



May 30, 1937 Massacre at Republic Steel

by William Bork

The 1930's was a period of great economic hardship for the American people, a period of upheaval in the social and political structure. Streets were filled with hungry people waiting in breadlines. During the Great Depression, workers also walked the picket lines demanding their rights under laws passed during the New Deal.

The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), passed in 1933, contained a section guaranteeing to workers a right to organize for the purpose of collective bargaining. Several large and sometimes violent strikes occurred in 1934 involving unions struggling for recognition as collective bargaining agent under the NIRA. Toledo, Minneapolis, and San Francisco were scenes of three of the best known strikes.

The level of strike activity was the highest in American history. Between May, 1933 and July, 1937, 10,000 strikes took place involving some 5,600,000 workers. It was a period of bitter conflict between Capital and Labor.

In May 1935, the NIRA was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court. Its labor provisions, however, were replaced on July 5, 1935 by the National Labor Relations Act, popularly referred to as the Wagner Act.

This act set up elaborate machinery for the determination of collective bargaining agencies and for the protection of labor from unfair practices by employers who might attempt to hinder union organization. By its protection of workers who chose to organize, it went much further than any previous law to encourage a policy of collective bargaining. The steelworkers were among the first to begin organizing under this new law.

The steelworkers received the stimulus for organization from the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), a group of unions which defied the craft orientation of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in November, 1935. The leader of the CIO was the United Mine Workers' president, John L. Lewis. Lewis believed that the mass production industries should be organized on an industrial, rather than a craft basis.

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Under the AFL, union workers in the steel industry would be required to join their respective craft organizations, and these different unions would then negotiate separately with management. Under the CIO plan, all steelworkers would join one union only, and bargain as a united group. The craft approach had failed previously in the steel industry, and the workers were anxious to organize under the CIO with its industry-wide approach.

In June of 1936, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) was set up in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania by the CIO. Its chairman was Philip Murray, a vice president of the United Mine Workers. Many of the SWOC officials at all levels were mine union members and officers. A large number of organizers were sent out into the steel areas and the SWOC newspaper, *Steel Labor*, began to report the progress of the drive to organize.

The economy was improving at this time and the steel industry was running at almost 90% of capacity, employing about 800,000 men. Of the large number of companies producing steel, one stood out as the leader, the United States Steel Corporation, dubbed "Big Steel."

SWOC exerted most of its early efforts toward the U.S. Steel plants. In November, 1936, U.S. Steel granted a wage increase to its employees to try to undermine the union's growing strength. It was to no avail, U.S. Steel workers continued to join up with SWOC.

In January, 1937, a personal meeting between Lewis and U.S. Steel's chairman of the Board, Myron Taylor commenced a series of secret negotiations which culminated on March 1, 1937 with the signing of a contract, the company recognizing SWOC as the bargaining agent for its members only.

The contract made binding arbitration the terminal point of the grievance procedure. It established a common labor wage of \$5.00 a day, and an 8-hour day with time and one-half for overtime work. The SWOC rejoiced over this victory and turned to the rest of the steel industry, fully expecting the "Little Steel" companies to follow the Big Steel lead.

The remainder of the steel industry matched the wage and hour provisions of the U.S. Steel agreement, but went no further than that. While it is true that some small companies signed contracts with SWOC, the Little Steel group opposed recognition of the union and refused to sign a contract, relying on a theory that the Wagner Act required only negotiation and not a written agreement.

The group included Bethlehem Steel Corp., Republic Steel Corp., Youngstown Sheet and Tube, National Steel Corp., Inland Steel Co., and American Rolling Mill Co. Their leaders were entrepreneurial types with strong anti-union attitudes. They believed that unionization would infringe upon what they felt was their management prerogative. One man, in particular, stood out in the vehemence of his anti-union stance, Tom M. Girdler of Republic Steel.

Girdler had worked his way up through the ranks of management for 30 years to become in 1930, the Chairman of the Board of the newly-formed Republic Steel Corp. Girdler totally controlled the operations, and sought to dominate the employees as completely. Through an Employee Representation Plan, or company union, Republic sought to divert the employees' away from true collective bargaining.

Republic used espionage, firing of union men, and hiring of strikebreakers. It built up a stockpile of industrial munitions, including guns, tear gas, and clubs. These munitions were placed in the various plants of Republic Steel in preparation for a strike which the company anticipated.

By May, 1937, SWOC prepared to strike three of the little steel companies, Republic, Youngstown Sheet and Tube and Inland. SWOC felt it had to move against all three simultaneously instead of one at a time.

SWOC had just won a short strike against another steel company, Jones and Laughlin, and the union leaders believed that they had the strength to close down the three companies. The strike was called on May 26, 1937. There were 85,000 steelworkers involved.

Most plants ceased operations at the onset of the strike. Both Inland and Youngstown Sheet and Tube closed their plants and prepared to wait out the strike, which they knew would place a substantial economic burden on the steelworkers, because union strike benefits were very meager.

Mass picket lines were set up by SWOC at these closed plants, hoping to prevent any attempt to reopen them. Some of the Republic Steel plants were completely closed, but a few remained open in the face of the strike. One of these plants which continued production, however limited, was the Republic Steel South Chicago plant.

At this plant up to one-half of Republic's 2,200 employees had joined the strike on Wednesday, May 26, as the walkout began shortly after 3:00 PM. To insure continued production, Republic had brought in food supplies and

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cots. They housed the non-union employees, or scabs as they were known to union members, in a particularly completed wire mill. By housing these men in the plant, the company sought to reduce any effect a mass picket line would have on movement of strike breakers in and out of the gate.

Plant management had also been in close contact with the Chicago Police officials in an effort to insure uninterrupted production.

Whereas police in other strike cities did not interfere initially with picketing, in Chicago the police took an active role from the start of the strike.

As the walkout began, Chicago police entered the plant to clear the union men out and prevent them from encouraging other workers to join them. The strikers gathered in Burley Avenue outside the plant gate. After the arrival of SWOC organizers they began to form a picket line in front of the gate.

Despite the fact that no disturbance had taken place and despite a legal opinion to the effect that police should not interfere with peaceful picketing, the police under the orders of Captain James Mooney moved out through the gate into the street and forcefully broke up the picket line. They pushed it two blocks from the plant gate to 117th Street between Buffalo and Green Bay Avenues, arresting 23 persons when they refused to move.

With this action, the police abandoned any role as impartial law enforcement officers and in the eyes of the strikers became parties to an industrial dispute as agents of Republic Steel.

A strike headquarters was established in Sam's Place, an abandoned tavern and dance hall, at 113th and Green Bay Avenue, about six blocks northeast of the plant gate. A token number of pickets, usually six to eight, were allowed in front of the plant gate by the police, who had further identified themselves with Republic Steel by eating and sleeping in the plant, and by helping to unload supplies for the scabs. It was later learned that they also armed themselves from company stockpiles.

On the basis of newspaper reports that Mayor Edward J. Kelly had said that peaceful picketing would be permitted, the strikers attempted to march to the gate to reinforce the pickets there. They were met at 117th and Green Bay Avenue and turned back without incident. The next day another attempt was made to reinforce the pickets, but with more serious consequences.

At about 5:00 PM, a group of from three to four hundred strikers and some members of the women's auxiliary began another march to the gate. The march moved down Green Bay Avenue to 117th Street and turned west toward Burley Avenue, encountering a few policemen on 117th Street. The marchers continued as the police gave way toward Burley Avenue. When reinforcements arrived, the police line stiffened around Buffalo Avenue. The marchers moved into the police line, whereupon fighting broke out, the police wielding their billy clubs against the marchers, driving them back with a few bloody heads. During the encounter, a couple of policemen had drawn their revolvers without orders and discharged them into the air. This incident carried serious overtones for the immediate future.

Saturday, May 28 was quiet at the plant with only limited picketing. As a protest against the actions of the police, however, District Director Nick Fontecchio, called for a mass meeting at Sam's Place for Sunday, May 30.

Other SWOC local unions in the area were encouraged to send people to the meeting. This included locals from the closed-down plants of Inland Steel and Youngstown Sheet and Tube in nearby Indiana Harbor, where mass picketing had been in effect without police interference. Plans were made within the Republic Steel Local to establish a picketing system with various captains responsible for different mill departments and shifts.

On Saturday, Captain Mooney received an anonymous report that an attempt would be made the next day to invade the plant and drive out the non-union workers. Without checking the rumor with any SWOC official, he ordered 264 policemen to be on duty at Republic Steel on Sunday afternoon. The stage was set for the tragic events of Memorial Day.

May 30, 1937 was a sunny, hot day with afternoon temperatures reaching 88 degrees. By 3:00 PM, a crowd of around 1500 strikers and sympathizers had gathered at Sam's Place for the protest meeting. About 15 percent of the crowd was made up of women and children. SWOC Organizer Joe Weber was chairman of the meeting. He introduced Leo Krzycki, an Amalgamated Clothing Workers organizer on loan to the SWOC. Krzycki's remarks concerned the national labor picture, the crowd applauding loudly at the mention of President Roosevelt and John L. Lewis. Krzycki told the crowd several anecdotes and concluded on an upbeat note, urging the crowd to support the right to organize.

Nick Fontecchio next reviewed the successes of the SWOC drive in the District, pointing to the increase in membership from 65 in July 1936 to 75,000 members at that time. He referred to the situation in Indiana Harbor

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where mass picketing was taking place without incident, while in Chicago police were defending Republic Steel which Fontecchio said, was violating the Wagner Act.

Weber read several resolutions to be sent to government officials in protest of police conduct at Republic Steel South Chicago plant. These resolutions were approved by acclamation. A member of the crowd then asked for recognition and moved that a march be undertaken to the plant gate to establish mass picketing. The motion was approved, and about 1,000 persons made a loose formation behind two American flags and began to march south on Green Bay Avenue. Their route changed, however, and they moved down a dirt road across a marshy prairie at 114th and Green Bay toward 117th and Burley Avenue. They moved across the prairie in the hot sun, chanting "CIO, CIO!"

Meanwhile, the police under Captain Mooney had formed a line in 117th Street between Green Bay and Burley Avenues. When they saw the marchers turn off Green Bay and begin to cross the prairie, Mooney ordered the police to a position on Burley Ave.

About 200 policemen in double file were waiting for the marchers with billy clubs drawn. Some of the officers carried non-regulation clubs obtained from Republic Steel, and some were equipped with tear gas from Republic stockpiles as well.

The marchers approached the police line to within three feet and began to spread out along the police line as those from the rear kept moving forward to see what was happening. Marchers implored the police to let them through to set up their picket line, demanding that their rights be recognized.

The confrontation continued for several minutes. Some marchers picked up branches and rocks from the prairie. Foul language came from both sides and the tension mounted. Several marchers in the front line, apparently convinced they would not let through, dejectedly turned to move back toward Sam's place. Suddenly the tension snapped.

Unfortunately the newsreel film in mute on the question of how the violence started. The cameraman, Orland Lippert, testified that he was changing lenses at the time, a procedure that he estimated took seven seconds.

At Hearings under Senator Robert LaFollette, the following points emerged. Police on the east end of the line moved to cut off any possible attempt by

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the marchers to outflank the police line. Some marchers were beginning to move back toward Sam's Place when a stick rose from the rear of the marchers' line and flew toward the police. Almost simultaneously, tear gas bombs were thrown by police at the marchers.

As several more objects flew toward the police line, an officer in the rear rank of police drew his revolver without orders and shot into the air. Suddenly, policemen in the front ranks drew their revolvers and fired point blank into the retreating marchers. Approximately 200 shots rang out. Within 15 seconds the shooting had ended, but the violence was not over.

The entire police line now moved forward wielding billy clubs against any in their path. Marchers who had dropped to the ground to avoid the bullets were struck repeatedly by policemen. Even women suffered from these indiscriminate beatings. The film clearly shows Lupe Marshall, a social worker from Chicago's Hull House, being prodded and arrested.

This period of beatings lasted for several minutes after which indiscriminate arrests were made. Patrol wagons designed for eight prisoners were filled with as many as sixteen, the seriously wounded thrown in without any attempt to treat or dress their wounds. The treatment of the wounded was characterized as callous indifference by the Senate Committee, which declared that "wounded prisoners of war might have expected greater solicitude." Patrol wagons with wounded took roundabout routes to hospitals.

Four marchers had been fatally shot and six others were mortally wounded. Thirty others had suffered gunshot wounds. Twenty-eight required hospitalization for lacerations and contusions, and about thirty others received some sort of emergency medical treatment. The gunshot wounds of the dead were all back or side wounds, only four were classified as frontal wounds. Police injuries were comparatively minor. Thirty-five policemen reported injuries with no gunshot wounds and only three policemen requiring overnight hospital care.

Reactions to the Massacre occurred immediately following the event. Sympathetic protestors clogged the business district in South Chicago and angry strikers were almost ready to proclaim war against the police. The Chicago press, particularly the Chicago Tribune, branded the marchers as Communists who had attacked the police with clubs, bricks, and guns in a plan to get into the plant and throw out the non-union workers.

The Lafollette Committee investigating the event came to four major conclusions about the Memorial Day Massacre.

First: the police had no right to limit the number of pickets in front of the gate as long as they were peaceful; and that the march would have resulted in peaceful picketing in front of the gate, not in a plant invasion.

Second: assuming that the police were justified in halting the march, it should have been done with a minimum of violence and not in the haphazard manner with which the confrontation was handled.

Third: the marchers' provocation of the police did not go beyond the use of abusive language and the throwing of isolated missiles; and that the force used by the police to disperse the crowd was far in excess of that required.

Fourth: the bloody consequences were avoidable on the part of the police.

A commission of leading citizens of the Chicago area was also formed to investigate the Massacre. The commission grew out of a protest meeting held on June 8, 1937 at the Civic Opera House. The crowd, estimated at 4,000 people, heard Paul H. Douglas, a professor at the University of Chicago, later to become a United States Senator of Illinois.

The Massacre was only a part of the much larger story of the Little Steel Strike. The nationwide death toll in the strike reached sixteen as six other strikers lost their lives on a picket line in Ohio. All these incidents took place outside Republic Steel plants and involved strikers and local law enforcement agencies.

The deaths, back-to-work movements, and anti-union propaganda combined to demoralize the striking steelworkers. The strike had to be called off. In this situation, the SWOC turned to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB).

The process of filing a complaint with the NLRB consumed a great deal of time due to opposing legal action taken by the companies. In August 1941, however, Republic Steel and other Little Steel Companies agreed to cease and desist from committing unfair labor practices. The Labor Board provided for a series of membership card cross-checks and secret ballot elections which later established bargaining rights for SWOC.

One year later, "Little Steel" companies signed their first contracts (under compulsion by the War Labor Board) with the new United Steelworkers of

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America. Little Steel had only delayed the march of unionism. The sacrifice of the workers of 1937 had not been in vain.

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