Historians characterize the first World War as a boon to organized labor. Union membership increased substantially and wages soared. Samuel Gompers's strategy of unqualified support for the war effort, symbolized by the first appearance of an American President at an American Federation of Labor convention, elevated the organization to favored status with the Wilson administration. Government backing enabled labor to achieve such long sought goals as the eight hour day in many industries. The fact that even the steel industry, an implacable enemy of unions, made some concessions to their workers, indicates the amount of progress made by organized labor during 1917 and 1918.  

The fate of the hatting industry in Danbury, Connecticut was an exception to this pattern. Hat manufacturers in this single industry town of approximately 22,000 people used wartime circumstances to accomplish their twenty year objective of curtailing the influence of the United Hatters. A bitter strike against four of the largest hat firms, provoked by management in 1917, contrary to the publicly expressed wishes of the Wilson administration, lasted until 1922 when the union conceded that its members could work in all local non-union factories. This paper will explore the way in which national forces and local responses transformed Danbury from a union stronghold to an open shop town.

The hatting industry in the United States at the start of World War I had resisted rationalization. In a half dozen cities in Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania it included many small to medium sized firms that engaged in ruthless price competition. Efforts to create a national manufacturer’s organization that could impose order on the trade met with limited success. Within each hatting center the scene was equally chaotic. The Connecticut Department of Factory Inspection listed 38 businesses in Danbury in 1918 that were either hat factories or directly related to hatting. Some semblance of unity was provided by the Hat Manufacturers' Association of Danbury and Bethel which was set up in 1903 but not all firms were members. The most notable absentee was the sizable E.A. Mallory Company. The rivalry among Danbury hat firms appalled a field agent of the Manufacturer’s Association of Connecticut sent to the city in 1919 who reported to the statewide organization that the major problem he found was "insufficient cooperation" among businessmen who "had insufficient desire and ability to serve their joint ends because they were more or less knifing one another."


The ability of factory owners to control the way hats were made was complicated by the presence of established unions. As early as 1791 local journeymen began to formalize the terms of employment in the trade. In 1800 the United and True Assistant Society of Hatters, the first hat union, was established to spell out in detail the rules and responsibilities of membership in this artisan fraternity. As the scale of the industry grew such local organizations gave way to national unions. Representing those who performed the most skilled tasks of polishing and curling, the elite hat finishers were the first to amalgamate forming the Hat Finishers National Trade Association in 1854. Their counterparts in the back shop, the hat makers, were unable to form a national front until 1885. Cooperation was erratic until the depression of 1893 prompted the merger of the two groups into the United Hatters of North America in 1896 and immediate affiliation with the American Federation of Labor. In all these organizations the membership of the Danbury district was among the largest and most influential. Another local union composed exclusively of women who represented about one-third of the work force at each factory, the Hat Trimmers, was established in and often was the most militant presence in the city.

5. Danbury Evening News (February 4, 1909) lists 1303 finishers and 1350 makers residing in the city.

5. Dana Frank "Hard Times in Hat Town: The Danbury Lockout of 1893-94" graduate paper, History Department, Yale University (1981) shows how the Hat Trimmers position was too extreme for their male associates.

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(Additional text appears to be partially legible and may include references or additional notes.)
The labor unrest that exploded in Danbury just as the United States was ending its three years of neutrality had deep roots. As one astute observer put it "The city has been 'dead-locked' for years with hat manufacturerers on one side, union labor on the other". (8) The Hat Makers and the Hat Finishers each faced a major threat to their job security. Mechanization in the backshop by the addition of forming and blowing machines lessened dependance on the skills of the Makers. In the case of the Finishers the menace consisted in fewer hats to finish. Since 1892 when Harry McLachlan hit on the scheme to fabricate rough hat bodies that would be completed in small "buck-eye" shops all over the country more Danbury firms turned to this mass production technique. By 1917 the director of the Industrial Bureau of the Chamber of Commerce estimated more than half of the capacity of Danbury factories was being finished elsewhere mostly in New York City. Nine factories manufactured rough hats for export. (9) Sensitivity on these issues and others like apprenticeship rules, and regulation of the pace of work--Danbury hatters enforced the "stint" or acceptable days output--were involved in a 16 week lockout in 1893-94 and a 21 week work stoppage in 1909 as well as numerous shorter interruptions. The frequency of the labor confrontations had increased since 1903, not only because local management was better organized, but because the Supreme Court's decision in the famous Danbury Hatters Case (Loewe v. Lawler) had deprived the United Hatters of the boycott, its most effective weapon. (10)

8. E. C. Ginty to Editor, July 16, 1917 contained in files of National War Labor Board, National Archives. Ginty sent a series of letters to many newspapers after the settlement of the Hatters Case in an effort to inform them of the true situation in Danbury. Ginty to Danbury Evening News (June
The impact of war magnified both the problems and opportunities for labor and management. Hatting was not a vital war industry and received few government contracts; consequently Danbury did not share in war-induced prosperity. Yet workers in this stagnant industry suffered from the high cost of living fueled by inflated wages in other sectors and shortages of consumer products. To provide relief the Executive Committee of the United Hatters decided that the annual contract to replace the bill of prices that would expire on May 1, 1917 must be tied to the selling price of hats rather than the production costs. In the eyes of union officials this was far from a radical proposal having been the pricing standard for stiff hats since 1902 and introduced as the basis for remuneration for soft hats in the 1916 contract. In what they considered a reasonable gesture to offset management fears of constant wage increases as hat prices went up union leaders agreed to freeze prices for an entire year.

The war placed the hat manufacturers in a difficult situation also. Raw materials imported from Europe, such as rabbit fur and chemical dyes, were scarce. With 2 million men in the service the demand for civilian hats was weak. They worried about granting a price increase without knowing their exact costs. More important three owners led by Frank Lee, the largest employer in the city, sensed that this was an opportunity to break the union. They took the position that linking wages to the selling price was a departure with past practices and therefore had to be subject to arbitration as provided by the so-called Fr. Kennedy agreement that settled the 1909 strike. Normally, prices were negotiated annually by local
shop committees. Locals 10 and 11 of the United Hatters responded that a national issue could not be subject to local arbitration, an accepted interpretation in labor-management relations. (11)

11. The most succinct statement of the issue on both sides is United Hatters of North America v. Frank H. Lee Company et.al, National War Labor Board, Record Group 2, File 15, National Archives.

Not all manufacturers thought it was wise to challenge labor. Within a few days of the expiration of the old contract on May 1, 1917 E.A. Mallory, one of the cities oldest and largest firms, signed a contract based on the selling price. Several smaller companies followed. But most followed the lead of Frank J. Lee, former journeymen and union members, who had emerged as the most aggressive foes of unions. The youngest of ten children who was raised on a Connecticut farm he became a hatter before starting his own factory in Bethel in 1886. In 1909 he constructed a modern steel and concrete factory that in 1916 employed 1,100 workers and grossed over 2.5 million dollars in business. Lee was an unlikely union buster knowing most of his employees by their first name and earning their respect for his honesty and generosity to the community. Even at the peak of tension President Jeremiah Scully showed his respect for Lee by telling a gathering of the Hat Makers union that Lee "has gone away from us but in every dealing with me he has been fair and honest." (12) Along with Harry McLachlan, a Scotch immigrant who also began at the bench and who was in partnership with Lee from 1909 to 1914, and the son of John W. Green who had recently taken over the management of that venerable company, Lee decided to provoke a strike. (13) Even though it would mean economic loss, Lee admitted in 1919 that the strike had already cost him a half million dollars and reduced his workforce by one half. (14)

12 – Danbury Evening News (June 30, 1917).

13. Danbury Evening News (February 7, 1937) contains an elaborate
obiturary of Lee; Danbury Evening News (June 30, 1917); Lynn Wilson, History of Fairfield County (Hartford: S. J. Clarke, 1929) pp 300–303 for a biographical sketch of McLachalan.


The conclusion that Lee brought on the strike with the intention of hurting the union is inescapable. Contemporaries besides union officials recognized his motivation. E. C. Ginty told the Connecticut Federation of Labor meeting in Danbury in 1917 that the purpose of the strike was "simply to crush and destroy the United Hatters of America." (15) The two mediators dispatched by the Department of Labor who were unable to bring the parties together praised the union representatives for their cooperation and vilified management for their "antagonistic mental condition", "the manifestly absurd" nature of their position on arbitration, and for the way they "stubbornly refuse to officially deal in any manner whatsoever" with the union. E. E. Greenwalt, in frustration, reported to his superiors "that the burden of responsibility for the regrettable situation that now obtains in the community rests upon the shoulders of the manufactureres who, in my judgement, precipitated without sufficient reason, considering the conditions of the world and our country, an industrial trouble that has brought incalculable harm to the business interests of the community." (16)


16. Robert McWade, US Commissioner of Conciliation, to William B. Wilson, Secretary of Labor, "Adjustment of Danbury Hatters Strike" (September 20, 1917); Department of Labor, Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, RG 280; 33/585; Danbury Evening News, August
The United Hatters recognized that this was a direct challenge to their position in the community and were wary in their response. When the contract expired and negotiations were stalled on the issue of mediation the union withdrew the label from the four factories controlled by Lee, McLachlan and Green on May 16, 1917 but permitted their members to continue work in the other factories run by members of the Danbury Hat Manufacturer’s Association. To strengthen their creditability the union immediately signed a new contract where the bill of prices was linked to the selling price with E.A. Mallory (600 employees) and several smaller firms who were not members of the hat manufacturer’s organization. Within two weeks the union began to distribute strike benefits to the employees of the four target firms at the rate of seven dollars per week for married men and five dollars for single. Although far below the normal earnings of hatters of close to twenty dollars a week this financial support tightened the discipline of the union. (17)

17. Danbury Evening News, June 7, 1917. The United Hatters placed a special 10% assessment on all locals to pay strike benefits in Danbury in both 1917 and 1918. In 1917 the amount paid out was $137,546.68 while in the following year until June 30 when benefits stopped $4,344.23 was sent to idle workers in the city. United Hatters Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, Account Books, 1915–1922, Box 55.
Discipline was needed for adherence of the Danbury locals to national union rules was soon tested. After five weeks of seeing his factory idle and vowing that "he did not mean to be driven from the manufacture of hats" Lee threatened to permanently close his huge, modern factory-- in town parlance referred to simply as "the big plant"-- and to shift operations to a smaller open shop plant in Danbury or possibly in Norwalk. This challenge produced consternation among Lee's employees who formed a Committee of 8 to confer with the United Hatters on a suitable response. This meeting described by the Danbury Evening News as "more or less acrimonious" and one where "personalities were indulged in" showed that Lee had thrust a wedge into union ranks. Some striking workers were critical of the policies of the national leadership and were adamant about the need to keep the Lee factory operating in Danbury. Patrick Connolly, a former Secretary of the Hat Makers Local and an ex Connecticut Labor Commissioner warned that the loss of the Lee factory "might kill Danbury." Herbert Low, a Lee employee and member of the Committee of 8, publicly agreed with management that the issue of prices like all others should be decided by local arbitration and attacked national Secretary Martin Lawlor who, Low claimed, had stated that he was willing to sacrifice the Lee factory for the principle of attaching wages to the selling price. (18)

Criticism of the union stance grew. Not only did the newspaper publish the critical comments of local hatters they printed a letter from an ex-hatter in Norwalk that depicted the national leadership as "meddlesome" and predicting that "Kaiser Lawlor is going to get a bad bump as Kaiser Bill is." (19) Respected figures in the community urged local hatters to disregard the directions of their leaders. Reverend A.C. Coburn, young rector of St. James Episcopal Church spoke about the situation from the pulpit. Using analogies to the war, appropriate from one who volunteered to be a military chaplain, Coburn compared "bleeding Danbury" to "bleeding Belgium" and implored strikers to "get together and show the world we are not slackers." He went on to tell his congregation that the only solution to labor unrest in Danbury was direct negotiations between Danbury bosses and Danbury workers, what he termed "home rule." (20) Reverend Walter Shanley, the fiery pastor of St. Peter's Catholic Church, who never hesitated to speak or write about such public issues as temperance and gambling, turned his attention to the strike. In an open letter to the Danbury Evening News he castigated Martin Lawlor for drawing a high salary as a union executive while local workers, many of them his parishioners, suffered. He judged that "never in Danbury have the workers expressed greater indignation against the officers than at present." These blunt sentiments also found expressions in his Sunday sermons. One long time Danbury resident remembered that Shanley's remarks provoked Jeremiah Scully, the President of the Hat Makers union, to the unheard of action of speaking out in protest from his pew before stalking out of mass. (21)

19. Danbury Evening News, June 22, 1917. (Facsimiles from June 10, 1917)
21. Danbury Evening News, June 16, 1917. Kenneth Hanna to author, no day, 1936; Shanley and Lawlor were old antagonists. Shanley's talk at an
early Chamber of Commerce meeting on April 13, 1915 in which he insisted that the organization was not anti-union and blaming labor troubles in Danbury on outside agitators touched off an emotional salvo of replies and counter replies to the local newspaper. In the course of this angry dialogue Lawlor revealed that Shanley had written him a personal letter taking him to task as a Catholic for criticizing a priest. Danbury Evening News May 11, 19, 20, 25, June 1, 8, 1915.

More damaging than words was the belated action of the other members of the Hat Manufacturer's Association who on June 16 voted to close their plants rather than accept a contract based on the selling price. In announcing their decision in an open letter to the press the Association indicted the national union for policies that benefited them but not the workers who were forced to leave the city to find work. They labelled the current strike as "a death blow to Danbury." (22)

22. Danbury Evening News, June 16, 1917

Union officials fought back. Martin Lawlor denied charges that he had ever said anything about "sacrificing" the Lee plant and denounced Father Shanley as a long time apologist for the manufacturer's. The most eloquent union reply was the support of the rank and file. On June 21 after three hours of heated discussion at City Hall where more than 1000 members jammed the building, sitting on the courthouse railing and the judges bench, the largest meeting of the Hat Makers Association unanimously voted to support the national position and not pursue separate negotiations with the Danbury manufacturers. The next day the Hat Finishers with considerably less enthusiasm and unity followed suit. Only 26 of the 400 members who attended the meeting cast ballots and 42 votes were recorded in opposition to the national policy. (23)
23. Danbury Evening News, June 21, 22, 1917. Lawlor acidly remarked that "I sincerely hope that the Trade Unions do not stand condemned in the eyes of a just God as they do in the eyes of the Reverend Walter J. Shanley."

The response of Lee and his associates to the Hatter's solidarity was direct. Lee leased the abandoned Beltaire factory, a much smaller wooden structure on North Main Street, and began to hire employees regardless of union affiliation. He announced to prospective employees that although he would never deal with a national union, he would be willing to arbitrate all issues with a local union. Lee's South Street factory was advertised for sale in New York newspapers and he started negotiations with Norwalk businessmen about opening a factory there. The three other struck firms also re-opened their factories on an open shop basis. In August all four incorporated as the United States Hat Company and with capitalization of 1 million dollars became the largest hat factory in the district representing more than half the local trade. (24)


As workers, some of them union members, began to file into the factories of Lee and his partners the union escalated the tension by deciding to picket what they termed the "foul" shops. Although union leaders were careful to decry violence and later boasted that the hatters always avoided force in labor disputes, there is some indication that this strike was not totally peaceful. There is no hint of this in the local newspaper always concerned about the community's reputation. Instead the press recorded peaceful marches of hatters carrying American flags up Main Street to the Lee plant. Kenneth Hanna, the son of the then City Clerk recalls that verbal abuse and frequently rocks were hurled by strikers at
The terse newspaper report that Lee shot at a prowler near his home at the height of the strike takes on added significance in the context of his daughter's description of her father sleeping with a gun under his pillow at this time, having the grounds of his home floodlighted, arranging for Danbury police to stay overnight at the farm, and withdrawing his children from St. Peter's school to protect them from physical harm and from the taunts of "scabs" hurled by their classmates. (1)

1. Interview with Josephine Robinson, March 21, 1987. Mrs. Robinson, 70 years later vividly recalls notes written in red letters nailed on the wall of the barn saying "We will get your children!"
the men who crossed the picket lines. A brief notation in the September newspaper that Frank Lee shot at prowlers on his farm takes on added significance in the light of his daughter’s recollection that she was withdrawn from public school because of her father’s fear of union retaliation.


This heightened tension occurred against the backdrop of the denouement of the Danbury Hatters case, a graphic reminder of the resourcefulness and determination of the open shop advocates. After 14 years of trials and appeals which included two Supreme Court hearings, the $240,000 damages against the union was scheduled for payment in July 1917 by the auction of the homes of 247 Connecticut members of the United Hatters, most of whom lived in Danbury, that had been attached since 1903. The auction, publicized in the local newspaper where each property was described, was canceled only when the American Federation of Labor paid the fine “blood money” as Martin Lawlor described it.


Frank Lee and other Danbury businessmen who wanted to free themselves from the power of organized labor had powerful allies in the Manufacturer’s Association of Connecticut and its affiliates the Fairfield County Employer’s Association, the Hartford County Manufacturer’s Association, and the Bridgeport Manufacturer’s Association. In 1917 the Manufacturer’s Association, transformed itself from a staid businessman’s
club into an aggressive promoter of industrial democracy in all parts of the state. Spearheading this open shop drive was Clarence V. Whitney, a Hartford industrialist, whose hatred of unions was so strong that the President of the Association described him in 1919 as someone who regretted "that the action taken by Governor Coolidge of Massachusetts and by Judge Gary in connection with the steel strike has not been taken by Connecticut manufacturers." When Whitney was searching for ways to revitalize the state organization his attention focused on the fight that Lee and his colleagues were making to establish the open shop in Danbury. Named to head a special Danbury Committee of the Manufacturer's Association Whitney provided a number of crucial services to the local hat firms. 

Most important the Manufacturer's Association helped overcome the fragmentation and isolation of the Danbury industrialists. On September 13, 1917 the Fairfield County Employer's Association met with local businessmen at the Hotel Green. At this meeting Whitney and others gave glowing testimony about the patriotic nature of the open shop. Lee, McLachlan, and W. Harry Green pledged their commitment to permitting workers "the liberty to work to their full potential." Other Danburians pledged their support. Reverend Coburn, for example, said that he was willing to "temporarily alienate workingmen" in order to support the open shop. One month later a Danbury branch of the Fairfield County Employers Association headed by Arnold Turner, a maker of hat machinery, was formed. At the first session of this new group a stream of out of town speakers pledged the support of the state Association and predicted that this new approach would remove "Danbury's unsavory reputation as a labor town. Walter Drew, an attorney retained by the state Association to help organize Danbury, captured the revivalistic tone of the meeting when he intoned "I believe the light is breaking over the hills of Danbury" bringing "a new era that would see Danbury made safe for
democracy." (28) The Manufacturer's Association then took its message to the public by subsidizing a half-page advertisement that reprinted Elbert Hubbard's 1910 article from the Roycrofters entitled "The Closed or Open Shop" (29).


The Manufacturer's Association subsidized the services of savvy lawyers who could present the Danbury employers position in the best light before courts and government agencies. Ralph O. Wells, a Hartford attorney who represented the state Association before the War Labor Board argued persuasively that the Board, highly sympathetic to organized labor, had no jurisdiction over labor matters in Danbury. (30) Wells, as counsel for the US Hat Company, obtained an injunction from the Superior Court in Bridgeport to curtail picketing near Lee's plant. He also orchestrated the contempt proceedings against John O'Hara, Secretary-Treasurer of the Hat Makers union for allegedly violating this injunction. (31)

One benefit to Danbury businessmen of the alliance with like minded state industrialists is easier to allege than it is to prove. On numerous occasions hat union officers asserted that striking hatters were discriminated against when they sought work in Bridgeport munitions factories during the summer of 1917. In particular it was claimed that Remington Arms instructed all hatters who applied for positions to "go back to Danbury and go to work." John OHara went further and maintained to Secretary of Labor William Wilson that sympathetic employers maintained a blacklist that operated to force hatters to accept employment in Danbury open shops. (32) Ultimately this charge was relayed to the War Department but there is no indication that any investigation was made. However it is strange that hatters in large numbers were forced to take menial jobs on the railroad and on farms if positions in war plants had been available to them. (33)


33. William Z. Ripley, War Department to Chief of Department of Mediation, Labor Department, August 28,1918, War Labor Board, RG 2, File 15, National Archives; Danbury Evening News, July 2, August 9, 1917.

Support of the Manufacturer's Association for the open shop movement in Danbury exemplified by the beachhead of the four hat companies extended into the postwar period. The Field Secretary of the Association and a special counsel spent much of their time in 1919 in Danbury trying to unify the business community behind this philosophy. One of their
accomplishments was to get union and non union employers to meet each week in the Danbury Boosters Club where presumably the advantages of the open shop could be proclaimed. (34) When Lee and McLachlan decided in 1919 that it would be prudent to purchase a vacant hat factory rather than let it open as a closed shop the Association provided a loan of $20,000 as a gesture of encouragement. (35) Testimony to the importance of the Manufacturer's Association in nurturing the open shop in Danbury was given by Frank Lee himself at the 1919 annual meeting of the state group. At that time Lee paid tribute to Clarence Whitney as the one who "has inspired me in the Open Shop propaganda more than any other member of the Association." and then added significantly "I dare say there was a time and a period in my open shop propaganda when, if it hadn't been for Clarence Whitney, I might have weakened, but fortunately we continued on."(36) 37

35. Sands, "The History of the Manufacturers Association of Connecticut: The War Years" Connecticut Industry (July, 1919) p.6; Lee clarified and the Association agreed that the money for the purchase was put up by Lee and McLachlan while the Association loan was symbolic and was returned immediately. Connecticut Manufacturers Association, Report of the Annual meeting, 1919 p.38-40.

Against this powerful attack the hatters locals had meagre weapons. They forged an alliance of convenience with the building trades represented by the Danbury Central Labor Union something the hatters had shunned for many years. The Convention of the Connecticut Federation of Labor was held in Danbury in 1917 providing psychological strength and a propaganda
Open shop employers used Danbury's dependence on the hatting industry, dramatized by the city's experience of being cut off from the wartime economic boom, to further weaken organized labor in the postwar years. On August 6, 1918 a group of twenty-five prominent businessmen met to form a corporation whose purpose was to attract diversified industry to the city. The Danbury Industrial Commission ultimately played an important role in revitalizing the city's economy in the 1940's and 50's following the collapse of hatting but in the early years it was primarily a means of counteracting what Arnold Turner, one of the founders of the group termed Danbury's "bad press about labor problems." Three of the five officers of the organization were hatters including Lee and McLachlan. Lee served as the first President of the Industrial Commission until his death in 1937. His interest in the group was clear from his comments at the original meeting when he offered to subsidize the construction of a modern factory building that could be rented to out of town companies but only if the community showed the "proper spirit". It is clear from the type and number of industries that were attracted to the city that to Lee "proper spirit" meant "non-union." (38)

platform where state delegates were urged to honor the union label. (37) Union officials orchestrated a modest letter writing campaign to counter the claims of the manufacturers that an open shop meant higher wages and more satisfying working conditions. (38) Direct meetings between the United Hatters national President and Danbury manufacturers in January and February 1918 failed. Probably the most prudent decision was to permit union members to work in all open shop factories except those owned by Lee, McLachlan and Green though they controlled 57% of production capacity. But by the end of August, 1917 all remaining local plants had withdrawn from the Danbury Hat Manufacturers Association and had reached a modus vivendi with the union.
the claims of the manufacturers that an open shop meant higher wages and more satisfying working conditions. (38) Direct meetings between the United Hatters national President and Danbury manufacturers in January and February 1918 failed. (39) Probably the most prudent decision was to permit union members to work in all open shop factories except those owned by Lee, McLachlan and Green though they controlled 57% of production capacity. But by the end of August, 1917 all remaining local plants had withdrawn from the Danbury Hat Manufacturers Association and had reached a modus vivendi with the union.


Appeals to class and racial fears was a central theme of the hatter’s arguments that got more explicit as the labor situation deteriorated. Martin Lawlor told the Connecticut Federation of Labor convention meeting in Danbury over Labor Day in 1917 that the open shop had already lured undesirable immigrants into the community with a lower standard of living and a willingness to subordinate themselves to machines in the hat factories. He charged that local merchants could testify to the "riff-raff of outsiders" that have flooded into Danbury. (40) When the Reverend Coburn expressed sympathy with the open shop the union advised him to start an "open chapel in the vicinity of Beaver Street
where the latest acquisitions to Danbury’s peaceful population live and work in the ‘open shop’." (41) Journeyman Patrick Ginty was more blunt when he charged that the open shop had brought to Danbury "a low class of people...the scum of Europe." (42)

The most promising source of help for the hatters was the federal government particularly the Department of Labor headed by William Wilson a former United Mine Workers official. Intervention of federal authorities more sensitive to labor’s plight than any previous administration who, in addition, were eager to quell any labor unrest that would ham the war effort seemed to hatter officials to offer hope. Yet on two occasions—once in 1917 and again in 1918—federal mediators failed to bring the feuding parties together. When the National War Labor Board in July, 1918, ruled that it was not appropriate for them to intervene in a strike that did not appreciably affect the conduct of the war the cause of the United Hatters was doomed.

It was a worried city government, then in the hands of Acting Mayor Michael Sullivan and City Clerk George Hanna acting for the young Mayor Anthony Sunderland who had volunteer for army aviation training, rather than the hatters union that turned to Washington for assistance. When a Citizens Committee authorized by the City Council and appointed by the acting Mayor was unable to budge the two sides after several joint meetings desperate City Clerk Hanna asked the Labor Department to send a mediator to Danbury. (43) In response General Robert McWade, an experienced diplomat who was the former consul general in China, arrived
in early August embarrassed to find that neither management nor labor welcomed his presence. However after a series of conferences McWade concluded that it was the intransigence of the hat manufacturers that prolonged the strike. In a local press conference before his departure and in his official report to the Labor Department he portrayed labor as willing "to go as far as the limits would allow to settle the matter" while he characterized the owners as stubborn and antagonistic. His final verdict was that Lee and associates had acted unfairly in trying to take advantage of the war emergency. (44) Though McWade's sympathies were with the union—United States Hat Company lawyer Wells judged that he did "not impress the manufacturers as in any sense an impartial or open minded conciliator."—he was unable to bring an end to the strike. (45)


Encouraged by McWade's strong words if not his results the hat union was responsible for injecting the Labor Department into the local scene for a second time in 1917 after another effort at community pressure misfired. In October 1917 the United Hatters locals circulated a petition urging that
Although two federal mediators had been ineffective in ending the strike, labor was encouraged that both agreed that labor was a victim of management's determination to establish the open shop in Danbury. Consequently, after almost a year on strike and no sign of weakening of Lee's resolve, the hatters union decided to once again seek federal intervention this time with a charge that the strike was disrupting the conduct of the war. Though admitting that the hat factories had few government contracts, the union charged that a blacklist existed which prevented hatters from finding employment in the Bridgeport munitions industry and that management was importing "alien enemies" to work in the open shops in Danbury. The National War Labor Board did consent to hold hearings in Washington and asked both sides to file briefs but in the end failed to take any action on the grounds that what was happening in Danbury did not directly effect the war. With that terse ruling the possibility that government might dislodge the open shop in Danbury disappeared. 

51 O'Hara to Wilson, April 16, 1918, National War Labor Board. O'Hara, an official of the Hat Makers union made this appeal as the President of the Danbury Central Labor Union.
the strike be settled and the cities factories be once again run under union conditions." This statement, signed by 300 persons including all city officials and 86 people who identified themselves by their business or profession, centered on the argument that non-union factories have attracted workers "that are not of a type or class to which Danbury is accustomed, and whose standard of living is far lower than that of Danbury citizens." To underscore the claim that patriotic Americans are idle while undeserving foreigners are employed over fifty of the signers added such phrases as "son in army", "boy in army" after their names. (46)

When public pressure failed to budge the manufacturer's John O'Hara of the Hat Makers union forwarded the petition to Secretary of Labor Wilson with a cover letter requesting a federal investigation of the unpatriotic activities of the hat makers who fly the American flags over their factories purchased by their loyal workers who were locked out and replaced with aliens. (47). Once again, in April 1918, a federal mediator came to Danbury. The disgust of E.E. Greenwalt after meeting with the two sides was even more extreme than that of his predecessor. Like McWade he found the union cooperative and management rigid, "so positive in their assertions" that he could make no headway. For the record he stated that in his judgement management took advantage of unsettled conditions to provoke the strike and for their selfish reasons they are prolonging it to the detriment of the community. (48)

46. "To the Hat Manufacturers of Danbury who are in Controversy with the United Hatters of North America" 13 pages of signatures. Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, National Archives.

47. John O'Hara to Secretary of Labor William Wilson (no date) Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, National Archives

Wells filed a 27 page brief of the manufacturer’s position. "In the Matter of the Danbury Hat Strike: Memorandum for the United States Hat Company, July 10, 1918, National War Labor Board; "United Hatters of North America v. Frank Lee et al., no day, 1918, United Hatters, HRD 16; "Report of Frederic C. Hood and Adam Wilkinson, A Section of the National War Labor Board, July 10, 1918, National War Labor Board.

With that terse ruling the possibility that government might preserve Danbury as a union town disappeared. The Open Shop factories prospered. Both Lee and McLachlan boasted to the local press in 1919 that they had so much business that they would immediately hire any hatters that applied. (51) The Manufacturer’s Association with satisfaction rated the industrial situation in Danbury a few years later as 96% normal and 25% above the average of the entire state. (52) Simultaneously pressure mounted among local union members to face reality and lift the restrictions against employment in open shop factories. In January 1922 both the Hat Finishers Local 10 and the Hat Makers Local 11 with the blessings of the national executive board of the United Hatters voted to permit union members to accept jobs in all local factories. (53) Danbury was no longer a union town. *A CASUALTY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR.*

51. Danbury Evening News April 2, 1919
52. Danbury Evening News, December 2, 1921
53. Danbury Evening News, January 4, 1922