

## John S. Nichols

(fictitious character based on real historical events)

I recently immigrated to America from Poland to make a better life for my family. My wife died on the boat ride over from typhoid. We used our only savings to purchase the tickets for her, my daughter and myself. Once I arrived at Ellis Island, I was asked a series of strange questions, such as “are you an anarchist?” I answered no to these questions mostly because I was confused and scared and also because I believe in America. They changed my name from Sobuchanowsky because they could not pronounce it. They said something about “dirty poles”, asked my father’s name, which was Nicholas, and promptly changed the name on the sheet to Nichols. I was insulted, but at the same time did not want to cause trouble for fear they would send me back to Poland.

I found work in a mill town of Lawrence, Massachusetts. I work at a loom for fifty-six hours a week and earn \$6.00, not an hour, a week. My daughter and I live in one room in a tenement with no heat. We look out over an alley where the tenants throw their garbage. I worry so much about my daughter. I do not want her working in the factory, so I send her to the school, but they treat her horribly there. They make fun of her accent and language. They make fun of her clothes and lack of a nutritious lunch. We hide the fact we are Jewish as this would bring even more condemnation from the Christian teachers and students. She says she doesn’t care and she studies hard, but this breaks my heart that I can’t protect her.

**With your group, pause in your reading to discuss and answer these questions:**

1. Is this character real or fictitious? How did he come to be where he is?
2. List his complaints about his situation.
3. Describe the treatment John and his daughter receive because of their Polish ancestry?

One week ago one of the factories gave out pay envelopes with short pay. The Italians who worked in the mill called for a strike and ran through the factory in anger shutting off the machines and throwing coal through the windows. The word went out to other factories and all the mill workers walked off the job in protest. The next day, the leaders of the Industrial Workers of the World came from New York to assist us with organizing a strike. They have a lot of experience and immediately gave us the word: no violence. They organized picket lines and I got a job painting signs. They organized relief stations where families could get food. Please understand if you go on strike you are not getting paid at all. This is a huge risk, but one we feel we must take to demand a better wage. We are not asking for much, just enough to feed, clothe, and house our families in a simple way. This strike was not even for higher wages but to get what they had been promised in the first place.

Even though the word was no violence, there were many incidents. A woman worker was shot in the street. The only people with guns are the police and the militia, but of course the leaders of the strike were blamed and hauled off to jail. Bill Haywood, a westerner who wore a big Stetson hat, came to take up the leadership of the strike. He gave a speech and said, "There is no foreigner here, only the capitalist." Everyone went wild.

**With your group, pause in your reading to discuss and answer these questions:**

4. Describe John's view of the strike. Why did he join it? What does he want from it?
5. What are the risks he faces for joining the strike?
6. How does John feel about using violence?

After two weeks, many strikers were beginning to waver in their commitment because they had to feed their children. Because our strike became famous in the large northeastern cities, offers from wealthy families sympathetic to our cause offered to take our children in. This was a huge decision for me to make as a father. Should I send my daughter off to a family in New York, Boston, or Philadelphia where she may be well fed and cared for? What would be the long-term consequences of this? Would she want to leave me? Would she resent me for sending her? I finally decided to do this after being assured over and over by the strike committee the families are thoroughly researched.

The day the train came to take the children, hundreds of families went to the train station to say their goodbyes. As the train was approaching, the police came from out of nowhere and began beating people with Billy clubs and firing shots into the air. It was pandemonium. Some children jumped onto the train, some fell onto the tracks. I was clubbed in the head with a bat. People were throwing bottles and rocks. My daughter got caught up in the push to the train and I have no idea where she went. I was taken to jail. I have done nothing wrong. I made some signs for our strike and tried to send my daughter to a better family for a time. I want a just wage for an honest day's work so I can feed and clothe my daughter. I can't understand the greed and hatred of the people who want to keep me from that simple request.

**With your group, pause in your reading to discuss and answer these questions:**

7. What difficult decision does John make regarding his daughter?
8. What risks did this involve?
9. Why did he do it?
10. How does it turn out for him? What are his feelings about his situation?