The Poetic Claim of Labor Law: *Bread and Roses* as a Living Symbol of Workers' Struggles

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Abstract

While different approaches to law have mobilized the role of emotions in legal study, and while the Law and Literature movement has carved out a privileged space for analyzing *Law as Literature* and *Law in Literature*, the vibrant artistic string of emotional expression remains too often overlooked. This string—resonating as much through books as through songs, including protest songs—bears the kaleidoscopic name of Poetry. In this article, I propose to use poetry as an analytical key, as an approach to a major historical event in U.S. labor law: the strike of immigrant women in Lawrence in 1912. This strike is considered not only an important victory for the advancement of social rights of workers but also as a feminist inspiration, with the particularity of bearing a highly symbolic name: *Bread and Roses.* This name—whose attribution remains mysterious—is drawn from a poem by James Oppenheim, which became a popular success after being set to music in the 1960s and 1970s. By taking this poem, and the legacy of its *living* symbols in particular, as resonant chords of claims and metaphorical struggles, I aim to answer this question: In what ways has *"Bread and Roses"* acted not only as a historical slogan of labor enforcement, but as a poetic vehicle for the symbolic transmission of rights across disciplines, movements, and generations—and what does this suggest about the use of poetry as a method to approach law?

Keywords

1912 Bread & Roses strike, law & poetry, labour law & literature, U.S. working-class history

> *"Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" – Shelley, P. B. (1891). A Defence of Poetry.*

Introduction

Reading Labor Law Through Poetry: The Blossoms and Transmission of Legal Symbols

To think that law can be read devoid of emotion would be like imagining love without longing, or comfort without the necessary fear that precedes it. While different approaches to law have mobilized the role of emotions in legal study, and while the Law and Literature movement has carved out a privileged space for analyzing *Law as Literature* and *Law in Literature*, the vibrant artistic string of emotional expression remains too often overlooked. This string—resonating as

much through books as through songs, including protest songs—bears the kaleidoscopic name of Poetry. Today, poetry is often regarded as the accessory part of literature, its crumbs no longer of interest to anyone. It seems so distant from the world of law and legal claims. In this article, I propose the opposite paradigm, namely, to use poetry as an analytical key, as an approach to a major historical event in U.S. labor law: the strike of immigrant women in Lawrence in 1912. Supported by the IWW, this strike is considered not only an important victory for the advancement of social rights of workers but also as a feminist inspiration, with the particularity of bearing a highly symbolic name: *Bread and Roses.* This name—whose attribution remains mysterious—is drawn from a poem by James Oppenheim, which became a popular success after being set to music in the 1960s and 1970s.

By taking this poem, and the legacy of its *living* symbols in particular, as resonant chords of claims and metaphorical struggles, I aim to answer this question: In what ways has *"Bread and Roses"* acted not only as a historical slogan of labor enforcement, but as a poetic vehicle for the symbolic transmission of rights across disciplines, movements, and generations—and what does this suggest about the use of poetry as a method to approach law?

To do so, the article is divided into two main parts. The first traces the four historical "seasons" of the strike—from its beginnings, to the imposed amnesia of its narrative, and to the resurgence of its memory. The second part then develops a poetic reading of this event, not so much in terms of the strike itself but of its metaphors and symbols. By considering different perspectives in which the legacy of these metaphoric and poetic symbols can be observed, I examine the transmission of the poem's ideals across several domains: activist, academic, and artistic. Through this incursion into Law and Literature, using poetry, I aim to propose a new way of analyzing the life of law and the metaphoric symbols that survive it—symbols which in turn inspire transmission across other spheres of society.

PART I. From Loaves to Roses: A March Beyond Lawrence, From Labor Law to Living Symbols

Winter: When the Looms Went Silent – A Fictional Testimony of the Strike to Touch a Past Reality

> *"'I think,' she began quietly, 'I think we want… not just bread for our bellies. We want more than only bread. We want food for our hearts, our souls. We want—how to say it? We want, you know—Puccini music… We want for our beautiful children some beauty.' (…) 'We want roses…'"* – Paterson, K. (2008)

For this section setting the historical context of the strike, I chose to draw on the young adult novel *Bread and Roses, Too* by Katherine Paterson, which narrates the Lawrence strike from the perspective of Rosa Serutti, a young girl, the daughter of Italian immigrants working in the textile mills. I recreated a character who experienced a trajectory similar to that described by Rosa, though not actually featured in the novel, in the form of a testimony by an elderly woman looking back on this episode of her life. This section is also factually supported by Watson, B. (2006). *Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream.* Penguin. Within an analysis close to the Law and Literature movement, it seemed —though unusual— pertinent to show that another type of narration is possible even in an article dealing with a legal subject. By proposing a theoretical exposition in such a form, I hope to demonstrate that bridges are possible between fiction (including that addressed to a younger audience) and legal history.

The fictional segment is *in italics* to make the distinction even more tangible with the rest of the text, written in a purely academic manner.

My name is Ilenia Paglia and I come from an Italian immigrant family, but in the city I met people of all origins: an extraordinary melting pot of immigrants from all over the world, many of whom had imagined that the streets of America were paved with gold. But gold, we had none. Nor time either, as we worked 56 hours a week.

It has been more than fifty years now, and yet I will always remember the whistle in the morning, marking the beginning of the workday for my mother and me. Being only twelve years old at the time, I had to forge my birth certificate to be able to work in one of the four textile mills along the Merrimack River, frozen in winter and dark in summer. Most of my fellow workers at the American Woolen Company were also young girls like me, or women like my mother. A woman's work was paid less than that of a man, and men could be employed in more qualified positions or those requiring greater physical strength, so we were the majority in the city of Lawrence at that time.

Just a few days before my thirteenth birthday, on January 1, 1912, the State of Massachusetts' legislator decided to reduce the hours we had to spend in the textile mills from 56 to 54, while maintaining the same salary. My mother's voice that evening, in the shabby shoebox flat where we lived with another family of Syrian immigrants[1], resounded throughout the street: operatic arias, songs of joy—I had not heard her so happy since Papa's death in a factory accident. "Ilenia, do you realize, two hours less work!" she said; while I remained skeptical. How would the great employer react, he of whom it was said that he had so many automobiles he could no longer count them?

In the days that followed, we continued to work to the rhythm of the weaving and production machines, in the usual organized chaos of the dirty and dark mills. But I had been right to be wary of Mr. Wood-with-his-millions-of-automobiles; on January 11, when going to collect their weekly pay, Polish co-workers cried out that it had been reduced, in complete violation of what was provided by the newlaw. This salary cut meant three loaves of bread less per week. As the main breadwinners of their households, upon seeing this, tears welled up: how could they manage now? I was told that they hesitated only briefly before reacting, simply yet radically, by shutting down their looms and refusing to resume work. Throughout Lawrence, an uprising rumbled as strongly as the snowstorm raging outside, making the broken panes of our overcrowded yet always cold flat rattle.

[1] Cadinot, D. (2022). Integrated laborers but marginal figures: the untold story of early Syrian-American factory workers. *Labor History*, *63*(2), 234–247. https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656x.2022.2070733.

This reaction of the Polish women nevertheless the first act of a three-month peaceful resistance[2], which we, immigrant women[3], began in those short and cold days of the winter of 1912. Around me, I heard singing in those crowded streets that gathered some 20,000 workers at the height of the strike. What struck me most was that everyone sang with a single voice, despite the usual cacophony that reigned among the different communities—more than fifty nationalities and about as many different languages spoken, that is quite a lot. My mother was very active in the logistical and practical organization of the strike: between the picket lines, she asked the local baker to stay open longer in the evening so that women could take refuge there and enjoy the warmth for a while[4]; she helped at the soup kitchens in the different tenements and gathering places of the communities; she made arrangements so that the youngest children would be looked after by elderly people unable to march in the streets. I was often afraid for my mother, I must admit: the militiamen carried bayonets, they poured water on the protesters' clothes that froze instantly, and Mr. Wood seemed determined to put an end to what he considered a foolish insurrection.

At church, the priest condemned the people who went on strike and said it was legitimate for Mr. Wood to respond with violence. From mid-January, everything seemed to accelerate and my mother no longer wanted me to go out into the street: dynamite had been discovered in the city's tenement district, and although the protesters remained peaceful for the time being, they were more and more determined despite hunger, fear, and cold. Local leaders called upon the IWW to come and support the strike, and my mother took me at the Lawrence train station to welcome "Big Bill" Haywood—a radical whose arrival surely made Mr. Wood shudder—and also Elizabeth Gurley Flynn[5], Joseph Ettor, and Arturo Giovanitti. In their speeches, they explained to us that our sympathizers were sending money to support us and to finance the soup kitchens, and that fundraising campaigns were being organized outside the state. Following police violence and especially the death of Anna LoPizzo, public opinion was gradually shifting in our favor. Later on, the caricatures in the newspapers following the arrest of Ettor and Giovanitti were unequivocal: a sham trial, and we refused to believe it!

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[2] *The Real Bread and Roses Strike Story Missing from Textbooks*. (2024, July 8). Zinn Education Project. https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/bread-and-roses-strike-story/ : "To suggest that the 1912 strike started in a flash over a wage cut diminishes the purposeful behavior of hundreds of immigrant laborers who built unity out of diversity. It also diminishes the importance of organized labor today and organized efforts to challenge injustices from climate change to the criminal justice system. If students learn the textbook lessons about the Bread and Roses Strike, they'll be led to believe that we just need to wait for the next spontaneous reaction to injustice. It's time to teach outside the textbook about the real history of the Bread and Roses Strike". Indeed, it remained a myth for a long time that the movement was born from a kind of spontaneous revolution that gathered all the workers. In reality, there were already twenty active foreign-language chapters of the IWW, as well as the Italian Socialist Federation, called "ISF." These organizations cultivated links with others across Europe and Italy. Several co-operatives had also been created following the model people knew from their countries of origin, such as the Franco-Belgians who had established co-operatives with their own bakeries and meeting halls. You see, a whole fabric had already been woven outside the textile mills, a fabric of organization and solidarity that explains why, at decisive moments, there was relatively rapid consensus among the workers to go on strike. Not to mention the women who already had networks among themselves, for example between neighboring tenements.

[3] *The Real Bread and Roses Strike Story Missing from Textbooks*. (2024, July 8). Zinn Education Project. https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/bread-and-roses-strike-story/ : "IWW organizer James P. Thompson stated in the October 1912 issue of *Solidarity*: "It is absolutely foolish to say the strike 'happened without any apparent cause'; 'that it was lightning out of a clear sky,' etc. As a matter of fact, it was a harvest, it was a result of seeds sown before. . . ".

[4] *The Real Bread and Roses Strike Story Missing from Textbooks*. (2024, July 8). Zinn Education Project. https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/bread-and-roses-strike-story/. See also Cameron, A. (1993). *Radicals of the worst sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1860-1912*. University of Illinois Press.

[5] Flynn, E. G. (1973). *The Rebel Girl: An Autobiography, My First Life (1906-1926)*: "This was more than a union. It was a crusade for a united people-for Bread and Roses".

It did not take long for me to see the concrete effects of the IWW support, since until the end of the strike on March 14, 1912—when Mr. Wood yielded, ah! Finally the law was respected!—I was sent by train to Barre, Vermont, with other children. Because of the famine, our mothers decided to do as in the European strikes by sending us far from their arms so that our hands might be filled with bread: the famous "Children's Trains" or "Children's Exodus" to cities such as New York or Philadelphia. Ah! How I missed my mother, who could not even write to us, and how I trembled at each dawn, knowing that she was preparing to go out into a winter clinging to the skin, leaving behind shards of frozen glass.

To console myself in my Vermont room, after the parades and the welcome by families whose comfort I hoped my mother might one day know as well, I heard their voices singing. I remembered Anna LoPizzo, the long evenings talking while huddled close together, the crumbs gathered from the table down to the very last. I too would be willing to die if my whole life had to be spent in that factory. I too would be willing to die if I were not given those two hours that meant far more than two times sixty minutes, that meant, I have the right to live. And I have lived until now to tell you this.

Autumn: An Imposed Amnesia – Withered Petals of a Decisive Strike

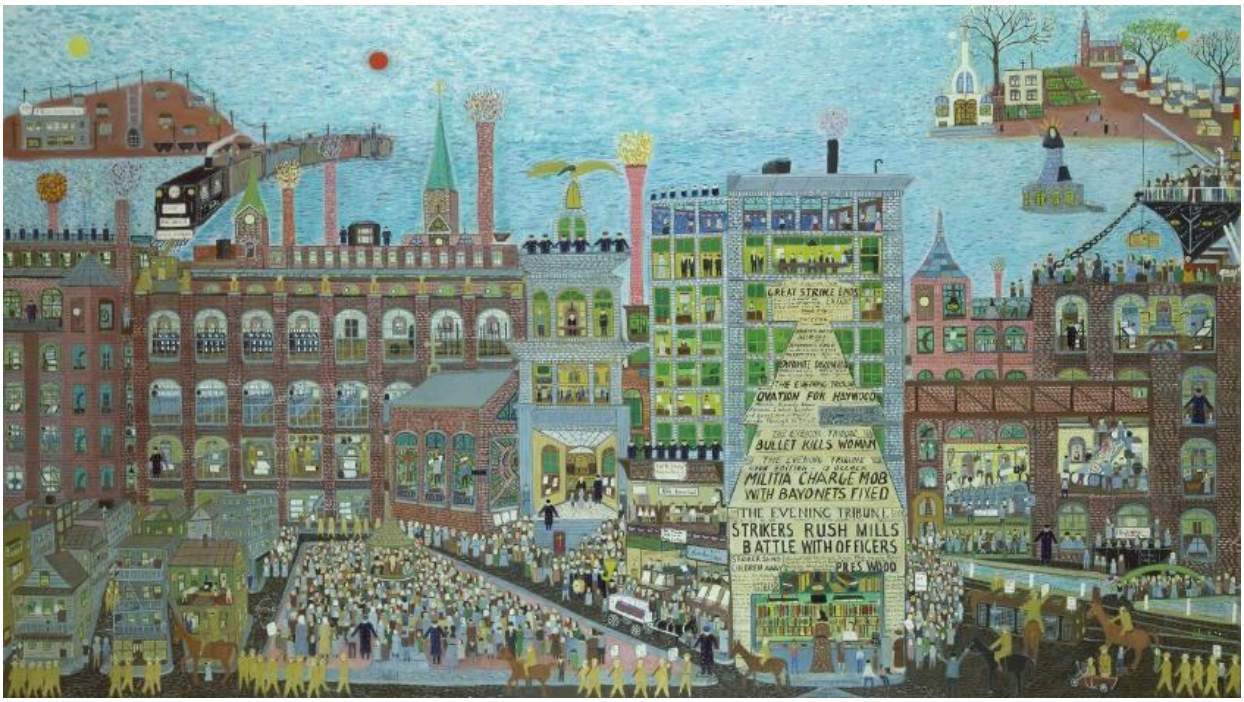
The victory of the Lawrence strike appeared as a threat to the authorities in power and to the employers of other industrial cities in the United States (Shackel, 2025). The industrialists were therefore supported both by civic authorities and by the Catholic Church in their attempt to erase all traces of this strike. Its memory was consequently actively repressed, with the strikers branded as godless anarchists (Shackel, 2025). In 1912, an official parade was organized by the Lawrence authorities under the title *"For God and Country"* in order to change the narrative of the strike: erasing its character as a workers' struggle and reframing it as a patriotic fight (Shackel, 2025). The AFL, then the dominant union, encouraged these efforts in order to undermine an IWW victory. As a result, the families of the strikers long kept secret their participation in this historic event. Until the end of the 1970s and the *rebranding* of the Lawrence strike, a forced amnesia thus afflicted Lawrence and its history, marginalized by dominant narratives (Shackel, 2025).

Carried later by the power of the symbols contained in the poem *Bread and Roses*, the memory of the strike re-emerged through the rediscovery of this poem by second-wave feminist movements as well as labor movements (Green, 1989). In addition, committed historians and journalists such as Paul Cowan undertook a work of memory-rehabilitation, notably through the *Bread and Roses Cultural Project* sponsored by a New York City labor union in the 1970s and 1980s[6]. Equally important in this rediscovery of memory was the work of Ralph Fasanella,

[6] Green, J. R. (1989): "We also wanted to follow up on the initial efforts made to publicize the history of the Bread and Roses strike of 1912. The Bread and Roses Cultural Project, sponsored by a New York City labor union to "restore public memory of the strike," began in Lawrence several months before our project in 1980. This effort was stimulated in part by an article by Village Voice journalist Paul Cowan, who visited Lawrence and made contact with the working-class painter Ralph Fasanella, who had been working there for several years. Cowan also interviewed the daughter of Camella Teoli, who had testified before Congress in 1912 about being scalped in a cotton twisting machine. The daughter knew nothing of her mother's "political past" and when Cowan told her about it and gave her Camella's testimony to read, she said: "Now I have a past. Now my son has a history he can be proud of." Cowan's story dramatically underlined how official repression could create fear of historical memory. The son of the Italian printer who made leaflets in 1912 was still afraid in 1979 that the memory of his father's role

a worker-painter who lived in Lawrence for some time and painted canvases that contributed to the cultural project of historical recovery of the strike (Green, 1989).

These initiatives resulted not only in the liberation of speech among the strikers and their descendants, but also in a public recognition of the strike, which has since been commemorated in particular by the *Bread and Roses Heritage Committee*[7], which each year brings Lawrence to life to mark the anniversary of this victory. This amnesia, which lasted so long over the Lawrence strike, demonstrates the determination of dominant elites to silence not only the victory itself but also the culture of memory of the working class. Still, a 2011 study demonstrated that in 10 out of 12 major U.S. history textbooks, the Lawrence strike remained unmentioned, even though it represented a pivotal moment not only for the workers of the textile mills but also for women in the labor rights movement and for the strikes that followed[8].



Ralph Fasanella, The Great Strike: Lawrence 1912, 1978, oil on canvas, Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO, Image courtesy Estate of Ralph Fasanella. © 1978, Estate of Ralph Fasanella. (2014, September 5). Meer. https://www.meer.com/american-folk-art-museum/artworks/51191.

would be harmful. He "insisted on concealing his name for fear that his business would be boycotted, that his family would suffer reprisals"".

[7] *2025 Festival | Bread & Roses*. (n.d.). Bread & Roses. https://www.breadandrosesheritage.org/.

[8] *The Real Bread and Roses Strike Story Missing from Textbooks*. (2024d, July 8). Zinn Education Project. https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/bread-and-roses-strike-story/ : "Despite this incredible organization, the pivotal 1912 Bread and Roses Strike is not mentioned at all in 10 out of 12 major U.S. history textbooks in a 2011 survey conducted by the Zinn Education Project. The two books that reference the strike describe it as "erupting . . . in the textile mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts" (*A People and a Nation*, Houghton Mifflin) and "Workers spontaneously went on strike" (*Give Me Liberty!*, Norton). The image of workers spontaneously saying "enough is enough" is inspiring. But it is not true. Workers weren't passive until the minute they could take no more. A deeper understanding of events leading up to the strike in Lawrence challenges this facile history".

Spring: A Poem as Symbolic Weaving – From the First Threads to the Embroidery of Roses

Bread and Roses (1911) – James Oppenheim

As we come marching, marching in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray,
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing: "Bread and roses! Bread and roses!"
As we come marching, marching, we battle too for men,
For they are women's children, and we mother them again.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses!
As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient call for bread.
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.
Yes, it is bread we fight for — but we fight for roses, too!
As we come marching, marching, we bring the greater days.
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge and idler — ten that toil where one reposes,
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses! Bread and roses!

This poem, brimming with symbols, was written by James Oppenheim one month before the Lawrence strike and published in the *American Magazine*. Before turning to the history of its association with the strike, let us take a moment to examine the richness of this poem from the perspective of the symbols it contains (Watson, 2006).

"Bread": Since time immemorial, bread has been the symbol of survival achieved through labor. Even today, common expressions such as *"breadwinner"* recall the central place of bread as a symbol. In Lawrence in 1912, bread constituted the basis of daily sustenance, and the wage cut suffered by the workers was measured in loaves of bread fewer per week that they could afford.

"Roses": Roses symbolize leisure time, time as an accessory, that which has no direct utilitarian function but is just as essential to survival—namely, leisure, dignity, a life that is not merely survival but possesses quality. It is time flowing like dew upon the petals of life's roses.

"Marching, Marching": These verbs of movement evoke both the nonviolent character of the strike and the historical feminist struggles that were also accompanied by marching—for instance, the Women's March on Versailles on October 5–6, 1789, during the French Revolution, which likewise centered upon the people's demands for bread.

These symbols constitute a true crystallization of the claims of the women of Lawrence, and thus of the social rights underlying the enforcement of labor law and, in this case, the statute enacted by the State of Massachusetts—despite the anachronism of associating this poem with the strike. Their evocation immediately calls to mind the memory of that feminine and immigrant struggle; but more than that, these symbols ensured the endurance of that struggle through their transmission and diffusion (as will be analyzed below).

The Lawrence strike today is inseparable from its *nom de plume*, *"Bread and Roses"*, and legend would have it that the strike itself inspired the poet James Oppenheim to write it. Yet we know that Oppenheim not only wrote his poem before the strike took place, but also that no trace of the use of this slogan during the strike has ever been demonstrated (Juravich, 2021)[9]. The association between the poem and the strike would appear to derive from Upton Sinclair's edition of the volume *The Cry for Justice: An Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest*, in which he wrote, accompanying Oppenheim's poem: *"In a parade of the strikers in Lawrence, Mass., some young girls carried a banner inscribed, 'We want Bread and Roses too."* (Juravich, 2021).

However, American Studies and History scholar Jim Zwick has shown that the poem was more likely inspired by feminist movements of 1911, particularly in Chicago, whose leading figure was the feminist Helen Todd (Davis, & Sasaki, 2019). The original inspiration for Oppenheim should therefore be traced back to a speech delivered by activist Helen Todd in June 1910 during an automobile campaign in Illinois in favor of women's suffrage (Ross, 2013). At the time, Todd was a factory inspector and developed an argument for the right to vote for working-class women: *"Not at once; but woman is the mothering element in the world and her vote will go toward helping forward the time when life's Bread, which is home, shelter and security, and the Roses of life, music, education, nature and books, shall be the heritage of every child that is born in the country, in the government of which she has a voice"* (Ross, 2013). Following this speech, she became involved in numerous campaigns and strikes, particularly those led by the Women's Trade Union League of Chicago (affiliated with the AFL, but which partially participated in the Lawrence strike through the organization of food relief stations). During these strikes and movements carried forward by the Women's Trade Union League—particularly in California—placards were reportedly used bearing the slogan *"Bread for all, and Roses, too!"* Ross even emphasizes that it is notable that the poem was not associated with the Chicago strike of apparel workers in 1910[10].

It thus appears that, although the slogan cannot be traced specifically to the Lawrence strike, it clearly emerged from a militant and feminist vocation. This association has since endured to the point that today it is inseparable from that historical event in labor law.

Some scholars had suggested that the expression *"bread and roses"* might be explained by a song written in Italian by Arturo Giovannitti, one of the strike's IWW organizers, entitled *"Pane e Rose."* Giovannitti was indeed considered a *"poet of the judicial system*" (Furey, 1994*)*, and his poems played a certain role during the Lawrence strike, gaining popularity while he was imprisoned with Joseph Ettor for the murder of Anna LoPizzo—a crime for which they were

[9] Juravich, T. (2021): "If Oppenheim had not based his poem on a banner carried by striking women in Lawrence, then the question becomes whether the phrase "bread and roses" had any other connection to the Lawrence strike. Gerald Sider reports that he "looked through a very substantial number of photographs of the strike, looked through all the testimony, and a great many newspaper accounts. The slogan 'Bread and Roses' never appeared once, nor even the word 'roses.' " Even after extensive research conducted as part of the strike's centennial, no evidence has been found that the Lawrence strikers adopted the phrase. See also Ross, R. J. S. (2013). Bread and Roses: Women Workers and the Struggle for Dignity and Respect. *Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society*, *16* : "Even before Zwick had definitively shown that the poem predated the strike, in 1996 Gerald Sider found that no photo of strikers, their marches or pickets showed the "bread and roses" phrase on a picket sign. No pamphlet in the Lawrence public library files has the phrase. No real time news article reports the phrase being used".

[10] Ross, R. J. S. (2013): "One may speculate as to why the poem, beautiful as it is, has been affixed to the Lawrence memory rather than Chicago. From September, 1910 through February 1911, there was in Chicago a very large strike of apparel workers, mostly women—larger than the Lawrence strike. But there, the men of the garment workers AFL affiliate settled the strike at one large suit maker (Hart Schaffner and Marx) and deserted the some 30,000 sweatshop workers not employed there. Not such a great moment of solidarity".

innocent (Furey, 1994). This hypothesis, however, has been refuted by analysis of the song's lyrics, which in reality consist in *"a very simple union song celebrating a New York City–based ILGWU Local decades later"* (Juravich, 2021). The mention of bread and roses not even occurs, and as Tom Juravich notes: *"Although individuals may have used the phrase 'bread and roses' or 'pane e rose' during the Lawrence strike, we have no evidence that it became a slogan for the striking textile workers en masse."* (Juravich, 2021). Moreover, *"Giovannitti's book of poems written in English, published after the strike and after his jailing during the strike (Giovannitti 1914), has no phrase even close to 'bread and roses.' Another claim is that an Italian local (89) of the ILGWU uses an Italian song with Giovannitti's poem. Local 89 was formed in 1919 (after the strike). Although the phrase does not appear in Giovannitti's collected work in English (Giovannitti 1962, 1975), someone did obtain copyright for a song 'Pane e Rose'—written with Giovannitti—in 1934."* (Furey, 1994). In those songbooks distributed to the strikers of Lawrence, however, there is no mention of Oppenheim's poem.

It is equally notable, in this context, that Arturo Giovannitti himself was a poet, an artist of the people. Although he did not participate in the creation of the poem or in its later diffusion (Furey, 1994), his writings—particularly those produced during his imprisonment following his accusation for the murder of Anna LoPizzo—remain important historical and literary testimonies for the study of the movement and of the IWW.

However, as in many strikes of the era, songs were an integral part of the Lawrence strike. The "labor songs" and the characteristic *Little Red Songbook* of the Wobblies—whose popularity extended beyond the IWW—were very much present during the strike. As Bruce Watson notes: *"While their children were being fed, strikers continued to parade. They had also begun singing—on the picket line, on the march, during meetings. 'It is the first strike I ever saw which sang!' one seasoned reporter wrote. 'I shall not soon forget the curious lift, the strange sudden fire of the mingled nationalities at the strike meetings when they broke into the universal language of song.'* Strikers soon had songbooks provided by the IWW, including the *'Eight Hour Song,' the 'Banner of Labor,' and 'Workers, Shall the Masters Rule Us?'* They also wrote their own songs, including a parody of *'In the Good Old Summertime.* [11] "

In the decades that followed, one witnessed a transformation not only of the content of the songbooks—now increasingly marked by communist influences—but also of the role played by songs of strike and resistance. In the postwar era, *"The war had been won, the Left purged, and labor was now an accepted institution with the legal right to organize. In this new context the nature of rank-and-file activism and the ways in which solidarity is built shifted dramatically from the turbulent 1930s, when struggles against the boss on the picket line and the shop floor brought workers together in class cohesion, the basic building block of solidarity at the time. But a new procedural unionism of filing grievances and arbitration began to overshadow the need for that old class cohesion. Union-sponsored social and recreational events (including singing) became mechanisms for building solidarity through social cohesion. In this way singing was no longer one step in a process of social transformation, as it had been in the 1930s, but an end in itself."* (Juravich, 2021).

In this context, folk music and other American subgenres experienced a boom and played a decisive role in the revival of certain labor songs. Yet until the mid-1960s, both *Bread and Roses*—the poem and the strike itself—seem to have been forgotten by the general public.

[11] Watson, B. (2006): "In the good old picket line, in the good old picket line / The workers are from every place, from nearly every clime / The Greeks and Poles are out so strong, and the Germans all the time, but we want to see more Irish in the good old picket line".

Summer: Rewoven Petals – Bread and Roses in Bloom

As explained, there is no historical evidence for the use of the slogan *Bread and Roses*; it emerged instead from a construction of the collective imagination, due to the power of its symbols and the claims it embodied. Even if its origins remain obscure and it is not possible to trace with certainty the inspirations from which it was born, what remains is that this poem symbolizes (Juravich, 2021) demands for a life and for working conditions marked by dignity. These claims found renewed resonance with the emergence, in the 1960s, of the second wave of feminism (D'Atri, 2020).

This new wave notably witnessed the appearance of the social-feminist collective in Boston called *"Bread & Roses"*, which we will develop further below. In those same decades of questioning the established order—both in feminist movements and in the civil rights movement—the poem acquired public notoriety, this time moving beyond the confines of labor songs to become a popular folk anthem, since then covered and reinterpreted many times.

PART II. Bread and Roses as Symbols Woven Through Time: Enforcing Labor Law, Inspiring Movements

Loaves and Petals: The Metaphors that Endure

Up to now, the Law and Literature movement has regarded poetry as a marginal sediment within the analysis of law (Christ & Mueller, 2017). Few in-depth studies have been undertaken on this knot, at once so entangled and so complex, between law and poetry. While poetry within judicial decisions has been studied, as well as poetry cited or poetry that takes law as its subject, little attention has been given to poetry as the companion of legal struggles, as a tangible and direct trace of legal claims (Christ & Mueller, 2017). I propose here to use the poem *Bread and Roses* as a key for reading this historical event in labor law, long subject to attempts at erasing collective memory. What it contains in powerful metaphors and in traces of demands that remain current allows us to highlight not only its capacity to humanize law, but also how poetry is influenced by law and, by ricochet, enables change.

If Law and Literature scholarship has often used works of fiction in particular in order to humanize law and to bring out the individuals behind its application, the poetry analyzed here appears to transcend that humanizing function (Talavera, 2025). Indeed, although it makes visible the recipients of a law unenforced by the factory owners of Lawrence in a manner both striking and moving, its poetic and symbolic impact goes further. It is a song of resistance with a singular trajectory: one that not only succeeded in rendering visible a feminist struggle through strong and enduring symbols, but also penetrated society by transmitting a series of symbols that have been employed for activist, dialectical, and artistic purposes, as will be analyzed below. Some anthologies of poetry and law exist, but they do not propose such a reading of law through poetry, limiting themselves instead to poetry *about* law or to highlighting lawyer-poets (Talavera, 2025; Lawrence, 1993).

In an ultracapitalist world where everything without monetary value is discarded, poetry is a kaleidoscope that exposes us to the diversity of the human condition, making us feel in the deepest parts of our hearts and flesh the experience of others—offering a way out of our hyper-individualist focus (De Medeiros, 2013). To see to what extent poetry was able to sow and prolong a profound cultural revolt, is a trace of its continuing necessity, including in the study

of law. Not only to shed light on injustices, but as symbols of unity so that law may be applied justly, or so that its application may be challenged. Poetry is a language that *"reflects a self, a subject, which partly exists in the human and social realities it expresses. Language includes an aesthetic plane part of, yet simultaneously apart from, human and social experience."* (Lawrence, 1993). In the case of *Bread and Roses*, this language also carries the force of being nonviolent yet militant, which distinguishes it from many other canons of labor movement songs.

Following the example of Eberle and Grossfeld, it is possible to trace parallels between the poem *Bread and Roses* and the legal context, the very law for whose enforcement these striking women fought (Eberle & Grossfeld, 2005).

First, both the poem and the law are kinds of languages, sharing the raw material of language that transforms reality into common reality. If law seeks to order reality, and at times to regulate the exploitation of a segment of society such as immigrant workers, poetry is likewise a kind of freer language yet equally normative, in that it lays bare the rules of the heart, of individual aspirations, or of what people seek to denounce (Eberle & Grossfeld, 2005). Poetry also renders tangible the exploitation and its consequences on individuals that law seeks to establish, impose, or alter.

Furthermore, both law and poetry are "universals" in their own right, which can come into conflict as in the present case: law is universal in its aim to apply universally to a limited number of persons, while poetry is universal in its capacity to resonate with individual and collective consciences. It is this capacity that seems to be at work in the poem *Bread and Roses*, with an inclination that transcends the Lawrence strike and even the particular historical context that saw it born, developing thereafter into an iconic song of resistance. If law imposes by means of coercive norms, poetry proposes another normative field—one that appeals to the construction of a collective imaginary, in this case of dignified life and justice (Eberle & Grossfeld, 2005).

Both law and poetry are human and cultural product(ions), infused with time, place, and human sensibility (Eberle & Grossfeld, 2005). In this case, the poem *Bread and Roses* was born in a context of cultural change, turning slowly but propelled by a continuous impulse toward legal and political (r)evolutions. If it is a trace of that context, it is also, and above all, a trace of aims that exceed it, and that resonate still today with struggles being waged across the world. Poetry is also, in the specific context of protest songs, a site of subversive expression. Like law, poetry fixes a collective imaginary within the limits of the words it offers. Unlike law, however, it perhaps leaves more worlds open (Eberle & Grossfeld, 2005). Poetry transforms the static time of history, setting it in motion, budding with what was then beginning to metamorphose in society and its struggles. The culture sown and made visible through the poem's petals thus forms a renewed global and juridical narrative (Eberle & Grossfeld, 2005).

Finally, both law and poetry function through metaphors aimed at ordering and making sense of reality: if the fiction of the "reasonable man," present in numerous rules of law, is a metaphor, so too are the bread and roses of the poem analyzed here (Eberle & Grossfeld, 2005). Thus, in their way of touching and seeking to influence reality, both law and poetry rely upon this "metaphorization" of reality. In the case at hand, it is these metaphors in particular that I wish to analyze insofar as they reveal the heart of the demands but also what has remained so enduring in this struggle, in these ideals. Poetry, in sum, humanizes, resists, and transmits—linking singular horizons with a struggle for social justice, continuous and continuing.

It is these metaphors, these particular symbols embodying the demands of the working women of Lawrence, that we shall now evoke in their dimension of continuity and transmission into contemporary society.

What makes *Bread and Roses* a case apart, almost unique, is that this poem and its imagery succeeded in permeating society with the legal and political claims of the Lawrence strikers. By a kind of chance of circumstance—or rather, by a conjunction of feminist evolutions and struggles that intersected and inspired one another until they converged at a given point, attributing this poem to Lawrence, disregarding the historical reality which is nonetheless thereby honored—this poem became an emblem that penetrated not only the political and activist domain, but also academic discourse and the cultural world. Claims so essential that reality itself seems insufficient to embody a struggle for them, and that it is necessary to weave legends so that the leaven may rise and the buds may bloom.

Bread and Roses as Symbols of Enforcement and Victory

This poem illustrates how law can penetrate every stratum of society and inspire change from below, if it takes the form that touches, the form that appeals and recalls to emotion. In the poem, the "marching, marching" is of course initiated by the immigrant women of Lawrence in a kind of historical fiction that serves reality, but it is the innumerable inspirations that have succeeded them that continue to march: academics, artists, and all those who still fight today for dignified working conditions. One of the strengths of this work is that it excludes no one, not even men, thanks to its inclusive character: the struggle is understood as a class struggle, of the excluded, fighting for bread and roses, which are two highly concrete representations of claims for the application of law. If the piece is an homage to women, it is not confined to them and instead impels a larger number of people to join the movement.

Bread and Roses is also the trace of a victory of these claims in social law: the Lawrence strike overcame the resistance of the mill owners on a still-cold day of March 1912. The poem conveys this hope of victory through its symbols, which immediately evoke issues still crucial to contemporary struggles. A collective history that was woven and embroidered with motifs of bread and roses, and whose immense tapestry—contributed to by each woman and each activist—continues today to advance our aspirations by reminding us that two hours a week may well represent the most important of a life—because they are life itself [12]. The poem is a trace of the enforcement of the law itself, in that sense and linked to this particular context.

If this poem remains so emblematic, it also seems to be because abuses of women and children through labor are considered even more abominable than those inflicted upon men. This view is certainly open to critique, but it nonetheless helps explain why public opinion throughout America and the wider world aligned itself with the Lawrence strikers at a time when social movements (and especially those led by immigrant workers) were viewed with enormous suspicion (Ross, 2013). In the press and in the archives, numerous caricatures denounced the violence of the police repression against the strikers, and in particular against the children attempting to board trains to leave for other cities. Following a similar logic, public opinion seems more easily moved by the deplorable working conditions of women and children.

[12] Ross, R. J. S. (2013): "One definition of a myth "is a traditional tale with partial reference to something of collective importance" (Burkert 1982, 23). A view of legend includes "a symbolic representation of folk belief and collective experiences and serving as a reaffirmation of commonly held values of the group to whose tradition it belongs".

A recent example, likewise in the textile industry, is the collapse of the Rana Plaza in Dhaka (Bangladesh) on April 24, 2013, which embodied the tragedy of the consequences of fast fashion. More than half of the 1,135 victims were women and children. As Ross points out, *"The system consumes women; its brutality mobilizes our sympathy."* (Ross, 2013).

Bread and Roses as Feminist, Militant, and Academic Symbols

Because of the metaphorical duality—so complementary—of bread and roses, of survival and of fulfilled existence, the expression *"Bread and Roses"* rapidly established itself in academic discourse, becoming analytical markers that transcend the discipline of law to touch all of the humanities.

Among the earliest uses of this slogan in such a context was by the labor organizer and functionary of the Women's Trade Union League, Rose Schneiderman, who in 1912 titled her lectures on women's suffrage in this way[13]. In the 1960s, as Tom Juravich further notes: *"a number of academic feminist books adopted versions of the lyrics for their titles, such as Sarah Eisenstein's Give Us Bread but Give Us Roses. In 1971 The Liberated Woman's Songbook included the song, as did the 1974 compilation All Our Lives: A Women's Songbook. 'Bread and Roses' also became part of ceremonies at the women's colleges Mount Holyoke and Bryn Mawr."* (Juravich, 2021). At Bryn Mawr College, summer school educational programs for unschooled girls from factories were held in the 1920s and 1930s, serving as models for other initiatives of the same type (Dullea, 1984).

More recently, it should also be noted that this poetic slogan has been adopted in numerous publications across the humanities, including in studies of psychology, international relations, copyright law, and labor studies. Throughout the humanities, this slogan has become a living, tenacious, and evocative expression—reinforcing its potential as a key for interpreting both past and present phenomena[14].

In the activist world, the aforementioned Boston collective *"Bread and Roses"* took its name from the eponymous poem (Juravich, 2021). Founded in the summer of 1969 by Meredith Tax and Linda Gordon (Breines, 2002), it shaped the following decades through its contributions to socialist and feminist struggle. Although this movement had a notable impact on the

[13] Ross, R. J. S. (2013): "But Schneiderman's lectures with that title (1912) came after Oppenheim had written it. Zwick notes though, that Schneiderman worked for many years as a functionary for the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) an organization of reform-minded affluent women who encouraged women workers to form unions. The WTUL was extremely active in support of the women and families of the Chicago strike in 1910–1911. In 1907, he notes, a British founder of the earlier WTUL had visited Chicago and given talks there. She argued, "wrote Zwick," that women must work for more than just increased wages. Her message was summed up in a quote she attributed to the Qur'an: "If thou hast two loaves of bread, sell one and buy flowers, for bread is food for the body, but flowers are food for the mind." The Women's Trade Union League probably turned that thought into the slogan that inspired James Oppenheim's poem".

[14] See, inter alia, in various fields of sciences and humanities : Riordan, C. A., & Kowalski, A. M. (2020). From Bread and Roses to #MeToo: Multiplicity, distance, and the changing dynamics of conflict in IR theory. *ILR Review*, *74*(3), 580–606. https://doi.org/10.1177/0019793920970868; Gasparri, S., & Fanti, S. (2025). Trade unions and equality, diversity, and inclusion in Italy: bread and butter, bread and roses, or just breadcrumbs? In *Diversity and inclusion research* (pp. 255–277). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-81938-4_12; McKay, R. K. (2019). Bread and Roses: Empathy and recognition. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, *29*(1), 75–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2018.1560870; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2024). A manifesto for Bread and roses. *Migration and Society*, *7*(1), xv–xx. https://doi.org/10.3167/arms.2024.070102; Lacey, L. J. (1989). Of Bread and Roses and Copyrights. *Duke Law Journal*, *1989*(6), 1532–1596. https://doi.org/10.2307/1372660; Moyo, F. L. (2012). We Demand Bread and Roses when We Are Hired. *The Ecumenical Review*, *64*(3), 254–266. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.2012.00172.x.

development and diffusion of feminism in the United States, it was also criticized—particularly by former member Winifred Breines (2002) —for its lack of intersectionality. Nonetheless, the very fact that a movement of such importance adopted this slogan as its name demonstrates its evocative power in signaling struggles and demands. Being sufficiently universal to connect to the transcendental aspirations of second-wave feminism—across social classes, nationalities, and races—this slogan appeared as a link between the feminist movement and social struggles (Juravich, 2021).

On this point, it is emphasized that the reasons why this poem was somewhat excluded from traditional labor songbooks are the same as those that explain its durability within the feminist movement—and also as a song-artwork: *"As an anthem-like song transcendent in its imagery and focus on women, it managed to be both reflective and militant ('marching, marching'), but it operated at a distinct remove from the strident masculinity of socialist realism (and implicit sectarianism) that infused prewar songbooks. Susan Lewis, of the Seattle-based duo Rebel Voices, described how 'Bread and Roses' stands out from other labor songs: 'It's poetic, it's not didactic at all. The imagery—'A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray'—I can see it and I can see these women. It is very visual.' Janet Stecher, the other half of Rebel Voices and the director of the Seattle Labor Chorus, continued: 'I love the marching part. It keeps coming back to the marching. It started then, and we are just one more chapter in an ongoing march—this is not done. We get to join in and there is some sense of continuity about it.' As Pat Humphries of Emma's Revolution explained, 'So few songs go to us as women and workers. It is great to have the song. We need to be reminded that women are workers, too.' She continued, 'An awful lot of labor history doesn't reflect women's history—I don't see myself.'"* (Juravich, 2021).

The fact that this poem was, in a sense, excluded from the songbooks—*"caught between the socialist realism of the Left and the depoliticized labor and popular songs of the post-McCarthy labor movement"* (Juravich, 2021) —made it an ideal harvest in the 1980s and 1990s for feminist movements, but also for the new labor movements that increasingly rejected "business unionism" (Juravich, 2021).

A more recent movement emerged under the impetus of the Marxist and Trotskyist feminist Andrea D'Atri in Argentina (D'Atri, 2020), named *"Pan y Rosas.*[15] *"* This far-left group has since developed in the United States, in France, and in several other countries in Latin America and Europe—ensuring the continued vitality of this slogan within the feminist movement.

As Ross notes, in the 1960s social history underwent major advances in its discipline by adopting a "bottom-up" perspective, and the history of labor law became an increasingly developed field of study. In this context, the Lawrence strike *"became part of a narrative of inclusion of women and of minority racial and ethnic groups. It came to symbolize more than labor's struggles but the whole story of female and ethnic inclusion. Bread and Roses met feminism, and they got married, and they were very equal."* (Ross, 2013). It then appeared that while strikes have always been important sources of demands, allowing the priorities of the working classes to be brought to light, it is remarkable that the strikes associated with calls for the improvement of *"material decency"* and *"the dignity of labor"* were carried by women workers. As Ross emphasizes in the context of the Lawrence strike: *"The legend of Bread and Roses, however, adds something beyond release from degradation; it pushes us to connect the mundane ability to buy bread with the exalted opportunity to appreciate art and beauty. Dignity,*

[15] *Pan y Rosas*. (n.d.). https://panyrosas.org.ar/.

the slogan instructs us, is a complex bundle. That the aspiration the slogan expresses is culturally attached to women and/or immigrant workers is the mirror of the special degradation such workers encounter. But on the positive side of that proposition is a more universal one: we all want the Roses—even the tough and silent men—but it is the women who are allowed to say so. The legend reaches deeply into the cravings of those the Internationale claims who 'have been naught' but wish to be all: 'Nous ne sommes rien, soyons tout.'" (Ross, 2013).

Bread and Roses as Symbols of Artistic Inspiration and Resistance

Unlike other militant songs such as *The Internationale*—which the Lawrence strikers knew and sang in their mother tongues—the piece *Bread and Roses* embodies an additional dimension to the struggle. If *The Internationale* is the leftist anthem *par excellence* and continues to represent strong militancy and commitment to rights, *Bread and Roses* bears the (violet) imprint of feminist inspiration and seems to transcend political boundaries to be inscribed within a broader sensibility in favor not only of women, but also of decent working conditions and a satisfactory work–life balance.

Even more, it is its musical setting that truly cemented the organic association that now appears between the Lawrence strike and James Oppenheim's poem. Although one may say that this poem never truly belonged to the labor movement as such—because of its exclusion from songbooks and its convoluted genealogy of inspiration—it remains that its musical adaptations effectively "brought" it back to its rightful place at the heart of protest songs inspired by struggles in the world of labor.

Its first musical adaptation dates back to 1917 with a version by Caroline Kohlsaat, which, however, was more a lament than a rallying song. It was the folk music revival of the 1960s and 1970s that truly transformed the poem into a song of rallying and feminist, universal solidarity. In 1974, the poem acquired broader notoriety when it was set to music by Mimi Baez Farina [16]. In 1976, Judy Collins' version topped the charts, marking the beginning of a series of adaptations by singers such as John Denver, Bruce "Utah" Phillips, and Ani DiFranco in the following decades (Juravich, 2021). The song is regularly reinterpreted by contemporary artists[17]—for instance, by Hélène Pedneault and Marie-Claire Séguin, who opened the *World March of Women of Quebec* in 1995 with their version *"Du pain et des roses."* (Juravich, 2021).

Bread and roses are elements that inspire life—and, it would seem, artistic production as well. Ken Loach released a film of the same name in 2000, addressing the working conditions of Los Angeles cleaning women (Castaño, Bretones, Abuladze, 2012). In 2023, Afghan filmmaker Sahra Mani, co-produced by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai, also adopted this title for her documentary on the situation in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. Publications

[16] Juravich, T. (2021) : "Judy Collins further elevated "Bread and Roses" with her recording of the song, which topped the charts in 1976. This success came about in part because Mimi Baez Farina — the younger sister of the folk icon Joan Baez and a singer in her own right as part of the folk duo Richard and Mimi Farina — wrote a new melody for the lyrics. Although the original melody attributed to Caroline Kohlsaat was not difficult to follow in a sing- along, it was more a lament than it was a march. Farina's melody not only took the form of a march but also soared with a sense of purpose and defiance — capturing the spirit of the growing women's movement".

[17] Juravich, T. (2021): "By making "Bread and Roses" the title cut of her 1976 record album, Judy Collins brought the song to a popular audience; musicians as diverse as John Denver, Bruce "Utah" Phillips, and Ani DiFranco released their own arrangements in the 1980s and 1990s; and the song's inclusion on the Smithsonian Folkways 2006 Classic Labor Songs CD further secured its place in the canon. Not surprisingly, "Bread and Roses" continues to be sung and rearranged by a new generation of labor and progressive performers in the twenty- first century, including Emma's Revolution, Rebel Voices, and Bev Grant".

as well as examples of visual art creations are equally widespread and regularly mobilized, notably in posters.

Conclusion

Reading Law Through Metaphors: Poetry, Symbols, and the Life of Labor Law Claims

> *"Law and poetry have a curious yet compelling relationship with one another. They have much in common—perhaps more than is generally acknowledged. Both are human creations of imagination and ingenuity, both communicate their essence through language, both provide order, form, and structure to the dizzying array of phenomena present in daily life, and both reflect and reshape the culture from which they arise. In these ways, law and poetry offer insights into, and deeper understanding of, the human condition". – Eberle, E. J., & Grossfeld, B. (2005). Law and Poetry.* (Eberle, & Grossfeld, 2005).

In a society where labor is often elevated as the supreme value, while creative work is frequently devalued, perhaps the ultimate *"girlboss move"*—to borrow a fashionable expression from social media—would be to demand a truly poetic life. A poetic life would not be composed of dead time, but of living time; a life in which artists would not create only in the interstices of time, but would choose to create at the times they desire. The women of Lawrence may not have sung *"Bread and Roses"* during their strike, but their aspirations remain strikingly relevant today. Roses come with the thorns of struggle, but they promise, thereafter, an existence where the leaven does not fail to render life substantive and nourishing.

The labor of women and children remains a pressing issue, as do social rights. Yet through this analysis of the strike by way of poetry, what emerges is the extent to which struggle transmits itself metaphorically, symbolically, penetrating different disciplines of society and knowledge. Poetry is one of the petals of possible analysis, and is certainly not always the most relevant, but in this case—as I hope in many others—it acts as roots that draw the analysis from its origin up to the stems rising toward the sky. Rooted in labor law and its related claims, the metaphors it carries have enabled us to see its enforcement in a broader sense—beyond its mere application in Lawrence—through the transmission of its symbols. Labor law served as the fertile ground for these symbols, which have endured and evolved: from protest song, to academic discourse, to artistic inspiration, all the while preserving the essence of what they sought to achieve.

Over the years, from its erasure to its rediscovery, *Bread and Roses* has become an emblem born of struggles for social rights that has transcended both time and geography to serve as a direct transmitter of emotions. These emotions, tied to the claims of the women of Lawrence, still resonate with us today, but above all demonstrate how these symbols—emerging from a specific legal struggle—were able to form a shared and transnational legal imaginary, rooted in labor law claims. Through the power of symbols and metaphors, struggles that transcend temporal and geographic boundaries have been woven together, producing a poetic enforcement of the claims they embody.

At a time when, in several countries around the world, the retirement age continues to rise and workers' and trade union rights are increasingly under threat, the poem *Bread & Roses* and everything it embodies feel more urgent than ever. While the discourse surrounding work-life balance has become integrated into our common narratives, we must also move beyond labels in order to assess its tangible reality and concrete implementation, rather than allowing it to

function merely as a form of "good conscience" within our workplaces. The memories of workers — and even more so those who are structurally marginalized — must also resist attempts at silencing and collective amnesia, as the poem and its survival so powerfully demonstrate.

To analyze the poetic life of law is to analyze, at once, the life of those who make law, those to whom law is applied, and the ways in which law grows and transmits its symbols.

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Aurélia Gervasoni is a Belgian poet and multidisciplinary artist. In her work, she addresses questions of gender and intimate relationships. Unaltered yet always poetic, she exposes these subjects that concern us all but that we do not always dare to look at directly. Her art is intrinsically political and feminist. Her work also explores communication between individuals and the theme of autism, which affects her personally. In parallel, she is a researcher in law and literature at the University of Zurich. She currently lives somewhere between Brussels, New York, and Bogotá. Her website : www.aureliagervasoni.com.

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