



## THE AMERICAN LABOR MUSEUM BOTTO HOUSE NATIONAL LANDMARK

SAVINGS  
SPOTLIGHT

by Robert Oakes

The year was 1913, and the mood was tense on the streets of Paterson. Immigrant workers from the area's silk mills, fed up with dangerous working conditions, poor wages and long hours, walked off the job in protest. It was in the bleak and bitter month of January, and though they could hardly afford to cut themselves off from their income, they took to the icy streets to demand a higher standard of living.

They were the nation's poor and disenfranchised. They were, most of them, newcomers and foreigners, but they were also the country's backbone. Yet, worked to the bone, they could hardly put bread and butter on their own tables.

Wealthy mill owners dismissed the strike, believing this disorganized group of workers, all hailing from different countries and backgrounds, wouldn't hold together and could not last through the cold winter. But they were wrong.

Driven on by their deep need and desperate conditions, these workers continued striking on the city streets well into the warm months, until finally the police were set upon them and many were dragged off to jail. Scabs were hired to take the place of the strikers.

Things looked bad for the protesters in Paterson until the mayor of nearby Haledon, William Brueckmann, who was sympathetic to their cause, agreed to let them gather in his town.

It was in Haledon that spring, at the home of Italian immigrant worker Pietro Botto, that

20,000 men, women and children then gathered. They crowded the quiet suburban street surrounding the Botto House and listened to union organizers and famous figures like author Upton Sinclair speak about the need to organize in defense of the rights of workers.

It was a shining moment for their cause, but it could not last. In July of that year, despite all of their efforts, the strike ended not with a bang but with a whimper. The strikers, hungry and tired, went back to work, many returning to the same conditions they had walked out on months before.

Though it might have seemed like a defeat at the time, many today consider this six-month strike that culminated in the gathering at the Botto House as one of the most significant events in the history of the American Labor Movement. It is celebrated as having brought national attention to the plight of immigrant workers, influencing subsequent protests and ultimately helping to create pro-worker legislation.

Today, you can visit the Botto House, learn more about the history of the American Labor Movement and get a fascinating glimpse of what life was like for a working immigrant family during the early 1900s.

Upstairs, you can find art exhibits that focus on workers' issues. Now through December, for example, the museum is hosting an exhibit by artist Mark Priest of paintings that depict the lives of women railroad workers.



photo by Chris Marabou

Because the American Labor Museum Botto House National Landmark has recently been added to AAA North Jersey's list of local partners, members now get free admission when valid AAA Membership Card is presented. For more information, call (973) 595-7953