed union and the strike itself. Mrs. Emma Francis Langdon, organizer of the International Brotherhood of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, told the operators of the trials they would face during the strike but also assured them unionism had gained power in the nation. She believed the operators would be successful and would help the movement of female workers into unions. The final and most prominent speaker was Love Grant, of the law firm Covington and Grant representing the strikers. Grant criticized the

³³ “Striking Telephone Operators on Guard for Strike Breakers,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 20, 1917.

³⁴ “Strikers Hold Meeting at Exchange Building; Great Crowd Applauds Speakers,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 21, 1917.

telephone company as unfair to labor, pointing out the low wages of \$9.50 a week for long term employees and only \$5 for beginners in the company. Then, he “pointed to the American flag that was flying in the night breeze from the top of the exchange building and declared that while the company was enjoying the protection of the Stars and Stripes it was grinding out millions of dollars for its millionaire officers by the sweat system of underpaid telephone operators.”³⁵ This would not be the first time patriotism would be equated to different sides of the strike. With the United States having entered into World War I the previous spring, both sides employed rhetoric that equated the other as the “enemy” who were aiding the Germany war effort and portrayed their side as motivated by pure patriotism and the desire to make America the best it could be. The mass meeting was successful for the strikers, and the *Fort Smith Times Record* concluded that “few strikes have taken place in Fort Smith where the strikers have had as much sympathy and support as the telephone operators.”³⁶

From the very beginning, the community sided with the operators, and the strikers would enjoy this support throughout the strike. Residents of Fort Smith tried time and again to end the strike and get the company to agree to mediation, and many throughout the state investigated the women’s claims not only in their mass meetings but in later trials and would find truth in everything they testified. The *Southwest American* published a report from the Industrial Relations Commission in Washington D.C. that found “the condition of the telephone operators in both interstate and local service is **SUBJECT TO GRAVE CRITICISM...and that same report shows that, with few exceptions, Fort Smith operators have been paid SMALLER**

³⁵ “Strikers Hold Meeting at Exchange Building; Great Crowd Applauds Speakers,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 21, 1917.

³⁶ “Striking Telephone Operators on Guard for Strike Breakers,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 20, 1917.

WAGES THAN ANY OTHER CITY.” The report included a graph that showed the wages were indeed over \$1 less per week than the next lowest wage of the cities it investigated.³⁷ This investigation validated the claims of the strikers and labor leaders that the operators could not live on the current wages they received from Southwestern Bell, and the public could see in print how dastardly their pay was in relation to operators in the surrounding areas.

The support was not just from the average citizens in Fort Smith, though, but also from workers in labor unions across the area, who contributed to a fund to allow the strikers to buy food and pay rent. The women experienced the most support, both morally and financially, from the area’s United Mine Workers of America locals, and on September 30, operators went to nearby Greenwood, Arkansas to meet with coal miners in a show of support for the telephone strike. Community members lined the streets and cheered as the women rode through town in decorated cars.³⁸ The language used in the article published in the *Southwest American* made it appear the operators were visiting the coal camps as a weekend getaway that would be an extremely joyous occasion rather than meeting with another union to discuss their reasonings for striking and asking for support. This would continue to be the case throughout the *Southwest American’s* publications toward the strikers.

On October 1, coal miners in Huntington and Hartford—both in the southern part of Sebastian County—joined their brethren from Greenwood in pledging their support to the striking operators. They published a resolution in the *Times Record* accusing the telephone company of being un-American and calling upon the “congress of the United State of America to

³⁷ “Telephone Operators’ Wages Subject to Grave Criticism Says Industrial Commission,” *Southwest American*, October 9, 1917.

³⁸ “Benefit Days for Striking Operators.” *Southwest American*. September 23, 1917.

take over the telephone system and operate it in the interest of the public.”³⁹ The miners believed federal control of the telephone system would not only bring service back to the area but also lead to higher wages for employees. While this seemed like a viable option in the midst of a world war, the federal government never seized control of the telephones during the war.

The Arkansas State Federation of Labor’s *Union Labor Bulletin*, published out of Little Rock, also supported the strikers and mocked the phone company. It sarcastically mentioned the company’s stance that the dismissal of the two operators had nothing to do with the union formation; “oh no, of course not, the great big telephone company would not jump on its operatives for suddenly discovered incompetency in old employes [*sic*] and infractions of rules that have been fractured for years without reproof...that all of the discharged girls happen to belong to the union is quite an accident, quite so.”⁴⁰ Even from the beginning of the strike, the public support was decidedly in favor of the operators and against the telephone company; later that would change slightly and cause even more division within the entire city of Fort Smith.

With public support, the strikers expanded their picketing areas to include the train station to discourage incoming strike breakers. Strikers would go through the business district and ask supporters to sign petitions calling on the telephone company to submit to arbitration and end the strike.⁴¹ Picketers at the railway station and the telephone exchange approached each woman the company brought in and urged them to join the strike.⁴²

³⁹ “Coal Towns are Strong for Strikers,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 1, 1917.

⁴⁰ “Pledges Assistance,” *The Union Labor Bulletin*, September 22, 1917.

⁴¹ “Striking Telephone Operators on Guard for Strike Breakers,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 20, 1917.

⁴² “Phone Girls Strike,” *Southwest American*, September 20, 1917.

Within a few days of the strike beginning, businessmen from across the city joined together to try to get the company's managers to agree to meet about ending the strike. Public support was strong for the striking operators, and local businesses provided food and drinks during their shifts along with monetary donations. At the beginning of the strike, R.S. Carver, general manager of the *Fort Smith Times Record*, created a commission to try to end the strike and return phone service to the area, but, just like every other attempt, it failed. The company continued to refuse to even acknowledge it had employees that were striking but rather maintained "its former employees had quit its service," and it would only meet with operators individually and not through any sort of committee.⁴³

As early as September 21, rumors that the Trades and Labor Council would call general strike in support of the telephone operators spread throughout the city. The rumors suggested that the general strike would only be in response to the use of non-union strikebreakers from outside of the city to keep the telephone exchange functioning. This would continue to be the case throughout the entirety of the strike.⁴⁴ Fort Smith had a fairly large union presence, newspapers do not report exact numbers but federal conciliators listed 1200 direct participants in the later general strike, among the different industries throughout the cities, and not only did they show complete support for the striking operators but also observed the company's actions closely and were willing to join a general strike against strikebreakers any time it was called.⁴⁵

Southwestern Bell officials also sought public favor. Attorneys for the telephone company blamed local merchants for the fact that the operators could not survive on their wages.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ "General Strike Rumored," *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 21, 1917.

⁴⁵ Preliminary Report of Commissioner of Conciliation, Box 31, File 33-716, Mediation and Conciliation Service Dispute Case Files, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

They explained that the problem was a rise in living costs rather than the lack of wage increases. Company leaders even went to Governor Charles Brough with exaggerated reports of destruction of property from the strikers and their supporters in the hope of gaining armed protection for the company.⁴⁶ Later investigations into these claims would find the strikers inflicted little to no damage on company property and fixed any damage themselves. These reports and appeals from the company held no sway with Governor Brough who continually offered to help mediate and end the strike instead of giving support or armed protection for the company.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, negotiations went nowhere. Leaders of the Central Trades and Labor Council tried to meet with Vedder to negotiate an end to the strike, but Vedder remained steadfast in his refusal to meet with any organization on behalf of the operators. When asked if he would agree to meet, Vedder stated “it would not be of any use, that he would go no further with the matter” and would not take any responsibility for any problems that happened while the strikers were waiting to meet with Vedder.⁴⁸ Vedder did not want to meet for arbitration or supply any concessions to the striking operators but rather decided to use the vast resources of one of the world’s largest corporations to simply outlast the several score of Fort Smith phone operators..

The company, though, finally decided, on September 20, to import strikebreakers from Texas and Missouri so that it could provide phone service and pressure the operators to return to work. Picketers assigned to the railway station urged each arriving women not to work in place

⁴⁶ ““Phone Company Defiant While Strike Spreads to Coal Field Towns,” *Southwest American*, September 25, 1917.

⁴⁷ “Mayor Replies to Mr. Vedder’s Request for Police Protection,” *Southwest American*, September 25, 1917. “Governor Brough Offers Services to Mediate Phone Strike,” *Southwest American*, October 12, 1917.

⁴⁸ “Striking Telephone Operators on Guard for Strike Breakers,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 20, 1917.

of a striking operator but rather to pledge their support to the strike.⁴⁹ The use of strikebreakers to man the long-distance switchboard led to an armed confrontation. A group of about 100 to 125 men went to the Hotel Goldman demanding the female strikebreakers staying there leave Fort Smith. Though local newspapers do not mention the names of these men, it can be assumed the men in the crowd were members of the labor community within Fort Smith as the purpose of the group was the removal of strikebreakers from the city. Armed guards employed by the telephone company captured eight of the members of the crowd and held them captive. The police arrived, secured the release of those eight members, and took possession of the telephone company employees' weapons. The crowd's goals were successful in that the out-of-town strike-breakers, including Adelle Hastedt, Dora Miehe, Lavince Hokamp, and Hazel M. Evans all of St. Louis, left town. Additionally, local women Sue Allison, Beulah Welshear, Lucille Gass, Lorena Westfall, and Etta Coombs of Fort Smith agreed to stepdown as strikebreakers. The police department's handling of this situation would be the spark that caused many businessmen in Fort Smith to turn against the city government. This spark would later ignite into the business community's all-out war against the city leadership that would reign chaos down onto Fort Smith citizens.⁵⁰

The forced removal of strikebreakers from the city, only four days after the strike began, prompted Southwestern Bell to shut down all phone service on September 22. At this time, company leaders only expected the loss of phone service to affect the city of Fort Smith. The Fort Smith telephone operators' steadfastness, though, inspired operators in the surrounding area, and soon the strike began spreading to neighboring communities such as Midland, Hartford, and

⁴⁹ "Phone Girls Strike," *Southwest American*, September 20, 1917.

⁵⁰ "Strikebreakers Flee City Under Cover of Darkness," *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 27, 1917.

Mansfield.⁵¹ Rumors of a general strike and the strike's spread to neighboring towns made it imperative that a solution was found.

After the Hotel Goldman skirmish, Manager Vedder asked the Sebastian County sheriff Claude Thompson for help protecting them as they left, but the sheriff decided no reinforcements were needed because there had been no violence or noise complaints regarding the actual picketing so far.⁵² Vedder was obsessed with gaining armed protection to allow people and employees to enter the building freely and keep business running as usual. Vedder fought for this protection all the way to the federal level over the course of the first month of the strike. Again, this tactic perfectly coincides with the strategies the company used often when faced with any sort of labor unrest that Green outlines in her book. The Southwestern Bell Company did not explicitly fight against unionism and labor unrest but rather relied on its size and influence to strong arm the end of strikes by simply outlasting the strikers and refusing any negotiation, thus ensuring the strike would end with no concessions from the company.

When managers could not receive guarantees of armed protection for the exchange, they turned to the federal courts. On September 20, the company took legal action against some of the former operators and strikers including Pleasant Armstrong, Dave Lowry, Fuzz Martin, M. W. Pate, Effie King, Ferrie Boatright, Bertha Moore, Ella McMahan, Bessie Stockton, Nora Boger, Bettie Lou Cox, and Stella Pots. The company argued the individuals prevented two female strikebreakers and one of the managers from entering the building, thus disrupting the telephone exchange's business operations and forcing it to shut down service to Van Buren. The preliminary injunction—issued by Judge Frank Youmans—stated these individuals could not

⁵¹ “Strikebreakers Flee City Under Cover of Darkness,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 27, 1917.

⁵² “Telephone Company Suspends All Service,” *Southwest American*, September 22, 1917.

interfere with any further exchange operations, and a hearing for a full restraining order would be held on September 25.⁵³ Additionally, Jack Adams and John Buell, leaders of the Central Trades and Labor Council, faced charges of preventing company superintendent L. M. Loring, and strike breakers Lily Venable, Dora Miche, Adelle Hastedt, and Lucille Gass from entering the exchange building through “force, threats, and violence” and threatening one of the company’s night watchmen, John Dickson.⁵⁴

The court proceedings on the permanent order began on September 25. This hearing, though initiated by the company, provided the strikers with the opportunity to testify in court and inform the public about conditions at the exchange. In their testimony, several strikers detailed the abuses they experienced at the hands of company officials. One unnamed operator testified she worked such long hours that she fainted and “was frequently forced to work when she was ill with a fever that registered as high as 103 degrees.”⁵⁵ Furthermore, women stated the company brought in three “instructresses” to grill the operators about union activity while requiring the employees to give up any mail they received pertaining to the union.⁵⁶ Strikers Bessie Stockton and Betty Lou Cox testified they were physically knocked down and against objects by fellow company employee R. D. Byrn. Emily Nicodemus stated her salary was only \$18.25 per month (\$366.29 today) and she could not support herself without her parents’ supplementing her income. Most damning of all was when several employees testified the company threatened to discharge any operators who joined the union; a testimony that flew in the face of every claim the company had made thus far about the dismissal of the original two operators. Furthermore,

⁵³ “Federal Injunction Extended in Case of Striking Operators,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 24, 1917.

⁵⁴ “Two Violations of Restraining Order Charged,” *Southwest American*, September 23, 1917.

⁵⁵ “Ugly Charges Made Against Telephone Co.” *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 25, 1917.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*

Sheriff Claude Thompson testified that “he did not think it was his duty to furnish the company with guards.”⁵⁷ Both local newspapers, the *Fort Smith Times Record* and the *Southwest American*, published accounts of the proceedings, so every one of their readers could see the harsh environment these women endured and their reasonings for desiring a union to protect them.

Judge Youmans granted the injunction against the strikers. The named strikers could not be on the premises of the telephone exchange, but the injunction did not apply to those not named in the complaint. The *Times Record* published a statement from Judge Frank A. Youmans during the hearing in which he dramatically compared “the stand of Mayor J. H. Wright, Chief of Police James Fernandez, and Sheriff Claude Thompson in the strike [...] to the attitude of Germany towards the United States in relation to the safety of American citizens upon the high season previous to the declaration of war [...] and [...] declared the local officials were ‘carrying out German doctrines on American soil’ and that ‘they deserved to be decorated with the iron cross at the hands of the German emperor.’”⁵⁸ Youmans further argued the sheriff and chief of police were preventing people from entering of the exchange.

Having secured the injunction, the telephone company readied to reopen using strikebreakers. It published a quarter-page ad in the newspaper maintaining the striking operators had “resigned from their positions,” and the company was “prepared to fill place...with experienced young ladies who believe the Company gives fair treatment and who wish to work for us.”⁵⁹ In an attempt to deflect blame, company leaders publicly stated an opinion they would

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ “Court Flays Officers For Failure to Apply Law in ‘Phone Strike,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 30, 1917.

⁵⁹ Southwestern Bell Telephone Company, Advertisement, *Southwest American*, September 23, 1917.

hold fast to throughout the entirety of the strike and end negotiations. They firmly believed the operators had left of their own accord, and, thus, the company had no obligations to sit down for negotiations with the Central Trades and Labor Council or anyone else. Furthermore, company leaders attempted to appear benevolent towards the strikers, perhaps to gain some public support for themselves, by stating they were more than willing to meet with the operators individually to discuss the rehiring of those who had walked out.⁶⁰

The continuation of the strike presented problems for the city that went well beyond the disruption of phone service. Without the exchange fully operational, Fort Smith's fire alarm system only had 15 working emergency telephones, with seven of them on the same street, and there was no fire alarm system at night. Because of this, the fire chief urged the citizens not to burn any trash or grass for fear of fire spreading. The fear of fire prompted several the residents of Fort Smith to continue to work to bring an end to the strike over the next several months.⁶¹

The ongoing struggles prompted the intervention of State Labor Commissioner Ben Brickhouse. He arrived in Fort Smith hoping to mediate some sort of settlement. While Vedder refused to meet with him, Brickhouse met with the striking operators and expressed his surprise at the amount of public support they enjoyed but also "urged that they [did] not risk the loss of all that sentiment by overt acts or acts of violence or of an illegal nature." He told them there was a possibility he could have the state minimum wage commission investigate their situation and potentially get better wages for the workers of the telephone company.⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ "City Almost A Mercy of Fire Danger," *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 28, 1917.

⁶² "Phone Company Defiant While Strike Spreads to Coal Field Towns," *Southwest American*, September 25, 1917.

With Brickhouse attempting to bring company leaders to negotiation, union representatives publicly stated their demands. At this time, they produced “a proposed contract and working and wage agreement [and] submitted to officials of the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company” that included a “significant raise” for each level of operators. The proposal outlined weekly pay for operators at \$45 for 1st class Apprentice Operators, \$42.50 for 2nd class, \$40 for 3rd class, and \$37.50 for 4th class. For Junior Operators it proposed \$50, \$47.50, \$45, and \$42.50 respectively. Operators would receive \$55, \$52.50, \$50, and \$47.50 respectively. Chief Operators, those with the most duties, would earn \$90, \$85, \$80, and \$75 respectively. The proposal also included increased wages for long distance toll operators with Apprentice Operators receiving \$47.50, \$45, \$42.50, and \$40 respectively. Junior Operators would earn \$52.50, \$50, \$47.50, and \$45 respectively. Operators would earn \$57.50, \$55, \$52.50, and \$50 respectively. Finally, supervisors would earn \$63, \$62.50, \$60, and \$57 respectively. Also important to note, the “class” of the operators had nothing to do with their skills or longevity with the company but rather with the size of the telephone exchange they worked at and how many calls came into that exchange per day. In addition to these base pay amounts, the agreement also mandated a \$2.50 per month raise every six months for local operators up to a maximum of \$65 of 1st class operators, \$62.50 for 2nd class, \$60 for 3rd class, and \$57.50 for 4th class. Similarly, toll operators would receive a \$2.60 raise every sixth months up to a maximum of \$70, \$67.50, \$65, and \$62.50 respectively. Finally, supervisors would receive undisclosed amounts of raises every six months until they reached a maximum pay of \$75, \$72.50, \$70, and \$67.50 respectively. The agreement also detailed an eight-hour workday with time and a half pay for any overtime and fifteen-minute breaks at the halfway mark for each shift. Lastly, the agreement required the company to rehire the two dismissed employees and the length of time

for the wage system would be based on the length of employment prior to the strike.⁶³ This was the first time the request from the strikers went beyond simple recognition of the union and reinstatement of employees. This shift matches Venus Green's observations of the change in demands from female labor strikes once predominately male unions and councils involved themselves in the struggle.

The company responded with their own wage and working condition plan, and the differences between the two were startling. Company leaders proposed a flat based average weekly pay of \$8.21 for all operators with the chief operator receiving \$15.90 per week. Figure 1 on the next page shows the differences in the two proposals. The company also proposed six-day, eight-hour day work weeks with 30-minute breaks and time and a half pay for any overtime. In the newspaper advertisement that detailed the company's viewpoints, Manager Vedder also included a clipping of the *Southwest American* report of the September 20 mass meeting in which strike leaders publicly stated their only goal was union recognition and they were not fighting for pay raises or improved working conditions.⁶⁴ He wanted to remind the community that the strikers were escalating their demands.

⁶³ "Wage Scale is Presented to the Company," *Southwest American*, September 27, 1917.

⁶⁴ "The Facts," *Southwest American*, September 27, 1917.

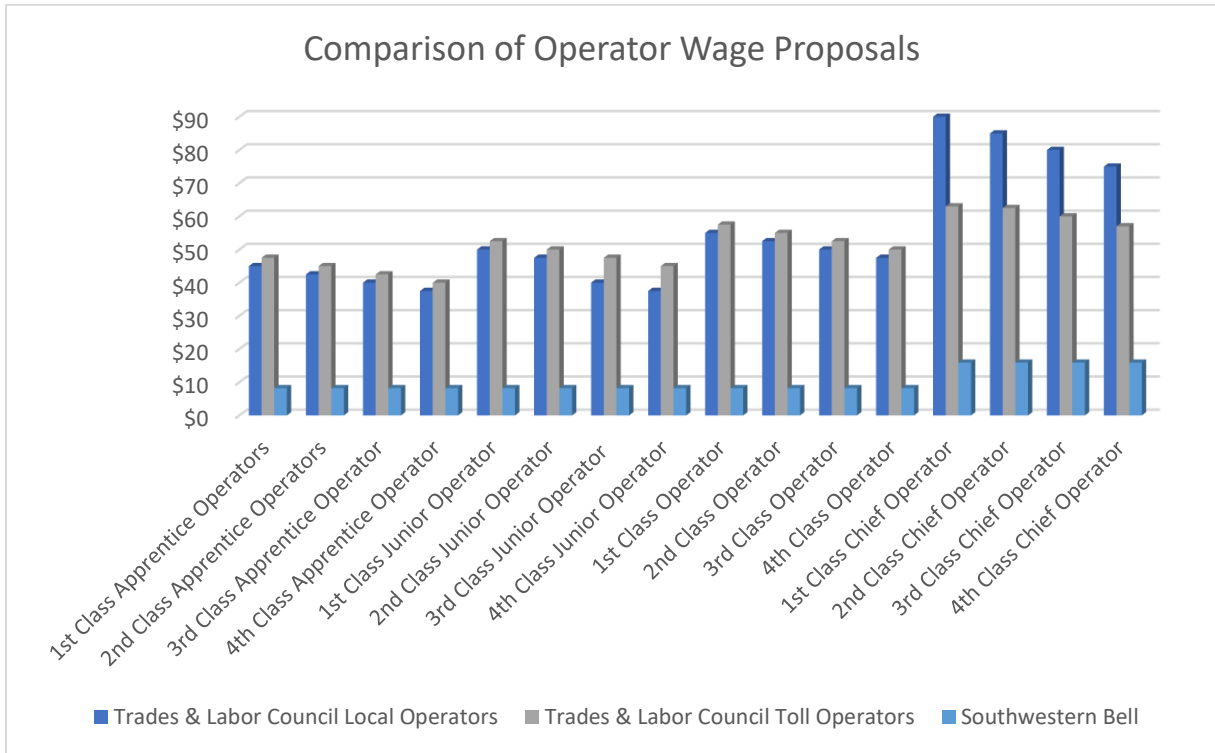


Figure 1. Comparison of weekly operator wage proposals from the Fort Smith Trades & Labor Council and the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company

As the strike and lack of phone service continued, insurance companies began considering cancelling policies because of the fire danger and lack of available alarm systems.⁶⁵ Within five days the strike had grown from a simple walkout to a full blown strike that had shut off all telephone service, drew the attention of the state commissioner of labor, and created concern within insurance companies about fire danger. Because of this, citizens within the city began to try to create plans that would be satisfactory to both the company and the operators to end the strike and reintroduce phone service back to the area. Still, the company was unwilling to budge, and no one could have foreseen what was in the future for the city.

Business leaders went even further than attempting to simply end the strike by also contemplating ways of circumventing the Southwestern Bell Company altogether due to the company's continuous, frustrating stubbornness. There had been rumors throughout September about the city of Fort Smith creating their own telephone company and bypassing the Southwestern Bell Co. altogether. However, by October 4, these rumors had waned after realizations of the creation of a new company taking up to a year and the high cost of materials and labor, especially in the midst of a war. For these reasons, the citizens continued to fight for an end to the strike and a return of the telephone service they already paid for. The *Times Record* reported that citizens, having been without phone service for two weeks at this point, are "paying for the disputes between the telephone company and its employes [*sic*], and the public temper is such that it is ready to take a hand and see to it that the local exchange is operated."⁶⁶

None of the public outcry affected company leaders, and Southwestern Bell continued to refuse to meet with state and local mediators. Meanwhile, federal conciliator Joseph Myers

⁶⁵ "Confer to End 'Phone Strike; Charges Filed," *Fort Smith Times Record*, September 23, 1917.

⁶⁶ "Operate the Telephones We Have," *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 4, 1917.

arrived in Fort Smith on October 6 to help arbitrate the strike, much to the delight of the labor community.⁶⁷ Governor Charles Brough and Attorney General John D. Arbuckle also offered to mediate, but the company again refused. One potential reason the company refused to meet with the governor was his apparent support of the labor community. At one point, he travelled from Little Rock to Fort Smith to attend and speak at one of the strikers' mass meetings. At this meeting, he "stated emphatically that he is in hearty favor of the minimum wage law, and believes firmly in the right of working man or woman to legally employ any methods whereby to obtain a living wage."⁶⁸

While rebuffing the governor, attorney general, and the federal mediator, Manager Vedder forged forward with his requests for police protection of the exchange. He wrote Mayor J. H. Wright complaining about the inaction of the city administration and police department: "In the heart of the city of Fort Smith, seemingly without the slightest police or governmental interference, the telephone exchange serving this community is permitted night and day to be kept in a state of virtual siege[...] the people of this city are utterly deprived of local telephone service notwithstanding that the company is able, ready and willing to furnish service if the employees and property necessary in the service of the public can have police protection."⁶⁹ Wright responded that he was "confident of [the police and local government's] ability to handle the situation and furnish such police protection as may be necessary."⁷⁰ Just as it had done with

⁶⁷ "Accused City Officials Are Arrested Again on Indictments," *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 6, 1917. "Department of Labor Sends Representative To Settle Phone Strike," *Southwest American*, October 4, 1917.

⁶⁸ "Governor Offers Services to Mediate Phone Strike," *Southwest American*, October 12, 1917.

⁶⁹ "Mayor Replies to Mr. Vedder's Request for Police Protection," *Southwest American*, September 25, 1917.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Governor Brough, the company was pleading for armed guards through exaggerated accounts of damage and violence on its property.

Writers of the *Southwest American* investigated what “depredations” Vedder mentioned in his letter to Wright. Vedder spoke of cut electric and gas lines, yet the *Southwest American* found that service was quickly restored. Vedder complained about destruction of groceries, but the *Southwest American* found that while some had been destroyed, most had been returned to the grocery store when the delivery man was prevented from entering. Vedder spoke of a broken window and fire damage; the *Southwest American* found evidence of this only in a house a block away from the exchange. While Vedder’s ultimate complaint and reason for requesting police presence was the disruption of daily proceedings within the building, the *Southwest American* found that patrons had been allowed inside to do their business with the company. Jack Adams spoke on behalf of the striking operators, maintained the legality of their actions “according to court decisions and stated further that in their picketing they have been guilty of no acts of violence or of anything that is not strictly within the law.”⁷¹

When it became evident they would not receive help from state or city officials, the managers petitioned the federal government for armed federal guards to protect the exchange. Immediately, lawyers, businessmen, and labor leaders in Fort Smith wrote letters urging the federal government to ignore the company’s request, insisting that the arrival of federal troops would only escalate the situation. Attorneys Webb Covington and Love Grant, representing the strikers and the Central Trades and Labor Council, wrote to Senators Joe T. Robinson and William F. Kirby detailing the situation and pleading to “urge the department of Justice not to

⁷¹ Ibid.

send guards to guard the private property of the company” because they believed “the girls are in the right and the people are with them.”⁷² Labor leaders also sent word to American Federation of Labor president Samuel Gompers explaining the situation and urging him to use his influence to prevent the government from sending federal troops.⁷³

The secretary-treasurer of the Arkansas State Federation of Labor, L. H. Moore, joined the chorus of labor leaders seeking to prevent the arrival of federal troops. He wrote U.S. secretary of labor William Wilson explaining that the company was not paying the women a livable wage and dismissed the operators who joined the newly formed union. He further detailed how the company refused to meet to negotiate the strike but instead insisted on meeting with the women individually. Moore stated he had confidence that Wilson would “use [his] influence to prevent this company from using the federal authorities as strikebreakers.”⁷⁴

Additionally, the Arkansas labor commissioner Ben Brickhouse wrote to Secretary Wilson and detailed how the phone company had rebuffed his efforts to end the strike. He also assured Wilson that the city chief of police and county sheriff had agreed to “maintain law and order” because “it was their opinion and is also [his] that if armed guards are sent to Fort Smith it will result in bloodshed [*sic*] as the senniment [*sic*] of the people of Fort Smith as well as in the mining district adjacent to Ft. Smith are in sympathy with the strikers.”⁷⁵ These leaders noted that the conflict had seen very little violence up to this point and worried that the arrival of troops

⁷² Covington and Grant to William Kirby and Joe Robinson, lettergram, September 30, 1917, Strike Files of the US Department of Justice, Pt. 1 on Microfilm #5897 mf. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library, reel 8.

⁷³ W. F. Merk, A. M. Kellar, C. H. Miller, Bud Berry, I. H. Nakdimen, and Oliver Wolf to Samuel Gompers, September 30, 1917, Samuel Gompers to Thomas Watt Gregory, October 2, 1917, Thomas Watt Gregory to Samuel Gompers, October 6, 1917, *ibid.*.

⁷⁴ L. H. Moore to William Wilson, letter, October 1, 1917, *ibid.*,

⁷⁵ Ben D. Brickhouse to Wilson, October 1, 1917, *ibid.*

might escalate the situation. They also insisted, despite what company leaders claimed in their correspondences, the company was the one prolonging the strike. Although the operators were willing to meet with federal mediators, the company refused. The pleas of different labor leaders and Arkansas leaders appear to have fell on willing ears as no federal guards ever came to Fort Smith on behalf of the telephone company.

While troops did not arrive, the federal government had an official on the scene. Joseph Myers, the federal conciliator, had been meeting with the strikers and listening to their testimonies on wages and working conditions. He also attempted to meet with company leaders, but they rejected each of his overtures. Myers' work on the Fort Smith strike was cut short, however, as he was soon called to Arizona on October 6 to help with a major copper strike there. Myers' work in Fort Smith would be marred by short visits and calls to go to Arizona throughout his time on the case. During one of his visits to Arizona, he left Governor Brough and Attorney General Arbuckle with a plan to end the strike. Myers proposed the company reinstate all the operators except the originally dismissed two, increase the operators' wages, and implement a scale of wage increases.

While the Department of Labor sent a conciliator to try to negotiate the strike, the Department of Justice decided to remain outside of the situation. Attorney General Thomas Watts Gregory wrote to Samuel Gompers, in response to his urging not to send federal troops to protect the exchange, that he did not see any need for the department to get involved and would not act unless the situation escalated to the need for court martial.⁷⁶ Because the strike at this point had not threatened war production or materials in any way, the Department of Justice was

⁷⁶ T.W. Gregory to Samuel Gompers, telegram, October 8, 1917, Strike Files of the US Department of Justice, Pt. 1 on Microfilm #5897 mf. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library, reel 8.

not interested in stepping in until it determined a complete federal takeover of the telephone company would be required to end the strike and any war production disruption.

Myers' proposal and Brough and Arbuckle's efforts did not work. The striking operators agreed to the proposal, even though the two original operators were not part of the reinstatement. The company, however, flat out refused and did not offer a counter proposal.⁷⁷ This was the first time the operators had agreed to any sort of proposal to end the strike without the reinstatement of the originally dismissed operators. This did not mean that was no longer a primary goal for their striking, but they trusted the federal conciliators to work on that aspect of the negotiation after they returned to work. After being in Arizona for three days, Joseph Myers arrived back in Fort Smith on October 15 confident he could settle the strike within a few days.⁷⁸ This confidence, while admirable, would prove to be misplaced. Myers efforts to mediate would be bogged down by the political turmoil in the city.

⁷⁷ "Federal Conciliator to Leave Offer of Brough and Arbuckle for Arbitration is Accepted." *Southwest American*, October 23, 1917.

⁷⁸ Joseph Myers to H.L. Kerwin, October 15, 1917, Box 31, File 33-716, Mediation and Conciliation Service Dispute Case Files, National Archives.

Chapter Three

Battle for Control

In a city and region already rife with socialism and radicalism, many in the business community viewed the formation of trade unionism with suspicion and fear. The outbreak of the telephone strike compounded this idea, especially when city officials expressed sympathy for the strikers and refused pleas to provide police protection for strikebreakers. After a month of trying to end the strike met with little success, many of the elite citizens of Fort Smith started to take matters into their own hands. In their view, the city officials' support of the strikers was prolonging the strike, and these officials were failing their duties to the city by not protecting the strike-breakers Southwestern Bell needed to resume operations. This select group of citizens soon began a successful legal battle to remove these officials and a political effort to replace them with friends of the business community. What started as a simple strike over the firing of two union activists now engulfed the city and escalated into a civil war of sorts between labor supporters and business supporters that would almost tear the city apart.

On October 3, a grand jury issued indictments against many prominent citizens including Sheriff Claude Thompson, U.S. Marshal J. H. Parker, Chief of Police Jim Fernandez, Mayor J. H. Wright, and Judge Paul Little, among others. The local newspapers had not published reports on the grand jury or any indications these indictments were imminent prior to October 3. Furthermore, Wright had gone to St. Louis just days prior to his arrest to meet with corporate leaders of the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company.⁷⁹ In fact, officials had to wait until his return to arrest him, suggesting no one but the grand jury was aware at the time that these arrests

⁷⁹ "No Settlement for Strike and No New 'Phones," *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 4, 1917.

would happen. The *Times Record* published the affidavits of the indictments, which ranged from “mischievous mischief to grand larceny.”⁸⁰ Not only were the charges against Little never mentioned again by local media, but he would later preside over the trials of Wright and Fernandez. While the newspapers do not mention the charges against Thompson, Parker, and Little after the initial announcement, the arrests of Mayor Wright and Chief of Police Fernandez would plunge Fort Smith into disorder that would overshadow the strike in the eyes of the newspapers, city leaders, and the courts.

On October 4—the day after he was indicted—Judge Paul Little ordered an investigation into alleged pre-election promises Wright made almost a year earlier. Little empowered the grand jury “to investigate these matters fully and let the chips fall where they may.”⁸¹ After the investigation was over, the grand jury charged Wright and Fernandez with not only failing to disperse the crowd outside of the exchange when the gas lines were cut but also for not protecting the telephone exchange employees at Hotel Goldman, making pre-election promises, and accepting a bribe to let a brothel continue running.⁸² While these latter actions seem consistent with Arkansas politics at the time and hardly in need of formal indictments and felony charges, the *Southwest American* was quick to point out that “these rumors of an attempt to indict on various charges have been revived since the telephone strike the past two weeks has naturally arrayed the company’s friends as well as the opponents of organized labor against the mayor and his police department.”⁸³

⁸⁰ “Leading Citizens Arrested,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 3, 1917.

⁸¹ “Grand Jury Probe,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 4, 1917.

⁸² “More Indictments Served on Mayor and Police Chief,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 8, 1917.

⁸³ “Grand Jury Probes Action of Officer in Telephone Strike,” *Southwest American*, October 4, 1917.

Less than two weeks after the indictments of Wright and Fernandez, many of those thought to be behind those efforts created a “League for the Enforcement of Law.” The new organization was open to any man and woman who “believe a crisis has been reached in Fort Smith” and “the action of officers sworn to enforce the law, in aiding and abetting who would ruthlessly trample it under foot, is so menacing that such an organization is absolutely essential.”⁸⁴ The League of Law Enforcement would eventually boast 415 Fort Smith citizens as members; however, no union members of any kind were allowed to join.⁸⁵ The league was led by a group of 25 men including John Ayers as its chairman, Dr. St. Cloud Cooper, Reverend J. David Arnold, among others. Newspapers do not mention their positions, but the tone of the article and discussions surrounding the league imply they were elite citizens of Fort Smith. Federal Judge Frank Youmans, the judge who issued the injunction against the striking operators and likened Wright to the Germans, was also a member but not on the leadership committee.⁸⁶ Though the league would continuously frame its rhetoric in a way that suggested they wanted to see true justice restored to the community, its actions made it clear the members simply wanted the telephone strike ended in a way that benefitted Southwestern Bell and to get rid of any city official who expressed sympathy for organized labor. .

The League published many opinion articles in the *Fort Smith Times Record* in which they detailed their views on the corrupted state of the city, but it never seemed to detail an exact plan to restore the good nature of the city other than the removal of Wright and Fernandez. The League insisted that its members “believe a crisis has been reached in Fort Smith when the action

⁸⁴ “Law Enforcement League Organized Here Sunday to Meet Present Crisis,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 15, 1917.

⁸⁵ “A Law Enforcement League Is Organized,” *The Union Sentinel*, October 19, 1917.

⁸⁶ “Law Enforcement League Organized On Sunday at High School Auditorium,” *Southwest American*, October 16, 1917.

of officers sworn to enforce the law, in aiding and abetting those who would ruthlessly trample it under foot, is so menacing that such an organization is absolutely essential.”⁸⁷ It later declared that Fort Smith “shall never have the enforcement of the law as long as such men as Fernandez are retained in office” and the only way to ensure the appointment of a law abiding chief of police was to “have a mayor who is in favor of the removal of Jim Fernandez.”⁸⁸

The League for the Enforcement of Law ratcheted up the anti-labor rhetoric when it published an article, not surprisingly in the *Times Record*, linking the city’s labor unrest to the anti-war Industrial Workers of the World. It said the lawlessness of mob activity only hurt the striking women and compared the violence they potentially could experience to that inflicted against African Americans because “the negro was lynched on our streets some years ago was the victim of the non-enforcement of the law.” The article also blamed Wright and Fernandez for the small mob at the Hotel Goldman because, according to the league, “it is when it is known that the officers will not enforce the law that the mob spirit rules.” The League further maintained that mob activity only comes when officers do not enforce the law that “it is not necessary for officers to be armed; if they are determined to enforce the law the people will respect their commands.” Finally, the article drew allusions to Russia and Germany, as had previously been done by others in the community including Judge Youmans, by pointing out the lack of law enforcement and excessive mob activity in Russia and that “the great Democracy is crumbling and the Germans overrun it at will. Shall Fort Smith be a little Russia?”⁸⁹ This allusion to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia is interesting in that the revolution had only taken

⁸⁷ “Law Enforcement League Organized Here Sunday to Meet Present Crisis,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 15, 1917

⁸⁸ “Fort Smith Opportunity,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 27, 1917.

⁸⁹ “The Real Issue,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, November 9, 1917.

place a few days before the publication of this article, so the news and fear of a communist revolution seemed to travel very quickly to Fort Smith. While everything in the article sounds very convincing, the league did not give any examples of how it believed it would overcome the apparent “lawlessness” in the city and bring back and maintain law and order throughout the city. Instead of naming these plans, it simply disparaged those currently in law enforcement attempting to bring justice to everyone in Fort Smith during this turbulent time.

Jack Adams of the Central Trades and Labor Council condemned the League for the Enforcement of Law for not standing up with the laborers and pitting females against each other by advocating for strike breakers. He maintained that, even though the strike was seemingly nowhere close to ending, the strikers were determined to stand their ground saying, “We wish to serve notice now, that the fight has just begun, and the girls call on all who are in sympathy with the rights of true womanhood to assist them, in order that in the future even the corporations will respect the working girl who demands the right to a decent living.”⁹⁰ With this statement, the evolution of a strike simply for recognition of a union and rehiring of two fired operators into a moral fight for better working conditions and wages not only for current operators but any female worker nationwide was completed.

Wright also insisted that the opposition of the business community to his administration was rooted in more than his support for the strikers. Wright claimed the ministerial alliance asked him during his previous campaign to eliminate the red-light district. After investigating, he “found it absolutely necessary...that this social evil be eradicated.” Wright argued that his actions in eliminating the red-light district “brought down on [himself] the enmity and criticism

⁹⁰ “Adams Makes a Statement in Behalf of Girl Strikers; Other Labor News of Interest,” *Southwest American*, November 18, 1917.

of some of the prominent business men of this city...who were profiteers of this vice district...and are now prominent among the leading members of the Law Enforcement League and strongly opposing [his] candidacy for re-election.”⁹¹ It also brings into question who initiated the charges against Wright. While newspapers only mention the grand jury as the entity issuing the indictments, statements such as this from J.H. Wright suggest powerful members of the business community were unhappy with how he had affected their business and continuously supported the labor community, and they decided to push through indictments and convictions they knew would remove him from office.

On October 11, Mayor Wright’s trial for the allegations of pre-election promises began. Wright allegedly met with John Vaughan prior to the election and promised to make him city attorney should he and his friends support him. While pre-election promises of positions in exchange for support seem commonplace now, it was actually illegal in Fort Smith according to the city statutes. Section 18 of the municipal charter stated: “it shall be unlawful for any candidate for office, of any officer in such city, directly or indirectly, to give or promise any person or persons any office, position, employment, benefit or anything of value for the purpose of influencing or obtaining the political support, aid or vote of any person or persons.”⁹² Wright’s trial took place in the circuit court with Judge Paul Little presiding and the jury consisted of twelve men including Phillip Bass, John A. Northum, Lawrence Keating, and Grady Manning, who would later be significant in Wright’s appeal to the Arkansas Supreme Court. In a show of great support for the mayor, the striking operators marched together from North Street into the court room and sat in the front rows. Prosecutors argued, though, that Vaughan and his

⁹¹ “Mr. Wright Speaks Plainly on the Issue of Vice,” *Southwest American*, November 12, 1917.

⁹² “Grand Jury Probe,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 4, 1917.

supporters “were led to believe that he (Mr. Wright) would make Mr. Vaughan city attorney” because he had told the group that approached him in his home that “John Vaughan suits him just fine.” Witnesses testified this statement led them to believe Wright was promising to make Vaughan attorney and formed conversations and persuasions to vote for Wright around that statement leading up to the election.⁹³ Wright’s attorneys, including Webb Covington and Love Grant who also represented the strikers, argued if Wright had indeed promised to name John Vaughan as city attorney after the election, he still did not violate the law because Wright was not the sole appointer of that position. Additionally, he maintained Wright actually refused to make that promise when approached in his home, and now Vaughan, “because he and his friends had been disappointed, they were now trying ‘to wreck Mr. Wright.’” Three days after the start of the trial, the jury found Wright guilty of pre-election promises, a verdict that removed Wright from office and set in motion preparations for a new mayoral election.

On October 14, Wright went on trial a second time, this time for the allegations relating to the strike. Other than four men, the jury presiding over this trial was exactly the same as Wright’s previous trial. Paul Little was again the judge for the second trial, as well. Prosecutors alleged Wright did not disperse a crowd outside of the Southwestern Bell Telephone Exchange and knowingly allowed protestors to cut gas lines behind the building, damaging the company’s ability to conduct business. Ray Gill, secretary of the Business Men’s club, testified to the court that Wright had spoken to him about the exchange incident and he had seen several boys outside of the exchange but had made them leave. Gill testified, however, that there was a loud banging that “stopped as he and Mayor Wright walked by but was resumed after they had passed. When

⁹³ Mayor Wright Placed on Trial on Charge of Violating Election Law,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 11, 1917.

they neared a corner of the building [...] he heard a whistle.” Gill admitted that the whistle had to have been a signal because there was no sign of digging or banging sounds when he and Wright looked, but that Wright did not do anything to disperse the crowd around the exchange to ensure there was no damage. The prosecution even called several strikers and labor members to testify. One striker, Beulah Buchannan, testified she had gone on strike every single day and had seen Wright often while striking. She argued that “he advised the strikers [...] not to resort to violence, and not to blockade the sidewalk in front of the company’s building.”⁹⁴ Wright’s attorneys argued Wright was present at the exchange during this event but did not see any violence or any reason to break up the crowd. They also vehemently denied that he had any knowledge of damage against the exchange building much less the explicitly allowing it.⁹⁵ Judge Little was even called as a witness, and he testified that not only had he not seen anything unlawful happening when he would pass the telephone exchange but that “no violations of the law had been reported to him [...] by telephone company officials or others.”⁹⁶ In the end, however, the jury convicted Wright of nonfeasance of office regarding the dispersing of crowds at the telephone exchange.

Immediately, Wright’s attorneys filed motions of appeal against the second conviction stating one of the jurors, Henry Brockington, had a bias against Wright. Witnesses stated Brockington had “called Mr. Wright unprintable names, and said things that indicated strong prejudice against him.” Judge Little, however, dismissed the motion regarding Brockington after

⁹⁴ “Tells Jury Mayor Was Present When Gas Was Cut At Phone Building,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 17, 1917.

⁹⁵ “Mayor, Held Guilty on Pre-Election Promise, On Trial Second Time,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 14, 1917.

⁹⁶ “Tells Jury Mayor Was Present When Gas Was Cut At Phone Building,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 17, 1917.

the juror swore under oath that he held no prejudice against Wright, and the conviction stood. Wright's attorneys continued this argument of juror prejudice through several more appeals up to the state supreme court. For the time being, the cases were settled and preparations for the new election began.

A few days after issuing the order for his removal from office, Judge Paul Little ruled that J. H. Wright could be a candidate for the new mayoral election.⁹⁷ The primary election would take place on November 13 and the general election on November 27. While Wright was appealing the convictions, he began running to regain his position as mayor. Despite his recent arrest and conviction, Wright believed he had enough support continuing from the previous election and that public support for the strikers would allow him to win his position back. Wright announced his candidacy for mayor on October 26.⁹⁸

The League for the Enforcement of Law found their champion on November 4, when Arch Monro announced his candidacy for mayor, making him Wright's only challenger.⁹⁹ Unsurprisingly, the *Times Record* and the League for the Enforcement of Law boasted of the "opportunity" that Fort Smith had to work through democracy and create law and order for themselves and reminded readers that "a vote against J. H. Wright in the November primaries is a vote to remove the worst police chief Fort Smith ever had."¹⁰⁰ Although the *Times Record* and the League endorsed Monro, they did not write and publish much about his merits but rather

⁹⁷ "Say Wright Not Barred Off Ticket," *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 21, 1917.

⁹⁸ "J.H. Wright Announces For Mayor," *Southwest American*, October 26, 1917.

⁹⁹ "Announcement," *Southwest American*, November 4, 1917.

¹⁰⁰ "Fort Smith Opportunity," *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 27, 1917. "FOR FORT SMITH," *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 29, 1917.

focused on tearing apart Wright's campaign. They wanted voters to back Monro only because they did not want Wright to win.

The *Southwest American*, which was much more sympathetic to the strikers, maintained that the League for the Enforcement of Law cared about "PROPERTY RIGHTS-not human rights" and that Arch Monro was only the mouthpiece for the League. The newspaper also questioned Monro's patriotism citing the fact that he arrived in Fort Smith in 1893 but did not file for naturalization until 1908 calling into question his loyalty to the United States or to Great Britain overall.¹⁰¹ The *Southwest American* argued that voters would be expressing much more than support for a candidate in the upcoming primary but rather deciding if it is okay for leaders to speak harshly about the reputation of the city, for businesses to control the government more than citizens do in a battle of the will of the people over "capitalistic exploitation," and for a democratic, majority victory over "small cliques of arrogant men" who are in the "self-serving minorities."¹⁰² To them, the League for the Enforcement of Law was just a way for a small, elite group of businessmen to bully the public and achieve control over the city.¹⁰³

Not only was this primary an important step in deciding the next mayor of Fort Smith, but the November 13 election would also be the first time that women, or at least white women who had paid their poll tax, could vote in the state. Arkansas had passed legislation only that April that allowed women to vote in primaries and, since there were only two candidates for mayor, the primary would be the de facto election. Reports suggested that 422 of the 3,793 citizens who paid poll taxes that year were women, and many newspapers and citizens

¹⁰¹ "The Sunday Political Rally at High School Auditorium Reiterates L.E.L. Platform," *Southwest American*, November 12, 1917.

¹⁰² "Keep This In Mind," *Southwest American*, November 12, 1917.

¹⁰³ "Return Indictments Against Mayor and Chief of Police," *Fort Smith Times Record*, October 5, 1917.

speculated the female votes would be the deciding factor in the election.¹⁰⁴ The 422 women who paid their poll taxes did so between March 21 and April 10, long before there was any hint of the strike and indictments later that would hit Fort Smith later that fall. When these women paid their taxes, they did not think there would be an election that year but rather paid them out of novelty.¹⁰⁵

On November 13, Dymple Johnson, a dental hygienist, became the first female to cast her vote in an Arkansas election and was glad she had “the satisfaction of knowing [her] first ballot really counted; that it was not merely in a primary when the result might be overturned by the subsequent election,” though she neglected to say who she gave her vote to.¹⁰⁶ Striking operators also ventured to the polls themselves and wore buttons supporting Wright. It is highly unlikely, though, that the operators could vote because they could not have afforded to pay the poll tax. Since this mayoral election was an emergency election, and no one could have foreseen the election taking place whenever it was time to pay poll taxes. Thus, the only women who had paid their poll taxes and were eligible to vote in this election were those who had been able to afford paying their tax that year simply out of principle and not in anticipation of an election. The operators had already proven they could hardly afford to live off their salaries much less have enough left over for a seemingly unnecessary tax.

Arch Monro won the primary election by 200 votes through a record 2,686 total ballots cast. The *Times Record*, in its congratulatory article for Monro, gave all victory credit to the

¹⁰⁴ “Women to Vote in Primary in Fort Smith November 13; Will Be First Opportunity,” *Southwest American*, October 28, 1917.

¹⁰⁵ “Women Voters Pay Poll Tax,” *Southwest American*, March 21, 1917. On the suffrage movement in Arkansas, see A. Elizabeth Taylor, “The Woman Suffrage Movement in Arkansas,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 15 (Spring 1956): 17-52.

¹⁰⁶ “Fernandez, Police Chief, Attempts to be Czar for City Primary Election,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, November 13, 1917.

League for the Enforcement of Law and praised the League for fighting for justice, supporting lawful laborers, and attempting to show their own support for labor workers by denouncing Wright's support for them. The *Times Record* stated "there was an effort, as there always is, on the part of the lawless and unscrupulous, to distract attention from the main issues, because a labor dispute happened to be the thing that brought out the great departure from justice and right," but that Wright and others were only trying to use that to move attention away from his shortcomings and were not truly supportive of the strike. Furthermore, the article praised the American patriotism of the League that "made a good fight" but reminding them the war for justice "is a long conflict-such a long conflict as always confronts **embattled Right** when it faces **intrenched Evil**," and it claimed the "organization is needed now as much or more than ever."¹⁰⁷

The female votes are a fascinating aspect of this election not only because it was the first-time females could vote in Arkansas but also because there appears to be a class aspect to the election. After months of searching and numerous inquiries to various agencies, it appears the poll tax records and election books have been destroyed—not surprising for a city mayoral election. While the lack of hard evidence is disappointing, many assumptions can be made regarding this election. As stated previously, there was no election scheduled when the time came to pay the poll taxes, so the women who paid them did so out of principle rather than necessity. Additionally, the League for the Enforcement of Law, which was founded by and comprised of business class citizens who vehemently opposed Wright, boasted a high number of female members as well as male members. This could explain why the local newspapers heralded the female votes as the tipping point for Monro to win the election. The upper-class

¹⁰⁷ "But the Beginning," *Fort Smith Times Record*, November 14, 1917.

women, and even perhaps some middle-class women not members of the League, voted against those in the city government that supported the labor movement and, in essence, the working class striking female telephone operators. Thus, the election adds an interesting class dimension to battle between labor and capitalism. It appears the upper classes supported capitalism and business, joining the League for the Enforcement of Law and voting against Wright, while the middle and lower classes supported labor, giving monetary and moral support to the operators throughout the strike.

Wright did not accept the result of the election. Soon after the primary election, Wright appealed the results of the primary to the circuit court saying the female votes should not have counted and, if those votes were removed, he would have won. The reasons he gave for the illegality of the female votes that the law only allowed women to vote in primary elections because the state constitution explicitly forbade them from voting in general elections.¹⁰⁸ Wright maintained that, because there were only two names on the primary ballot, the primary election was the *de facto* general election. Thus, the law did not allow women to vote in this particular primary election.

Wright also filed an injunction to prevent Monro from taking office because, he was not legally voted into office.¹⁰⁹ Judge Paul Little denied Wright's motion, though, ruling that Wright could not succeed himself because he had been removed from office by a jury trial and quoted other cases from other states to justify his decision.¹¹⁰ Judge Little was the same judge who had

¹⁰⁸ "Wright Contests; Charges Women's Votes are Illegal," *Fort Smith Times Record*, November 18, 1917. "Wright Files Contest On Election of Monro To Test Women's Votes," *Southwest American*, November 18, 1917.

¹⁰⁹ "Wright Will Petition For Restraining Order to Prevent Election," *Southwest American*, November 24, 1917.

¹¹⁰ "Wright denied Injunction to Restrain Election; Court Says He is Ineligible as Candidate," *Fort Smith Times Record*, November 26, 1917.

earlier ruled that Wright could seek reelection. He had also been indicted alongside Wright, seen those charges disappear, and presided over both of Wright's convictions. To say the least, Little's actions suggest several conflicts of interest and many shady dealings. In the end, no court upheld Wright's arguments, and Arch Monro—the primary election victor with the help of female votes—would be the only name on the general election ballot. Just as the elite businessmen of the city defeated the labor community by removing Wright from office, the elite women helped defeat the working-class women through their votes.

The elections in November turned much of the news' attention away from the strike, but the newspapers were quick to point out that Wright's removal from office was directly related to his handling of the strike. The indictments, especially the pre-election promises, had only come after influential business leaders in the city accused city officials of mishandling the mob activity with the strike and continually showing sympathy with the strikers instead of supporting the telephone company. Wright and his team latched on to the idea his conviction was a "frame up" because of his support for the strike, but the *Times Record*, refuted that prospect. The *Record* reported that the grand jury commissioners had been chosen three months prior to the indictment and tugged at the emotions of its readers by reminding them the jurors were their own, honest neighbors, so why would it be a frame job?¹¹¹ The *Times Record* also reported businessmen in the area had offered jobs to Mrs. Nora Boger and Miss Mamie Garret, the two originally dismissed operators, for the same or even higher wages than they had received from the Southwestern Bell Co, but they and the other striking operators refused based on the principle.¹¹²

¹¹¹ "Charge of Frame-Up in J.H. Wright's Case is Pure Fabrication," *Fort Smith Times Record*, November 4, 1917.

¹¹² "Refuse to Negotiate on Strike Unless Discharged Operators Are Reinstated," *Fort Smith Times Record*, November 4, 1917.

In the midst of the pandemonium within Fort Smith, word of the telephone strike spread throughout the region, and on October 20, special assistant to the U. S. secretary of labor, Hugh Kerwin, wrote a telegram to Robert Keating, a federal commissioner of conciliation in Little Rock who had travelled to Fort Smith to attempt to resolve the situation, regarding the strike in Fort Smith and those apparently breaking out in Oklahoma as well. Kerwin advised Keating to stay in Fort Smith because he felt the other strikes were strongly influenced by the Fort Smith situation and would resolve themselves if Keating could end it.¹¹³ Joseph Myers, having returned from working on the copper strike in Arizona, sent a telegram to Keating expressing the seriousness of the situation and how he expected violence to occur since the mayor had been indicted. He further lamented the company still would not allow the governor to mediate nor deal with the strikers but would “negotiate with operators only through our dept [*sic*].”¹¹⁴ Myers was careful to create a difference in his telegram between “strikers” and “operators” most likely because the telephone company was drawing that exact line, and that distinction in how the company viewed the strikers helps explain why the strike continued on so long. The company refused to acknowledge the striking women, and by proxy the union they created, so they simply viewed them as “former operators” and would only work with them on an individual basis as they would any other employee who had quit.

In the weeks between Wright’s removal on October 14 and Monro’s inauguration on November 29, T.A. Bayley, one of the city commissioners and vice mayor, served as acting mayor and spent much time attempting yet again to end the telephone strike. Bayley created a

¹¹³ Kerwin to Robert Keating, December 20, 1917, Box 40, File 33-849 Mediation and Conciliation Service Dispute Case Files.

¹¹⁴ Joseph S Myers to Kerwin, telegram, October 20, 1917. Box 40, File 33-849 Mediation and Conciliation Service Dispute Case Files.

citizen committee of ten men in hopes of demanding the restoration of the telephone service. This committee, no names were given in the newspapers as to who was on the committee, created no ideas on how to end the strike, but Bayley hoped the men could use influence and diplomacy to bring the strike to an end.¹¹⁵ Up to this point, the telephone company had not listened to any committee, whether consisting of members of labor unions or general citizens, but all involved with this committee hoped the length of the strike so far would change the company leaders' minds and they would be willing to meet. Southwestern Bell was not really interested in solving the ongoing conflict, declining to meet with the mayor's strike committee. Instead, the company suggested that it would bring in strikebreakers to restart service. Wright's defeat and Monro's election had signaled that the police department would be mobilized to protect the strikebreakers. The mayor's strike committee began to worry that the city's labor movement would respond by calling a general strike.¹¹⁶

The striking operators responded to the threat of strikebreakers by appealing to the public. They published an ad in the *Southwest American* asking the public to sign petitions that were circulating throughout the city asking for a restoration of service and employment and "thus join in the effort to compel the telephone company to change its autocratic stand and the 'public be damned' policy it has shown for the past two months."¹¹⁷ The company continued to refuse any petitions for the settlement of the strike and called negotiations "a waste of effort" because they felt completely justified in the dismissal of the two operators. Acting Mayor Bayley,

¹¹⁵ "Acting Mayor Bayley Asks Citizens to Help Settle Telephone Strike," *Southwest American*, November 18, 1917.

¹¹⁶ "Mayor's Strike Board Asks Reinstatement of Strikers," *Fort Smith Times Record*, November 21, 1917. "Business Men Ask Girls Be Reinstated And Office Opened," *Southwest American*, November 21, 1917.

¹¹⁷ "To All Telephone Patrons," *Southwest American*, November 22, 1917.

however, was not moved by the telephone company's refusal and called another committee meeting to collect the petitions to deliver to company leaders.¹¹⁸

On the heels of a record-breaking primary election, very few citizens turned out for the final mayoral election in which Arch Monro was the only name on the ticket.¹¹⁹ Monro obviously won the election with 688 total votes cast in the election city wide; 685 votes were for him while 3 ballots had Wright written in. On November 29, Monro was sworn in as mayor and named Phi Ross as police chief.¹²⁰ The businessmen, *Times Record*, and League for the Enforcement of Law had succeeded in putting their chosen candidate into office and removing Jim Fernandez. Additionally, the power vacuum left by Wright's conviction was finally over, and the pendulum of support swung in the company's favor with a new anti-labor mayor. Monro did hold a conference with Vedder and representatives of the Central Trades and Labor Council the same day of his swearing in, but the conference was, predictably, unsuccessful. The strikers continued to insist on the reinstatement of the two dismissed operators, and the company still refused to do so.¹²¹ The strike continued into its fourth month. At this time, the company prepared to bring in strikebreakers to reopen the exchange and return phone service to the area.¹²²

¹¹⁸ "Strike Board to Hold Conference," *Fort Smith Times Record*, November 23, 1917.

¹¹⁹ "Little Interest in Mayoralty Election," *Fort Smith Times Record*, November 27, 1917.

¹²⁰ "Arch Monro Mayor Now; Phil Ross Chief of Police; Phone Conference Today," *Southwest American*, November 29, 1917.

¹²¹ "No Progress at Conference of Strikers by Manager Vedder," *Southwest American*, December 1, 1917.

¹²² "Phone Strike to Start This Week is Report," *Fort Smith Times Record*, December 2, 1917.

Chapter Four

General Strike

With the new mayor and a business community willing to back Southwestern Bell's use of strikebreakers, the unions of Fort Smith realized that the stakes were high and that a general strike was the most powerful tool that they had left. Union members across the area began to whisper again of a general strike that would force the business community of Fort Smith to its knees and make support of arbitration a necessity for the city to continue functioning as normal. Speakers at the meeting declared their dedication to the strike, even after such a long fight, and they "intended to carry the fight to the finish, if it took 'till the crack of doom.'" With rumblings of a general strike flowing throughout the city, many unions began to pledge their support to the strikers and willingness to participate should a strike break out. A mass meeting of labor union leaders from across the area took place on December 4th and a decision on a boycott of using telephone services in support of the telephone strike was unanimously approved.¹²³ Everyone at that meeting, however, knew the boycott most likely would not sway the telephone company leaders and a general strike was imminent.

With the fear of a general strike growing stronger, Mayor Monroe called yet another meeting on December 6 of businessmen to try and find a solution and avoid a general strike with the continuation of the power plant being their largest concern, but the street railway union of Fort Smith, the union including the power plant workers, that serviced the power plant was the biggest in the area and was sure to participate should the general strike occur.¹²⁴ Though not

¹²³ "Labor Mass Meeting Decides on Boycott to Fight Phone Co." *Southwest American*, December 4, 1917.

¹²⁴ "Mayor Calls Mass Meeting to Avoid General Walk Out," *Fort Smith Times Record*, December 6, 1917.

explicitly stated, based on previous connections, Monro's committee likely consisted of leaders of the League for the Enforcement of Law which strangely grew quiet after the November election. Whatever plan the businessmen and the mayor tried to implement following this meeting was futile because on December 6, the Central Trades and Labor Council authorized a general strike for all unions affiliated with it, approximately 25 unions with around 1200 members.¹²⁵ This decision came as a result of the telephone strike being in its fourth month despite "every honorable effort" from the union representatives to bring an end and the use of strike breakers brought in by the telephone company at the end of November to bring phone service back to the area. Because the company refused to submit to arbitration and seemed bent on forcing the operators to do its will with no concessions itself, every member of every union in the city was to walk out of work and not return until **all** operators were reinstated at the telephone company.¹²⁶

The union leaders agreed to place the general strike on hold pending the results of this meeting, but citizens across the city began to stock up on supplies should the city shut down. After the mayor's committee meeting ended badly, union leaders attacked the League for the Enforcement of Law believing it "was formed for the purpose of oppressing organized labor" and that was why it did not attempt to help negotiate the strike until this time. To no one's surprise, the general strike would take place.¹²⁷ The general strike was set to begin on December 9, and Jack Adams reminded union members to remain nonviolent and follow the law while the telephone company gives no statement. Adams maintained "the fight [...] would be won by

¹²⁵ Preliminary Report of Commissioner of Conciliation, Box 31, File 33-716, Mediation and Conciliation Service Dispute Case Files, National Archives.

¹²⁶ "General Strike of Union Labor is Authorized," *Southwest American*, December 6, 1917.

¹²⁷ "Conferences Are Held With Both Sides to Avert Strike But Situation is Unchanged," *Fort Smith Times Record*, December 7, 1917.

moral suasion and that alone.”¹²⁸ In response to the failure of the meeting, the *Times Record* decried the possibility of a general strike. The paper pointed to the value of contracts and not breaking said contracts saying, “To call a general strike would make it much more difficult and unsatisfactory for every element, union as well as nonunion.”¹²⁹

At 7:00 am on December 9, 1917, the Fort Smith general strike began as “bakers, carpenters, cigar makers, teamsters, sheet metal workers, painters, paper hangers, musicians, electrical workers, plasterers” and many other workers walked out..¹³⁰ The one local union that did not immediately participate was the Amalgamated Association of Street Railway Employees, whose members operated the power plant, because their contract designated they could not participate in any sympathetic strike. D. C. Green, from the Light and Power Company, spoke with the union leaders and wrote to Newton D. Baker, the secretary of war, that their contract with the Amalgamated Association Street Railway Employees stated they would not participate in a general strike, and W. D. Mahon, the national president, agreed to abide by the contract. The local president, however, insisted that if a general strike occurred, the power plant employees would join.¹³¹

Prior to this month, the federal government had remained relatively passive in the settlement of the strike. The secretary of labor had sent Joseph Myers as a federal conciliator, but the Fort Smith strike was far from top priority as Myers kept leaving to help with the Arizona strike. Additionally, even though Myers proposed several plans for mediation, he relied on the governor and attorney general and Southwestern Bell ignored them. In October, the federal

¹²⁸ “All Unions in City on Strike,” *Southwest American*, December 8, 1917.

¹²⁹ “For a Fair Deal,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, December 7, 1917.

¹³⁰ “General Strike is Inaugurated,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, December 9, 1917.

¹³¹ Green to Baker, December 8, 1917, Box 40, File 33-849, Mediation and Conciliation Service Dispute Case Files, National Archives.

government had also kept an eye on several other strikes that took place in other parts of the area. At the end of the primary election, Myers proposed a settlement to the company and the strikers that required the two dismissed operators to “be satisfactorily provided for,” reinstatement of all other women, no discrimination against girls involved in the union, and an increase in pay.¹³² The strikers, however, continued to hold firm and not accept any settlement offer that does not include the reinstatement of those two original operators. It should be no surprise, however, that the Southwestern Bell managers were not present at this meeting and issued no response to this proposal.¹³³

Once the general strike began, the federal government became very interested in the proceedings at Fort Smith-particularly because the power plant supplied all power to the area coal mines that produced 4,000 tons of coal a day and were vital to the war effort amidst a severe coal shortage across the nation. Having power to the coal mines, however, was inconsequential because the coal miners, who had vigorously supported the telephone operators from the very beginning, had joined the general strike.¹³⁴ The secretary of labor sent Robert Keating, a commissioner of conciliation, to Fort Smith to end the general strike. Upon arrival, Keating found that “it is truly a bad proposition and one that will have to be very carefully handled.”¹³⁵ He quickly got to work ending the general and telephone strikes.

¹³² ““Hello Girls,” May Soon Return to Work, *Southwest American*, November 25, 1917.

¹³³ “Must Reinstate All Phone Operators; One Settlement Strikers Vote Unanimously,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, November 26, 1917.

¹³⁴ “Power House Strike Would Cut Power From 4000 Tons of Coal Production a Day,” *Southwest American*, December 9, 1917. “Result of Strike Call To Be Known Only After All Unions Have Acted,” *Southwest American*, December 9, 1917.

¹³⁵ Kerwin to Keating, December 10, 1917. Box 40, File 33-849, Mediation and Conciliation Service Dispute Case Files, National Archives.

Attempts by plant managers and the national president of the streetcar employees to avert the walkout at the power plant were not successful, and on December 10 the local union joined the general strike, plunging Fort Smith into darkness and causing the coal mines to fully shut down as well, though the miners had already joined the strike.¹³⁶ Prior to this, the coal mines had been kept running with non-union workers, but the lack of power completely shut down the mines and any cola production. Fort Smith United States Attorney Emon O. Mahony sent a telegram to United States Attorney General Thomas Watt Gregory detailing the situation and stating there were no streetcars, no power from the Light and Power Co, no operation in the coal mines, and no newspapers. Noting that Jack Adams, the main negotiator and spokesperson for the striking operators, was “a very dangerous man and the principal cause of all the trouble” who, when told the government would step in in the event of a general strike, had responded “Blank Damn the government and the Coal Mines.” Mahony asked the attorney general if Adams could be charged with an offense against the United States. Gregory told Mahony there was “no sufficient reason for interference by this Department in labor troubles at Fort Smith,” and the Department of Labor and local officials should handle the situation unless they deemed martial law necessary.¹³⁷

Robert Keating arrived in Fort Smith on December 13 and arbitrated the end to the general strike through each individual industry and union, beginning with the power plant, to end the strike little by little. He framed his negotiations as the strikers’ patriotic duty to return to

¹³⁶ D.C. Green to Newton D. Baker, December 10, 1917. Box 40, File 33-849, Mediation and Conciliation Service Dispute Case Files, National Archives.

¹³⁷ Gregory to US Attorney in Fort Smith, December 12, 1917, Strike Files of the U.S. Department of Justice, Pt. 1 on Microfilm #5897 mf. Kheel Center for Labor’ Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library, reel 8.

work since the power plant aided in coal production.¹³⁸ Perhaps more importantly, Keating, along with conciliator Mark Crawford, promised the unions that they would stay and end the phone strike. Later reports indicate Keating and Crawford promised not only to negotiate better wages and working conditions for all of the operators but also the full reinstatement of the two dismissed operators that had originally sparked the strike.¹³⁹ After six days of the general strike and five days with no newspapers, electricity, or streetcars, the general strike ended on December 13.¹⁴⁰ By December 15, all industries had returned to normal and the general strike was over.¹⁴¹ Soon after the general strike ended, Crawford returned to Chicago and left Keating to finish arbitrating the telephone strike.¹⁴²

Keating worked quietly to end the telephone strike, and he ultimately was successful. On December 27, the strike officially ended as 67 workers returned to work at the exchange after accepting an agreement regarding hours, wages, and working conditions. The only thing left for discussion was the reinstatement of the discharged operators which Keating promised to continue to work on.¹⁴³ In the mediation process, Keating suggested the strikers go to the company and express their “desire to return to work” and then be “treated as individuals, and assigned to their duties by officials of the company.”¹⁴⁴ Essentially, Keating convinced the striking operators to agree to what the company had been wanting them to do the entire time—negotiate with the

¹³⁸ “Coal Mines Return to Work,” *Southwest American*, December 13, 1917.

¹³⁹ Transcript of Executive Board of the State Federation of Labor meeting, November 7, 1918, Box 31, File 33-716, Mediation and Conciliation Service Dispute Case Files, National Archives, 6.

¹⁴⁰ “Government Officials Take Hand in the General Strike Here; Men Back to Work,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, December 13, 1917.

¹⁴¹ “Government Agents Work Quietly to End Strike; Much Optimism is Felt,” *Southwest American*, December 14, 1917.

¹⁴² Mark L. Crawford to Secretary of Labor, Dec 1917, Box 40, File 33-849, Mediation and Conciliation Services Dispute Case Files, National Archives.

¹⁴³ “Agreement is Accepted Thru Federal Mediator to Settle Controversy,” *Southwest American*, December 27, 1917.

¹⁴⁴ “Telephone Conditions Are Normal Once More,” *Southwest American*, December 28, 1917.

company individually and, thus, not force the recognition of their union. Additionally, the women compromised every aspect of what they had been fighting for without receiving any real promises from the company, basing everything on the promise that Keating would meet with the company leaders and negotiate a plan that would please both parties. It is important to note that Keating had not met with the Southwestern Bell Company leaders at this time, and there was no agreement for negotiation or mediation from the company at all. Keating's promises and meetings with the operators and the Central Trades and Labor Council were based solely on his personal confidence that the federal government could force the company into arbitration when no other entity had been successful thus far. Keating seemed unconcerned that for the past three months, company leaders simply refused to show up to meetings regarding any negotiation from any committee or previous federal conciliator and remained hopeful that they would actually meet with him after they had all of their employees back working without any concessions. In the end, Keating failed to follow through with any of his promises to the striking operators.

All was not completely rosy, however, as Keating expressed to Secretary of Labor Kerwin that he still feared a general strike because he believed it "was originally caused more by local politics than anything else and every effort in the world has been made to prevent the girls from going back to work."¹⁴⁵ Keating, at this time, was still very confident in his arbitration of the strike amidst these concerns and boasted that he had "certainly worked hard on this case and accomplished something that the Governor of the State and his entire staff...failed to accomplish."¹⁴⁶ This sense of accomplishment would be short lived, however.

¹⁴⁵ Keating to Kerwin, December 27, 1917, Box 31, File 33-716, Mediation and Conciliation Service Dispute Case Files, National Archives.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

After four long months of ignored requests for negotiations and the company's return to its strike breaker policy, labor leaders in Fort Smith knew they needed to take drastic action. A general strike would bring the city to a halt and force the public to put pressure on the Southwestern Bell Company to meet for negotiations and end the strike. In the meantime, the strike shut down the local power plant that supplied power to nearby coal mines which drew the federal government's attention. For the first time, the general strike, and by demand the telephone strike, brought a full intervention from the federal government. Federal conciliators came to Fort Smith and quickly ended the general strike on the promise of also ending the telephone strike. Within a few weeks, they were successful in that endeavor, but the next year would be extremely turbulent as they tried, as so many had done before, to negotiate agreeable terms with the telephone company.

Chapter Five

Federal Failure and Aftermath

By January 5, 1918, all of the strikebreakers had been sent home, most of the operators had returned to work, and the federal mediator was supposedly continuing to work on the reinstatement of the two dismissed operators. Keating had succeeded in having company leaders agree not to discriminate against any employee associated with the union, but there was still no recognition of the union, wage increases, improved working conditions, or any other promise Keating had made to the operators and the Central Trades and Labor Council.¹⁴⁷ Keating sent a preliminary report on the settlement to the secretary of labor on January 15 and March 23 but was waiting to send a final report until one final issue was resolved. He needed to convince the Southwestern Bell Company to reinstate the two operators before he would officially consider the situation ended.¹⁴⁸ It seems with that one issue left, Keating should have resolved the strike fairly easily and sent in that final report, right? Wrong. Later reports show that Keating, who was so confident back in December, never resolved that one issue and thus never finished settling the telephone strike. Keating had promised the striking operators that he would press for higher wages, fewer hours, better working conditions, and the reinstatement of the two dismissed operators as part of his effort to resolve both the general strike and the operators' strike. Between December 1917 and October 1918, Keating tried to meet with company officials time and again but was met with resolute opposition every step of the way. With the operators back at work,

¹⁴⁷ "Settlement Ft. Smith Telephone Trouble," *The Union Labor Bulletin*, January 5, 1918.

¹⁴⁸ Robert Keating to H.L. Kerwin, March 23, 1917, Box 40, File 33-849, Mediation and Conciliation Service Dispute Case Files, National Archives.

Southwest Bell had no incentive to acced to the demands of either the strikers or the federal official.

By October 1918, the Fort Smith Central Trades and Labor Council was extremely frustrated with not only Keating's failure to secure the concessions he promised but also his lack of communication with them. After several months of little to no communication from Keating, the Central Trades and Labor Council filed a complaint with the Arkansas State Federation of Labor. The complaint detailed that Keating had made very specific promises in a meeting to negotiate the possibility of the strikers returning to work. The Council argued Keating "read from a paper in his hand, that if the girls would return to work, he would take the matter of reinstating the two girls up with the officials of the company at St. Louis."¹⁴⁹ However, after this meeting, Keating failed to accomplish this promise or communicate his efforts with the Council. The State Federation Labor then investigated the Council's allegations that October and found that Keating had indeed failed to follow through with his promises. As a result, the Arkansas State Federation of Labor condemned Keating and drafted a resolution at its November convention in Russellville detailing his failures to be sent to the federal Department of Labor. The resolution detailed Keating's promise to reinstate the two originally dismissed operators without the authority to carry out such a promise. It also stated the Arkansas State Federation of Labor believed Keating was "liable to censure for failing to report the progress of his work" and the "Central Trades and Labor Council of Fort Smith was well within its rights in introducing the resolution [...] hoping to secure final action by the government mediator."¹⁵⁰ This complaint and resolution against Keating had the potential to ruin his career as a federal conciliator with the

¹⁴⁹ Transcript of Executive Board of the State Federation of Labor meeting, November 7, 1918, Box 31, File 33-716, Mediation and Conciliation Service Dispute Case Files, National Archives, 3.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 2.

Department of Labor. Without confidence in his abilities to follow through, trade unions would not trust his assurances. The success of federal conciliators, hinged on well-placed confidence on both sides, was vital to the smooth continuation of industry throughout the war. Once Keating learned of the Arkansas State Federation of Labor's investigation and resolution, he demanded a new hearing, alleging he "was treated a little unfair by the State Federation of Labor at Russellville, for the reason of the publicity given the condemnation of [his] actions without an opportunity being given [...] to make [himself] heard."¹⁵¹ The State Federation of Labor complied with Keating's request and also called Jack Adams of the Central Trades and Labor Council.

The Arkansas State Federation's second hearing began in November 1918 with a recapitulation of the charges against Keating. Adams testified that Keating had assured him that the dismissed operators would be reinstated. He quoted Keating's words: "This matter is going to be taken up by me, and I assure you we are going to bring this company to terms. We are going to handle this differently to the way it has been handled. We are going to get politicians after this company. They have been so big, nobody seems to be able to handle it."¹⁵² When the Central Trades and Labor Council had not received any updates from Keating, Adams wrote to him asking when he would get the two operators reinstated to which he responded he would be back in Fort Smith in the next few days; he never returned to Fort Smith. Adams concluded: "Mr. Keating simply did nothing as he agreed to do, and we feel the department of labor [*sic*] should

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵² Transcript of Executive Board of the State Federation of Labor meeting, November 7, 1918, Box 31, File 33-716, Mediation and Conciliation Service Dispute Case Files, National Archives, 6.

know just how one of their agents failed to do his duty” and “if he had made an attempt to do something, [they] would have been happy.”¹⁵³

Keating denied that he had promised to get the operators reinstated, maintaining that he only promised he would “make an effort.” Keating explained how he wrote to Vedder several times asking to discuss any “possible consideration” for the reinstatement of Minnie Rodden and Miss Clements, and even asked if they could be reinstated elsewhere in the company if Vedder would not make them operators again. He maintained that he went as far as to “the highest official of the Bell Telephone Company in [the] territory and made a personal appeal” but “there was no way [he] could compel them to do it.”¹⁵⁴ Thus, Keating stated he made no final report to the secretary of labor or the Trades Council because he never received any “definite information from Mr. Vedder.”¹⁵⁵ Keating experienced what so many had already faced before him. In attempting to negotiate a settlement, the company simply refused any acknowledgment of his efforts and continued to conduct business as usual, but now they did not have to worry about public opinion turning against them because all ignored negotiation attempts were no longer being printed in the newspapers. Keating said he attempted every solution he could think of but did not give any updates to the Trades Council out of a constant fear of another general strike breaking out worse and more violent than before. He ended his testimony saying the company “ignored every letter [he] mailed” but “they never did positively refuse to reinstate the two girls. It was merely a matter of ignoring, refusing to reply.”¹⁵⁶ For this reason, since he never received

¹⁵³ Ibid., 4

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 5-11.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 23.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 33.

a definite “no” or “yes” answer, Keating did not view the strike as a closed situation even though eleven months had passed since the telephone operators had returned to work.

Keating admitted that he had not given full focus to the reinstatement of the telephone strikers for several reasons. First, he had to focus on other on-going matters, especially mediating other disputes and finding workers for war industries. Second, he assumed that the federal government was going to soon take control of the telephone industry (much like it had with the railroads). If that happened, Keating would not have to deal with the stubborn company to get the women reinstated. Third, seven of the eight members in his family caught the influenza during the 1918 outbreak.¹⁵⁷ With that, T.A. Wilson, president of the Arkansas State Federation of Labor, stated at the end of the hearing that the Federation had thoroughly investigated the matter and there was nothing further they could do, and everyone should “just consider the telephone matter closed.”¹⁵⁸

It appears that all investigation and attempts at mediation stopped after this hearing, especially because the striking operators were back at work. It does not appear as though Keating received any sort of reprimand or punishment for making promises to the strikers without following through. In the eyes of the federal government, Keating ended the strike and completed his overall assignment, though there is no evidence whether he continued as a federal conciliator or not after losing the confidence of the local labor community. Thus, in light of the continuous refusal of the Southwestern Bell Telephone Co. to meet with the federal conciliator after December 27, the negotiations for the Fort Smith telephone operators strike died off with the women receiving none of the concessions they had asked for during the strike but merely a

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 12.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 29, 40.

promise that company leaders would not discriminate against union members. Their nearly four-month strike wrought with complications such as indictments of city officials, widespread strikes across three states, federal intervention, and the first southern female votes proved fruitless.

J. H. Wright also did not give up his fight in appealing his October conviction and took his case all the way to the Arkansas Supreme Court. In March 1918, the court heard Wright's appeal of his conviction of not disbanding a so-called riot and pre-election promises. Judge J. Hart of the Arkansas Supreme Court overturned the conviction of not disbanding the riot stating in his opinion that Wright clearly stated he did not know of any gas line damage done to the exchange and did not see the group gathered outside of the exchange as a riot. Hart said that the conviction relied exclusively on biased witness testimony. Grady Manning, who had "ill-feeling" towards Wright, first testified that he had not been around when people were cutting the gas line but then switched and said Wright was there and had seen who had cut the line. Judge Hart said the court should have thrown out this testimony due to bias and, "for that error the judgment [was] reversed and the cause remanded for a new trial."¹⁵⁹

Wright also appealed the case which removed him from office, the conviction for making pre-election promises. Wright's legal team argued there was no significant evidence that proved Wright had actually made promises in exchange for votes; they also argued certain jurors were prejudiced against Wright. However, Judge J. Wood decided the statute that forbade pre-election promises did not require significant evidence and that the evidence that was heard was "sufficient to charge [...] that appellant made the promise to Barney Dunn, Jim Burke, and others that he would use his influence in behalf of and vote for John H. Vaughan for city attorney for the purpose of influencing or obtaining the political support, aid or vote of Barney Dunn and

¹⁵⁹ Wright v. State, 133 Ark. 16, 201 S.W. 1107, 1918 Ark. LEXIS 201, (Supreme Court of Arkansas March 4, 1918, Opinion Delivered).

Jim Burke, and the evidence was sufficient if it tended to prove these allegations.”¹⁶⁰ Judge Wood further said all testimony proved the indictment to be true and there was no evidence of an unfair trial, and so he upheld the conviction.

By November 1918, days after World War I ended with an armistice, the Arkansas State Federation of Labor finally closed their investigation and ended federal involvement in the Fort Smith telephone operator matter and consequently brought the ultimate end to the struggle that had split the city apart. With the telephone strike and Wright’s legal appeals over, the only successful ones were the business people who had effectively deposed a mayor they hated for his support of labor and ended a period of labor unrest without giving any concessions to the workers. Fort Smith might have gone back to “normal,” but its businessmen showed they could suppress any sort of perceived radicalism or socialism that might rise again in the city.

¹⁶⁰ Wright v. State, 133 Ark. 76, 202 S.W. 236, 1918 Ark. LEXIS 227, (Supreme Court of Arkansas March 4, 1918, Opinion Delivered).

Chapter Six

Conclusion

1917 was a turbulent year for the United States. Not only had it recently joined World War I, but many labor disputes erupted across the nation. One of those disputes was a telephone operator strike in Fort Smith, Arkansas. After the operators formed a union and company managers retaliated against two who had been instrumental in the formation, the remaining operators walked out of the exchange and started what would become a four-month strike. Throughout the entirety of the strike, the Southwestern Bell company leaders reacted in the same way Venus Green described as common for the company in dealing with any labor unrest. Leaders refused to negotiate or acknowledge the union, and simply used their size and power to try and outlast the strikers. During the strike, however, Southwestern Bell gained the support of the elite businessmen in Fort Smith who systematically took down any city official who supported the labor movement.

Once the business elite joined the fight in support of Southwestern Bell, Fort Smith split in half. These men created a League for the Enforcement of Law which purported to bring justice back to a city overrun with anarchy, but in reality, only worked to oust Mayor J. H. Wright and Sheriff Jim Fernandez. League members also took full advantage of the war happening overseas and continuously issued rhetoric that incited the residents' patriotism and linked the labor community to the Germans and Russians. Through legal cases and shady court dealings, the League accomplished its task and by the end of November had replaced the pro-labor Wright with their own a pro-business candidate, Arch Monro. Once the obstacles of the pro-labor city officials were gone, Southwestern Bell brought back strike breakers to reopen the exchange and restore telephone service.

The return of the strike breakers after four months of stubborn silence frustrated the labor community. Labor leaders realized the only way to draw in enough public support was to stage a full-scale general strike that would shut down the city. This general strike also shut down the power plant and nearby coal mines vital to war production which caused the federal government to finally step in and fully commit to ending the telephone strike. However, this intervention benefitted the business community far more than the labor community as the federal conciliator convinced the striking operators to return to work with no concessions. After their return, the Southwestern Bell managers had even less reason to submit to negotiations and continued to simply ignore the conciliator's efforts. After four months of striking and nearly a year of unrest, the telephone strike came to an end with no concessions or real changes for the operators. Fort Smith returned to a sense of normalcy but was decidedly more anti-labor than it had been before.

The Fort Smith Telephone Operators' Strike is a multifaceted event that effectively shows the relationship between capitalism, labor, and the federal government during the early stages of World War I. While the historiography on the event is limited, the proceedings of the strike, election, and aftermath perfectly match what historians such as David Kennedy, Venus Green, and Valerie Conner write. That is why this long-neglected event is essential to the study of women's labor, the federal government, and the relationship between the government and labor during World War I.

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