Deadly Picket-Lines in US Labour History

Paul F. Lipold
Ph.D. Sociology, is an independent scholar whose interests include labour-management violence and political repression

Dead men tell no tales; that is, until the living give them voice. From 1870 to 1970, a veritable victims’ chorus of no fewer than 1160 fatalities was amassed during labour dispute confrontations within the United States of America. Each was simultaneously an expression of and catalyst within the dialectical evolution of US labour-management relations. To thee they sing.

Strike-Fatality Overview

Violence on America’s picket lines was protracted, widespread and intense. Fatalities, the most extreme outcome of violence, were incurred in at least 244 separate strike events, more than a dozen industries, thirty-eight states, and seventy-two years. Many more resulted in various forms of intimidation, non-fatal injuries, and property damage. Strike event names such as the Battle of Homestead (1892), Battle of Blair Mountain (1921), and Colorado Mine War (1913-14) testify to the ferocity with which agents of capital and labour advanced and / or defended their perceived rights to property and labour over the course of an era widely recognised as the most violent and bloody of any Western industrialised nation: strikers, organisers and their sympathisers comprised nearly two-thirds of the classifiable victims.

Between 1877 to 1947, the US labour movement experienced the most violent and bloody era of any Western industrialised nation: strikers, organisers and their sympathisers comprised nearly two-thirds of the classifiable victims.

First, the commonly used term ‘labour violence’ is belied by the fact that strikers, organisers, and / or their sympathisers comprised nearly two-thirds of the classifiable victims. Another ten percent were bystanders: leaving less than one-fourth of the victims to be divided among strike-breakers, company guards, and / or state agents. Second, deaths were concentrated within the extraction and transportation industries. Coal mining alone accounted for roughly one-third of the deaths with another 199 (18.1 percent) on the railroads. Third, the regional distribution changed over time. Initially, strike fatalities were most heavily concentrated in the Northeast and to a slightly lesser extent the Midwest. As industrialisation spread, the violence shifted to the West and ultimately South. Fourth, 97.3 percent of the fatalities occurred between eruption of the Great Railway Strike of 1877 and passage of the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947: an era over the course of which evolved a discomforting and incendiary blend of economic desperation, labour militancy, employer intransigence, political uncertainty, and fatal resolve sandwiched between spans of relative labour quiescence.

Dialectics of Violence

The Great Railway Strike of 1877 provided a watershed moment in American labour history. It began in protest of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad’s decision to uphold the company’s annual dividend while reducing wages during a period of severe economic depression; and quickly spread across railways, industries, and state lines, disrupting commerce on first the Eastern seaboard and ultimately nationwide. Before its end, the nation had witnessed its first general strike, the deployment of police, numerous state and municipal militias, and federal troops against groups of non-seditious citizens, the destruction and looting of numerous railway yards, and the deaths of more than one hundred individuals. Prior to the Great Strike, ‘labour violence’ had generally been considered sporadic and non-threatening. In its wake, the reigning elitist sense of insulation from leftist politics and class based struggles was shattered, ushering instead the rise of the ‘labour question’: a multi-sided and contentious discursive formation that posed concerns centring on either problems for the newly emerging industrial society for collective labour or the problem of collective labour for the new industrial society. Alerted to the disruptive potential of large-scale labour insurgency, the overarching response by America’s political and industrial elite was to hone the means of repression. Public and private arsenals were built and stocked with updated weaponry. Militia units were re-staffed with typically middle-class personnel and sometimes upper class elites. Army officials openly lobbied for strike duty and found themselves in competition with the rise of private police forces such as the Pinkertons.

Reformist impulses only began to gain traction after the Pullman Railway Strike of 1894. Like the Great Strike, Pullman was a violent national affair centred mainly on the railways, this time resulting in thirty-four deaths. Even more alarming to industrialists, Pullman spread to the rails as a sympathy strike and propagated the Socialist career of its leader, Eugene V. Debs. The apparent intractability of labour strife in conjunction with the growing spectre of radicalism propagated a non-statist platform for reform. The efforts crystallised in the formation of the National Civic Federation (NCF) in 1900, an employers’ organisation which exploited philosophical differences between American labour organisations by advocating voluntary recognition of and collective bargaining with non-leftist unions as a means of dissuading militancy and radicalism.
Yet most US capitalists remained ill-disposed to compromise, earning instead an ‘exceptional’ reputation in regards their exuberant defence of the ‘open-shop’ and ‘right to work’. Spearheading these efforts, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) re-orientated itself in 1903 as a counterformation to independent trade unions and became de-facto arch-nemesis to the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The NAM lobbied the government in defence of managerial prerogatives and instructed its members in effective zero-tolerance anti-union tactics. Striking unionists were thus frequently confronted with strike-breakers, the threats of armed guards, court injunctions, and the direct deployment of repressive state agents, propagating much bloodshed.

The US Commission on Industrial Relations convened during an intense period of labour unrest punctuated by the 1910 bombing of the Los Angeles Times building and resultant deaths of twenty persons. The Commission had been proposed by the Republican Taft administration as a means to ostensibly investigate the calamitous state of labour affairs while besmirching organised labour, which had been implicated in the bombing as a means of lashing out against the anti-union sentiments of the paper’s owner. Somewhat ironically, as the Commission dragged on and investigations swelled to include numerous other events such as the Patterson Silk Strike and Ludlow Massacre, its final report identified four major causes of unrest: (1) unjust distribution of wealth; (2) high unemployment; (3) inequality before the law; and (4) the denial of labour’s rights to organise into independent unions and collectively bargain.

Of course, the state had been a key determinant in shaping the very conditions that the Commission seemingly condemned. Sufficient support for labour’s recognition might never have been mustered except for the exigencies of World War I and the Great Depression. The outbreak of the Great War in Europe and subsequent entry of the United States into combat required heretofore unknown levels of co-ordination for the purposes of wartime production. Conservative labour unions were brought into partnership along the lines advocated by the NCF years earlier with the expectation that they would police their own. Hopes that this would be a lasting arrangement were crushed like the many post-war strikes aimed at protecting wartime gains. Picket line bloodshed spiked as US employers fought to implement their ‘American Plan’ for company as opposed to independent unions; and again in the throes of the Great Depression as employers openly resisted legal declarations of labour’s rights to organise and collectively bargain. At least 130 strikers and picketers were killed during the New Deal Era: of whom roughly one third lost their lives after the Supreme Court upheld the Wagner Act in 1937.

Following World War II, America’s picket lines did not erupt with the accustomed sustained violence. Passage of the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act provided the capstone to a legal-juridical regime that obviated key incendiary issues and mollified conflict as US corporations readied for profit during the early stages of Pax Americana. Effective labour tactics such as sympathy strikes, general strikes, wildcat strikes, and sit-down strikes were outlawed; the right to hire replacement workers was legally enshrined; the National Labor Relations Board was established to adjudicate grievances; and union leaders were forced to sign non-Communist affidavits or risk decertification. Leftist inspired leaders had historically been some of the most courageous, inclusive, and successful within the American labour movement. But from the dubious trial and execution of the Chicago anarchists after the 1886 Haymarket Affair, to the World War I era repression of the International Workers of the World (IWW) sponsored strikes, to the Palmer Raids of the 1920s, they were scarcely tolerated if not persecuted or killed. The institutionalisation of labour thus came with a conservative bent, the left forsaken behind its iron gates.

Closing Thoughts

Neither violence nor repression received mention within Werner Sombart’s 1906 classic Why is there no Socialism in the United States?, a seminal statement regarding the laggard state of the American Socialist movement relative to that of Sombart’s native Germany. How much this violence impacted the uniquely conservative political bent of American labour and society remain open topics of debate even to the present. Sombart’s omission might be interpreted as a denial of violent repression’s impact. So, too, he may have implicitly recognised confrontation as a necessary feature of Socialism’s expectant triumph.

We aim to leave no such ambiguity. The epoch of violent contention between capital and labour was largely a product of rather primitive markets in which the rules and rights associated with governing workplace conflict were still hotly contested. But primitive markets and non-institutionalised labour-capital relations existed in other early capitalist nations as well. In the US, the law and repressive apparatus (both state and private) were employed more aggressively to defeat and / or contain the labour movement. Part of this heavier use of repression, both de jure and armed force, was likely due to the perceived threat to capital associated with the rather unique combination of race and ethnic immigration streams populating the labour force. The battle for worker rights was often coupled with other forms of contention over recognition and citizenship rights as well. In addition to the vast number of strike deaths, workers paid, too, with their lives for participating in non-strike labour actions. Between 1916 and 1941, 240 perished in such actions. The overwhelming majority of these victims were either African-American and / or IWW members, suggesting that to be both black and ‘red’...

... Continued on page 28 ...
Over 60 million jobs have been lost since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008. With the addition of new labour market entrants over the next five years, 280 million more jobs need to be created by 2019. Half the world’s workforce are employed in precarious work and one in three jobs pay less than $1.25 per day. To just maintain the status quo 1.8 billion jobs must be created by 2030.

We are seeing levels of inequality in income distribution back to the scale of the 1920s. We are living through a boom period but only for the one percent.

There is a word missing in the world of tomorrow debate – ‘solidarity’. UNI Global Union and its 20 million members stands for solidarity in action.

For more detailed discussion, see the following:

