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¡Alerta Tabaqueros! Tampa's Striking Cigarworkers

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Tampa, Florida, is a city that has had its essential character shaped by a single industry – the manufacturing of high-quality, hand rolled cigars. To be sure, other aspects of the city’s past loom as significant (the railroad, the river, the port), but none can compete seriously with the central and all pervasive role played by the cigar industry in defining Tampa’s personality. This is especially true of the city’s labor and immigrant history. So much of what Tampa has been and is today can be traced to the presence of an ethnically diverse work force in the cigar factories and the long, unusually turbulent record of labor relations characterizing the industry. This article focuses on one aspect of this fascinating story – the general strike of 1910 – and places it in the context of the broader historical patterns at work in Tampa.

During the late nineteenth century thousands of Cuban, Italian, and Spanish immigrants came to the small coastal town of Tampa, and did much to transform this settlement into a thriving commercial and manufacturing center. Drawn primarily by the attraction of cigar manufacturing,
these new immigrants underwrote the success of the city and its principal industry.¹ This achievement, however, was not accomplished without considerable labor strife. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, cigar worker unions in Tampa participated in two general strikes (in 1901 and 1910) and numerous lesser walkouts.² Tampa’s tabaqueros proved to be a contentious lot indeed.

Many cigar workers arrived in the city imbued with conceptions of themselves as workmen that were framed by pre-industrial notions of craftsmanship. These age-old work patterns and rhythms created a fierce sense of independence and pride in individuals possessing craft skills. Any threats to these familiar patterns were sure to place workers in an adversary relationship with their employers. Also affecting labor relations was the popularity of radical social ideologies (socialism, anarchism) among workers, which served to intensify a sense of labor militancy.³ For their part, factory owners were increasingly feeling the pressures of modern corporate development. Many believed that it was necessary for them to modernize operations to remain competitive in a changing marketplace. Consequently, as the nineteenth century neared its end, their paternalistic policies of an earlier age were passing away and being replaced by the more impersonal demands of profit and ledger book.⁴ The inevitable clash between these contradictory sets of perceptions and expectations explains much of the conflict that has characterized Tampa.

Tampa’s cigar workers followed the direction of their own independent union, popularly known as La Resistencia, in the general strike of 1901. This organization, created and led by immigrants and closed to native American membership, was able to capture the loyalties of cigar workers despite the presence of several other unions in the city, including locals of the Cigar Makers International Union (CMIU), an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). La Resistencia’s goals and methods represented a repudiation of the AFL’s brand of trade unionism. The union was solidly tied, instead, to the cultures and ideologies of its immigrant membership. Though specific “bread and butter” issues were contested by La Resistencia, the union also viewed its fight as part of the larger struggle pitting the proletariat against the forces of capitalism.⁵

The major dispute in 1901 involved efforts of manufacturers to establish branch factories in Pensacola and Jacksonville. The union interpreted these moves as an attempt to maintain an open shop policy and struck to force a closing of these operations. Strike leadership was in Spanish and Cuban hands, but Italians were active in the ranks and in supplying street-corner oratory that helped to maintain worker solidarity. Appeals to the strike cause were effective in prompting numerous workers to leave Tampa and find employment elsewhere in an effort to send back support.⁶

The strike’s most dramatic episode occurred in early August when a self-appointed citizen’s committee induced police to seize thirteen strike leaders. The abducted men were put aboard a steamer, warned never to return to Tampa, and dropped off on a deserted stretch of the Honduras coastline.⁷ One contemporary claimed that Tampa businessmen paid ten thousand dollars for the favor. With the strike leadership emasculated, city authorities and manufacturers increased their pressure by rigidly enforcing vagrancy laws and importing extra strikebreakers. The CMIU played an important role by refusing to aid or amalgamate with La Resistencia, while
simultaneously offering to supply workers for the factories. On November 28, 1901, La Resistencia capitulated.  

The defeat and rapid dissolution of this immigrant union left the CMIU locals alone in the Tampa labor field, and they were not long in capitalizing on the situation. In early 1902 James Wood of the International arrived to plan a recruiting campaign. He found that immigrant cigar workers had not abandoned unionism as an answer to their problems. As one cigar maker claimed after the 1901 defeat, “They have vanquished us, but not convinced us.” In 1903 workers created a Joint Advisory Board (JAB), composed of three members from each local, to coordinate union policy in the industry. By 1910 the union contained over 6,000 members and was solidly represented in the city’s largest factories.

Cigar workers claimed that owners precipitated the general strike of 1910 as a means of testing their open shop demands and squelching the growing union strength. The first direct confrontation came in June when manufacturers belonging to the Clear Havana Cigar Manufacturers Association (the “Trust”) began dismissing selectors who were members of International Local 493. Owners alleged that selectors had reneged on earlier agreements allowing for additional apprentices to be trained in the factories. Grievances accelerated as manufacturers began to violate the provisions of the cartabón, a wage and price scale negotiated earlier in the year. One JAB member claimed on July 13 that owners had discharged over 4,000 men in the last twenty days, and he urged that Tampa’s citizens investigate for themselves the true causes of the labor problem. By late August the strike was in full force with over 12,000 men out of work.

Despite strong union solidarity and encouraging support from other quarters, cigar workers girded for a long struggle. Numerous workers voluntarily left for Cuba and locations in the northeast in search of employment. These individuals sent funds back to aid those left behind. Relief payments of money, food, and clothing soon began flowing into the city. Sympathetic cigar workers in Havana and Key West also made periodic collections to assist their friends in Tampa. In a move to reduce further the number of dependents on hand, the union published an announcement promising free transportation to Cuba for any workers who registered at the Labor Temple. The impact of these developments was not lost on city businessmen and boosters who were becoming increasingly concerned that the strike would be a long one and that Tampa would suffer economically. A growing pattern of scuffles and beatings on the picket lines added to their list of worries.
Worker hopes were heightened on August 11, when other unionists in the city staged a mass demonstration in support of the cigar strike. Thousands of machinists, carpenters, longshoremen, and others marched to Ybor City from the downtown area. At the corner of Florida and Nebraska they were met by over 2,000 cigar workers and “bevies of gayly dressed Spanish, Cuban and Italian women [who] waved their handkerchiefs and showered applause as the marchers passed by.” At the parade’s end a crowd of some 5,000 people listened to speeches, including a stirring oration delivered in Spanish and Italian by José de la Campa, chairman of the Joint Advisory Board. Undoubtedly remembering the vigilante actions of 1901, Campa ended his talk with the admonition, “Go in peace and show the people of Tampa that we are law-abiding.”

Against a backdrop of increasing unrest throughout Ybor City and West Tampa, a decisive turning point in the strike came on August 23. On this day, the JAB formally rejected a proposal from manufacturers which granted many union demands (but not recognition) and possessed the endorsement of the Tampa Board of Trade. From this time forward, Tampa’s business and professional communities turned their complete support to the side of management. In an emotionally worded editorial entitled “Open the Factories,” the Tampa Morning Tribune clearly signalled the changed situation. Deriding the JAB’s “sophomoric declaration that recognition of the union means ‘life and liberty,’” the paper pledged protection to any worker who wanted to return to the factory benches.

Manufacturers soon attempted to break the stalemate by opening several large factories and issuing a call for workers to return. Not a single cigarworker reported, and these attempted openings were often the scenes of ugly confrontations between strikers and police. When the
giant A. Santaella factory in West Tampa tried to resume business, for example, a “great crowd” turned out to protest, and a number of beatings took place. West Tampa Mayor Brady sent the fire company to disperse the assembly with fire hoses. Mobs of strikers also regularly gathered at the docks and railroad stations to discourage strikebreakers. As further evidence of worker solidarity, a strike vote conducted on September 31 recorded a total of 3,446 to 15 in favor of continuing the walkout.

As much as sporadic violence worried city residents, they proved far more concerned about reports of manufacturer efforts to move factories away from Tampa. This trend, businessmen warned, “will mean permanent death to Tampa.” Factory owners were not unaware of the power these threats exerted on the local citizenry. Indeed, they were able to exploit this fear throughout the strike period and successfully engage the loyalties of community institutions and officials.

As economic dislocations resulting from the strike became more acute, native Tampans reacted angrily. Most local leaders believed that the majority of workers were anxious to return to work, but were prevented from doing so by labor radicals. In reaction to the alleged influence of socialist and anarchist “agitators,” business and professional elites formed another citizens’ committee. Membership in this organization swelled as confrontations became commonplace and the sound of gunshots rang through the city. On September 14, Tampa’s attention was galvanized by the news that James F. Easterling, an American bookkeeper employed at Bustillo and Diaz Company, had been seriously wounded. The shot which struck Easterling came from a crowd of Italian and Cuban strikers gathered at the factory.

Authorities soon arrested two Italians on suspicion of complicity in the shooting, but before they could be brought to trial, a mob seized them and lynched both. Tampa’s two daily newspapers pictured the men as hired assassins, “tools of the anarchistic elements in the city.” Frantic editorials pointed out that Easterling was the “first American to be attacked,” and city leaders publicly resolved that he would be the last. The press launched an increasingly emotional campaign against “agitators,” who were described as being solely responsible for the continued strike and the accelerating violence.

On October 4, Balbin Brothers’ factory was burned to the ground by arsonists, and the Tribune building narrowly missed the same fate. The next morning, papers decried the “presence in this community of an anarchistic law-defying element who stop at nothing to accomplish their hellish purposes.” José de la Campa, who had been very active working the picket lines and speaking to
workers’ rallies, received several murder threats through the mail, and was repeatedly labeled as an anarchist. He was soon arrested along with four other strike leaders on charges of “inciting a riot and being accessories before the fact to the murder of Easterling.” Warrants had been sworn out for the entire JAB membership, but most had escaped arrest by leaving Tampa.

Induced by pledges of protection, thirty-six of Tampa’s largest factories reopened on October 17. Tampa Mayor D. B. McKay recruited several hundred special police from areas surrounding the city to aid the citizens’ committee in keeping order. The new additions were organized into a force of fifty patrol cars, each carrying from three to five heavily armed men, and given the mission of patrolling West Tampa and Ybor City. By providing “absolute protection” to willing workers and intimidating the strike leadership, the patrols hoped to break the strike soon. Arbitrary arrests, illegal searches, routine physical beatings, and flagrant violations of civil rights characterized the actions of the patrols. These excesses were excused as necessary measures by the local citizenry. As the Tribune phrased it, “It will be a mere technicality if any of the actions of the squads of citizen deputies are declared illegal.”

Branded by socialists as the “Cossacks of Tampa” these patrols remained active even after three of the arrested strike leaders were convicted and received sentences of a year on the chain gang. The patrols were particularly vigilant in their efforts to disperse union meetings. On one occasion they entered the Labor Temple in Ybor City, broke up a meeting in progress, smashed...
furniture, confiscated records, and nailed the door shut with a sign overhead reading, “This place is closed for all time.” When the union newspaper *El Internacional* continued to print articles critical of the citizens’ committee, a delegation raided its office, destroyed its presses and intimidated employees found on the premises. On December 22, Tampa’s police further attempted to silence the labor press by arresting *El Internacional*’s editor, J. M. Gil, on two counts of conspiracy to prevent cigar workers from working.

Meanwhile, the citizens’ committee stepped up its campaign of vagrancy arrests. One citizen saw the matter clearly. “Whenever a woman or child is found begging – and there have been many in the past few weeks,” he pointed out, “able bodied men who are not at work should be arrested. There would soon be no vagrants [as] they would prefer the factories to the street squads.”

These tactics were having an effect on strikers. As early as October 27, José de la Campa sent an appeal to unionists elsewhere in America telling of many families evicted from their homes and subsisting on little food. One striking family had allegedly not eaten in three days. With the coming of cold weather, union problems intensified. By December, the JAB approved a measure allowing some men to work on Sundays so as to buy clothing for the children. When the police learned of the purpose of this move, they invoked a nearly forgotten blue law prohibiting work on the Sabbath and stopped all Sunday labor.

Owners repeatedly attempted to split workers along ethnic lines in an effort to divide and conquer. They clearly viewed Italians as the key to their campaign. On November 18 manufacturers sent an open letter to Italians in the city, warning that they would have no work in the future unless they immediately abandoned the strike. The appeal urged them to reject the advice of “agitators” and return to work. Late in December another approach was tried. Manufacturers circulated a bogus manifesto allegedly signed by Italians which proclaimed their intention to return to work shortly on the owners’ terms. They hoped that this would begin a stampede back to the factories. Italian cigar workers hurriedly distributed a counter manifesto signed by 460 of their number (lack of space reportedly required leaving off several hundred additional names) which labeled the first document “utterly without foundation in fact.”

City officials were chagrined in late November when news of Tampa’s troubles was given national publicity by Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor. Addressing the AFL annual convention in St. Louis, Missouri, Gompers condemned the lawlessness and mob rule present in Tampa and captured headlines across the country.
counter this unfavorable publicity, Florida Governor Albert W. Gilchrist visited the city for a week in early December to act as a mediator and conduct an “impartial” inquiry. Gilchrist’s final report completely exonerated both the citizens’ committee and city government of any wrongdoing. There was “no foundation for Gompers’ complaint,” it concluded, and violence was attributed solely to “the acts of strikers or their sympathizers.”

With citizen patrols guarding the docks and railway stations and physically intimidating the picket lines, the flow of strikebreakers into the city increased substantially during December and January. By the first of the year, approximately two hundred cigar workers per week were being placed in the factories. Most of these workers were Cubans imported from Havana or made available from local sources. The union newspaper took pains to report in detail the many problems that owners experienced with these workers, ranging from inferior workmanship to repeated fights amongst themselves. One enterprising strikebreaker, Charlie Kelley, apparently made scabbing into something of a trade. According to union sources, he “organized about fifty degenerate negroes into a band of strikebreakers” and moved from factory to factory in an effort to extract the most concessions.

With at last the tacit complicity of federal immigration officials in Tampa, manufacturers determined to crush the strike in January with massive additions of strikebreakers. During the strike’s early months, cigar workers from Havana had been deported by immigration officials as contract laborers. The citizens’ committee had complained bitterly of this “over-zealous application” of immigration laws, and on several occasions individuals had apparently threatened local immigration officers. On January 20, a large group of Cubans arrived and immediately
took their places at the work benches. Four days later two hundred more stepped off a steamer at Port Tampa, and newspapers observed that “every boat coming in from Havana and Key West” brought more. Finally, on January 25, 1911, after seven months of struggle, the JAB called the strike at an end with the prophetic words, “We simply give up the fight.”

Thus, Tampa’s second general strike in a decade again came to an unhappy end for the cigar worker unions. Defeated, but still defiant, workers returned to the factories. In the end they were unable to withstand the onslaught of powerful forces arrayed against them. Manufacturers were able to enlist the support of Tampa’s business and professional communities, its municipal authorities, (police, board of trade, mayor’s office) the local press, the state’s court system and government, and ultimately the immigration office proved compliant. When the local community felt that its vital interests were threatened, it quickly resorted to vigilante justice and rigorous suppression to force the union into submission. Viewed in this light, the wonder is not that the strikers returned to work, but that they held out so long.

The events of 1910 can also be seen as a further step in a process of grudging accommodation on the part of cigar workers to the demands of the modern industrial world. Early labor conflicts in the city were frequently sparked by real or imaginary threats to traditional privileges and work styles. One pre-1900 walkout, for example, began in reaction to owner demands mandating the use of scales to weigh out the filler tobacco given to workers at the beginning of each day. Relatively unimportant in an economic sense, this change struck at the old custom of allowing workers to make an unlimited number of cigars for their own use. The strike of 1901 saw the establishment of a formal union structure and the utilization of tactics that recognized the existence of the modern corporation. La Resistencia, with its immigrant membership and radical ideology, can be understood as a transitional organization. By 1910 Tampa’s cigar workers were still in a situation of flux, with competing ethnic, cultural, and union loyalties, but the majority appear to have accepted the lure of American big labor by joining AFL’s Cigar Makers International Union and supporting its organizational goals. In this important respect, the cigar workers who took to the streets in 1910 were quite different from their predecessors twenty years earlier.

Unlike La Resistencia, the International Union did not disappear following its defeat in 1911. Instead, it remained and slowly rebuilt its strength. In 1920 it would lead Tampa’s cigar workers in another general strike, this time in a struggle that would last ten months. Once again, factory owners and the wider Tampa community found themselves allied against the ranks of Latin cigar workers. The full story of Tampa’s continuing efforts to find a satisfactory resolution to labor unrest and ethnic tensions awaits further inquiry. Any attempt to understand the complex past of Tampa, however, must take into account the events and historical trends just described.

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1 Figures for the year 1908 show that the cigar factories employed over 10,500 persons and generated a weekly payroll of $200,000, representing seventy-five percent of the total payroll of the city. Spanish, Cubans, and Italians comprised nearly ninety-five percent of the work force in the cigar factories. Immigration Commission, Immigrants in Industries, Pt. 14, (“Cigar and Tobacco Manufacturing”) (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911), 187.
2 Although the term general strike usually applies to work stoppages throughout a community, it was used by cigar workers in Tampa to refer to strikes covering the entire cigar industry.

5 Durward Long, “‘La Resistencia’: Tampa’s Immigrant Labor Union,” Labor History, VI (Fall, 1965): 195, 198. For evidence of radical activities, see runs of two Italian language anarchist papers printed in Tampa, L’Alba Sociale and La Voce dello Schiavo, located at the Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

6 Long, “‘La Resistencia,’ ” 203. These events are also reported at some length in L’Alba Sociale, July 15, August 1, 1901.

7 L’Alba Sociale, August 15, 1901, contains a long article entitled “The Seizures” describing the kidnappings. Also see, Long, “‘La Resistencia,’ ” 207.

8 Long, “‘La Resistencia,’ ” 205-13.


10 At the eve of the 1910 strike, workers were organized into five locals of the CMIU. These were 336 (cigarmakers), 440 (packers), 462 (cigarmakers), 493 (selectors), and 500 (cigarmakers). For organizational work by the CMIU see, George Perkins to Samuel Gompers, October 26, 1909; Samuel Gompers to George Perkins, October 28, 1909; George Perkins to Samuel Gompers, December 7, 1909, Cigar Makers International Union Papers, “National and Internationals File,” AFL-CIO Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

11 Tampa El Internacional, June 3, August 5, 12, 1910; Tampa Morning Tribune, June 30, July 13, 14, 28, August 3, 1910. The manufacturers’ position is outlined in New York United States Tobacco Journal, July 16, 1910. The union’s position is seen in JAB to Gompers, June 27, 1910; December 11, 1910, CMIU Papers.

12 Tampa El Internacional, August 5,12, September 22,30, November 25, 1910; Tampa Morning Tribune, August 2, 23, September 14, 1910. On August 3 the Tampa unions received a telegram from the CMIU, pledging the “entire Treasury of the International” if needed.

13 Tampa Morning Tribune, August 12, 1910.

14 Ibid., August 23, 24, 1910. A subsequent editorial added the ominous warning that “Disorder of any sort will not be tolerated by the people of Tampa.”

15 Ibid., August 29, 30, 1910; New York United States Tobacco Journal, September 10, 1910. The press again served to inflame emotions. “This has ceased to be a question of the preservation of any organization,” the Tribune claimed, “it is a question of the preservation of Tampa.”

16 Tampa Morning Tribune, August 26, September 10, October 1, 1910; New York Tobacco World, October 1, 1910.

17 Tampa Morning Tribune, September 10, 22, 24, 1910. Mobile, Alabama, was particularly anxious to lure factories away from Tampa and sent several delegations to open talks.


19 Tampa Morning Tribune, September 15, 16, 1910.

20 Ibid., September 21, 1910. A sign attached to the feet of the men and signed by JUSTICE read as follows: “Others take notice or go the same way. We know seven more. We are watching you. If any more citizens are molested, look out.” Investigations by the police yielded no arrests or convictions in connection with the lynching.
Ibid., September 22, 23, 1910. Gaetano Moroni, Italian Vice-Consul at New Orleans, visited Tampa and conducted a confidential investigation. His conclusions probably come as close to the truth as possible. He stated that “the lynching itself was not the outcome of a temporary outburst of popular anger, but was planned, in cold blood . . . with the intention of teaching an awful lesson to the strikers of the cigar factories . . . and, at the same time, of getting rid of two ‘terrible ruffians.’ ” See, Gaetano Moroni to Marquis Cusani Confalonieri, October 11, 1910, p. 1, Records of the Department of State, State Decimal File, 1910-1929, “Tampa Lynching Incident,” Box 3671, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

22 Tampa El Internacional, June 3, 1910; Tampa Daily Times, October 4, 9, 18, 1910. Tampa Morning Tribune, November 25, 1910, for example, referred to Campa as a “youthful anarchist whose career in Tampa has been characterized by the most flagrant disregard of the rights of life, person, and property.”

23 Tampa Morning Tribune, October 17, 18, 1910. The patrols in West Tampa were under the command of Col. Hugh C. MacFarlane, chairman of the citizens’ committee; those of Ybor City were under Col. C. C. Whitaker.

24 Ibid., October 18, 1910. The citizens’ committee posted several thousand placards around the city reading: “We, the Citizens Committee, guarantee absolute protection to anyone who desires to go to work in any of the cigar factories of this community both in going to and from work and to their homes.”

25 Tampa El Internacional, October 21, 1910; Tampa Morning Tribune, October 17, 18, 1910.

26 Tampa El Internacional, December 23, 30, 1910; January 20, 1911.

27 Tampa Morning Tribune, October 18, December 14, 1910; Tampa El Internacional, December 16, 1910.

28 Tampa El Internacional, October 27, December 16, 1910. Ever since the cigar industry came to Tampa, cigarmakers had worked on Sundays during the weeks before Christmas in order to fill holiday orders.

29 Ibid., November 18, December 30, 1910; Tampa Morning Tribune, November 19, December 30, 1910.

30 Tampa Morning Tribune, November 26, December 1, 3, 7, 1910; Tampa El Internacional, December 16, 1910.

31 Tampa Morning Tribune, December 26, 1910, January 1, 2, 3, 10, 16, 1911; Tampa El Internacional, December 23, 1910, January 20, 1911.

32 Tampa El Internacional, December 23, 1910.

33 Factory owners were particularly anxious to acquire selectors for their businesses and were outraged when these individuals were deported. On August 28, for example, Manuel López, a Cuban selector, was returned to Havana on board the steamer Olivette for being in violation of the alien contract labor law. Tampa Morning Tribune, August 28, 1910, January 27, 1911.

34 Tampa Morning Tribune, January 25, 26, 1911.

35 Long, “‘La Resistencia,’ ” 193-94.