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1919 Steel Strike

Immigrant, Black, Red, and Female

One hundred years ago, there was a labor relations' crisis rooted in

- the exploitation of labor and the suppression of civil liberties. The two went hand in hand in mill towns and coal patches
- the intentional and purposeful inflaming of anti-immigrant sentiment
- fierce struggles over women's rights and a woman's proper role in society
- the cynical and sinister manipulation of racial divisions and ethnic hostility

The conjunction of these factors led to a tragic year of social upheaval and violence. The centennial has been largely ignored. This despite the fact that 1919 illuminates issues that endure in 2019.

Central to both - a hundred years ago and now - are two very different questions:

Who is an American?

What is an American?

The rapid shrinking of production and employment at the end of the First World War exacerbated the stark contradictions of war capitalism. A vast accumulation of wealth at the top of society rested uneasily on masses of workers who faced inflated prices, wage stagnation and increasing unemployment. Repression in the name of Americanism and patriotism had been directed against anti-war activists and a wide spectrum of voices calling for peace in a more just and egalitarian world. Attacks on progressive, feminist, socialist, anarchist, black nationalist and embryonic communist organizations as well as on Southern and Eastern European ethnic societies and labor organizations intensified in 1919 as worker uprisings erupted on the West Coast and in the giant steel mills of the Chicago and Pittsburgh regions. Racial tensions escalated as the competition for jobs increased.

Corporate interests undermined a free press by extending control over once independent sources of information. In Pittsburgh the press was virulently anti-foreign born ignoring the terrible hours and working conditions immigrant steel workers faced and the contribution that they had made to the war effort. Despite waging a war presented as a defense of democracy and the rule of law, free speech and civil liberties were brutally suppressed in the coalfields and industrial valleys of Pennsylvania. US Steel controlled up to 25,000 armed official and unofficial deputies in the Mon Valley alone. Intense repression provoked fierce resistance and stirred debate about the meaning of America and democracy. 1919 provides a disturbing template against which to ponder our present situation.

Prior to World War I, the Progressive movement exposed and tried to correct the egregious evils of the corporate order. Crystal Eastman's *Work Accidents and the Law* documenting 526 traumatic industrial deaths in a single year in Allegheny County, including 195 deaths in the steel industry alone, gave a powerful impetus to workers' compensation laws and improved machine safety standards. Frances Perkins, witnessing the horrors of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in lower Manhattan, campaigned for the adoption of strict safety codes in building construction in a life dedicated to significantly strengthening worker protections, raising the

living standards of the poor, and eliminating child labor. Sinclair Lewis's expose *The Jungle* led to food safety reforms. Widespread muckraking in the dark corners of American capitalism stimulated civic engagement.

As war broke out in Europe in August of 1914, the forty-year seemingly endless flow of cheap labor, primarily from eastern and southern Europe was disrupted at the same time that industrial production, stimulated by war, increased. Workers gained unheard of economic leverage. In 1915 and 1916, two million workers participated in nearly five thousand strikes. With labor demand high, dissatisfied workers could quit and change jobs individually or strike collectively. Confronted by a horrific war caused largely by ruling class arrogance and stupidity, competing radical visions flourished supplanting earlier goals envisioning moderate reform of the system.

Before the war in 1912, the American Socialist Party attained the highest vote percentage in its history with its candidate Eugene Debs, in a four-way race for president, running a strong second or third in many industrial valley towns around Pittsburgh (Irwin Marcus with news of Whitaker). Teddy Roosevelt's Bull Moose Republican insurgency cut into incumbent president Howard Taft's vote more than Debs took from the professorial Woodrow Wilson - giving the relatively unknown Democratic governor the presidency. An idealist as well as a racist, Wilson's consciousness was profoundly shaped by the South's Civil War experience. In Europe, Socialist parties split - majorities generally supporting nationalism in a time of war. However, Eugene Debs and the American Socialist Party's consistent opposition to the war provoked fierce governmental repression as the United States geared up for and then entered the conflict.

While the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) played a major role late in the McKees Rocks strike of 1909 (something of a dress rehearsal for the Great Steel Strike a decade later), and several factions of the IWW were active in the Westinghouse strikes of 1914 and 1916, the great steel organizing effort in 1919 was a national effort by the skilled trades dominated American Federation of Labor. This was a source of strength and legitimacy, but also of constant complication for leaders trying to envision, let alone organize, an enormous industrial sector within a craft union structure and governance.

William Z. Foster, fresh from successful organizing efforts in Chicago's slaughter and meatpacking houses, was the lead organizer of the American Federation of Labor's effort to unionize steel, the pinnacle of American corporate power. Foster was a brilliant tactician who believed that radicals had to bore from within institutional unionism, scorning "romantics" like Debs and the IWW who advocated revolutionary unions. A 1912 article by Foster endorsing a radical syndicalist philosophy of direct action and workers' control was widely excerpted by Pittsburgh newspapers in 1919 to "prove" the foreign and un-American character of the AFL's effort to organize steel. Foster disingenuously claimed that he had become "a little less impatient, a little less extreme" and was "an advocate of the unionism we find in America and England." Subsequently, he became a stalwart leader of the U.S. Communist Party and supporter of Stalin - the ultimate institutionalist.

Critical to organizing the Mon Valley, the very center of corporate resistance, was to establish an organizational presence in the face of the perhaps the greatest display of private force masquerading as public law and order in American history. Estimates ranged from 10,000 to 25,000 armed deputies that US Steel could mobilize regionally to lock down the mill towns. Meeting halls were refused to organizers, public rallies were harassed, sometimes attacked, and foreign languages were forbidden in public gatherings. Pennsylvania's mounted

constabulary patrolled mill towns riding down even small groups of people on the street. The imposition of the swing shift on the majority of steel workers after the Homestead Strike of 1892 effectively separated them from community life and political participation.

The strike in the Mon Valley was very largely a Slavic strike as immigrant workers proved to be united in what John Fitch called a “strike for freedom.” He wrote: “Labor organizations as much as any other group made it possible to win the war...Are steelworkers to continue to be subject to a regime of absolute dictatorship, with no opportunity to express themselves as to the conditions under which they must work, with discharge the penalty if they join a union?” The press was uniformly solidly pro-company running full page ads in multiple languages challenging the Americanism of the foreign born strikers. The humorous aspect was that while papers in the Pittsburgh district were reporting little impact and very low numbers of strikers, they subsequently reported thousands returning to work, many times the number reported on strike.

The strike in the Pittsburgh region was broken by the enormous power that the steel corporations exercised over political and community life. As Mother Jones said: “Czar Gary met his workers as is the customary way with tyrants. He could not shoot them down as did Czar Nicholas when petitioned by his peasants. But he ordered forth his two faithful generals: fear and starvation, one to clutch at the worker’s throat and the other at his stomach and the stomach of his children.”

The massive flow of immigration that fed rapid industrial expansion from 1870 to 1910 led to Allegheny County approaching its historic peak of 50% foreign born by 1910. In that same year, the foreign born constituted 68% of the steel workforce. By 1920, the United States also became a majority urban society for the first time. While eastern and southern European immigration slowed dramatically during WWI and was radically restricted by the 1924 Immigration Act, African American migration to the north and urban areas nationwide accelerated. The relentless extension of segregation and white supremacy to all aspects of black life combined with the 20-year boll weevil infestation of the southern cotton crop, pushed black migration toward feeding the insatiable hunger for labor in the wartime industrial sectors.

Perhaps the 1919 strike’s most bitter fruit derived from the pitting of African American workers against Slavic workers. More than sixty years later political tensions between Slovaks and blacks still dominated Braddock politics. Because of the exclusionary practices of many white AFL craft unions, blacks saw little room for advancement through the labor movement. Additionally, until the advent of the Depression and the coming of the New Deal transformed the Democratic party, blacks in the 1920s provided a reliably Republican voting bloc that in the short run buttressed corporate power.

CMU professor Joe Trotter in his recent book *Workers on Arrival* demonstrates with meticulous scholarship how black labor constantly probed and pushed through cracks and gaps in the white supremacy system both north and south seeking economic opportunity. African American historian Vincent Harding likened the relentless black push for economic opportunity and community survival to “a long continuous movement flowing like a river toward the ocean of humankind’s most courageous hopes for freedom and integrity.” The 1919 steel strike offered opportunity for racial advancement. Blacks and white ethnic industrial workers were both acting rationally within the confines of the system that cynically exploited black hunger for opportunity against identical desires of the immigrant worker.

African American writer, William Attaway, in his novel *Blood on the Forge* writes about the strike in Duquesne Pa. from an African American perspective. Blacks were imported in large numbers and given jobs; some were even deputized and provided weapons to patrol immigrant strikers' neighborhoods. The achievement of industrial employment, along with unimaginable power and authority delegated by the boss, was a powerful incentive to become a strikebreaker. Attaway wrote that strikebreaking "allowed African-American men to challenge openly white society's image of them as obsequious, cowardly and lacking the ability to perform well under pressure. It enabled them to violate the prevailing norms of conduct for black men in the South, which required that they act deferentially in the presence of whites, avoid eye contact, and step aside on the sidewalk."

Women's disenfranchisement was not addressed when the 15th amendment (that became part of the Constitution on March 30, 1870, 150 years ago this coming spring) explicitly affirmed voting rights without regard to "race, color or previous condition of servitude," (but not including gender). Finally after sustained struggle women gained the right to vote nationally with the 19th amendment in 1920. Astute corporate leaders saw at least short term gain for their continued political control in acceding to female suffrage. Initially, middle and upper class women voted in a higher percentage than poor and immigrant women, but by the 1930s, voting percentage among immigrants and the children of immigrants increased significantly. Equally important, black voters were abandoning the party of Lincoln (Robert Vann of the *Pittsburgh Courier* said: "Turn the picture of Abraham Lincoln to the wall"). They were enlisting side by side with white workers in industrial unions. By 1936, African Americans overwhelmingly supported the New Deal of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Women's importance in the labor movement has been greatly undervalued. As someone with a wife and four children at the time, who was on strike with UE 610 for nearly seven months at Union Switch & Signal in 1981-82, I can assert with authority that no sustained labor conflict can be maintained, let alone won, without the firm support of the family on whom the greatest burden falls. This was especially true in miners' strikes where violence and home expulsions were routine. However, women played more than critical supportive roles in regional labor struggles. From the 1845 and 1848 Cotton Mill strikes that won the first restrictions on child labor and working hours in Pennsylvania, through the fierce women of Homestead during the 1892 strike, to Crystal Eastman's compassionate scholarship, to Mother Jones' unflinching courage supporting strikes and fighting child labor, and by the thousand woman picket line led by Bridget Kenny, the "Joan of Arc of the strikers during the 1914 Westinghouse strike, women have played leading as well as critical supporting roles in labor's struggles.

Two heroic women linked to the great steel strike forcefully asserted their civil liberties, their right to speak without governmental permission. In 1919 in Homestead, Mother Jones was arrested for addressing a large crowd on 8th Avenue. When told by the judge that she needed a permit to speak, she famously replied: she had such a permit – "signed by Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams."

The day after Mother Jones' court appearance for unpermitted speech, Fannie Sellins, the articulate female organizer considered by many to be her successor as the coal miners' angel and female public defender, was murdered in cold blood by corporate thugs with the full complicity of the sheriff of Allegheny County. Recently on August 26, a hundred people gathered for a three part commemoration on the centennial of her assassination: first, by the Alle-Kiski Valley community at the site of her murder in Natrona Heights; second at a dinner at the United Steel Worker Local 1196 union hall in Brakenridge, that she died trying to organize; finally, a graveside memorial at Union Cemetery in Arnold led by the United Mine Workers.

Fannie Sellins led a year-long strike of garment workers in St. Louis and in 1912 was hired by the United Mine Workers and brought to Pittsburgh. Sellins supported union miners and their families during strikes, lockouts, explosions, cave-ins and joblessness. She described her work as the distribution of “*clothing and food to starving women and babies, to assist poverty stricken mothers and bring children into the world, and to minister to the sick and close the eyes of the dying.*” Forbidden by court injunction to speak on behalf of the miners’ union in Collier, West Virginia, Fannie asserted her American rights and refused to be silenced, She was jailed in 1916 after speaking at a miners’ rally. Offered her freedom if she promised never to return to Colliers, she said:

I am free and have a right to walk or talk any place in this country as long as I obey the law. I have done nothing wrong. The only wrong they can say I’ve done is to take shoes to the little children in Colliers who needed shoes. And when I think of their bare little feet, blue with the cruel blast of winter, it makes me determined that if it be wrong to put shoes on those little feet, then I will continue to do wrong as long as I have hands and feet to crawl to Colliers

It is significant that the memory of Fannie Sellins has been preserved from below, from the grassroots, not by academic historians. Her story resides in the memory of the community, local steelworkers and coal miners. The centennial history of the UMW, “United We Stand,” fails to mention Sellins. David Brody in his pioneering work on 1919 strike does not mention her either. Brody reports an attempt by Foster and Fitzpatrick to deliver a symbolic appeal for negotiations to US Steel headquarters in Pittsburgh that they knew would be rejected on the very same day and almost at the same hour that Fannie Sellins was being shot and clubbed to death in Natrona Heights less than twenty miles away – this silence, despite the fact that William Z Foster called her the most effective organizer in the Pittsburgh district.

Philip Murray, who was in the process of moving Sellins from his UMW District 5 staff to the AFL steel organizing effort when she was murdered, erected a stunning twelve-foot grave marker for Sellins and Joseph Starzeleski, the mineworker picket who she tried to save from being beaten to death, depicting an woman leaning in sorrow against a cross with mine worker written poetry and the epitaph:

They, fell a victim to the lust of greed.
They, whose blood ran hot with labor’s need.
They, foully murdered August 28, 1919.

On the first anniversary of her death, ten thousand people were in attendance at the dedication of the statue marking the two graves.

Murray held memorials for Sellins in the 1930s and for three decades, Steelworker activist and one time USW local 1196 president Tony Slomkoski kept the memory of Fannie Sellins alive with annual commemorations. A Pennsylvania Historical Marker was dedicated in 1985. The current president of USW 1196, Todd Barbiaux plans to move the large rock - where the head of the mortally wounded (shot three times in the back) Fannie Sellins was crushed with a truncheon - down the hill to the Brackenridge union hall to ensure its preservation.

The brutal conditions in the nation’s steel mills spurred some religious voices to be raised in support of workers’ demands for fewer hours of work and safer working conditions. Clerical support inside the Catholic Church depended on the ethnic makeup of the parish. Fr. Molyneux, pastor of a church in Braddock donated by Charles Schwab of the Edgar Thomson US Steel plant, attacked the immigrant workers as “outsiders, not an element of our

community...you can't reason with these people...knock them down." On the other hand, Father Kazinci, the Slovak pastor of St. Michael's directly across from the mill, provided the only refuge and meeting place for strikers in the Mon Valley. Father K became a powerful voice for non-violent resistance to the steel corporation dominance. "Against them (the immigrant strikers) are violence, lies, repression. They have only their patience, their faith, their endurance."

The bitter 1919 strike defeat bore fruit in 1923 as US Steel and other steel makers were forced to go from a two shift 84-hour week to a three-shift 56-hour work week. This represented an astonishing improvement in workers and their families' lives. Two powerful reports by the Protestant Interchurch World Movement on the suppression of civil liberties and manipulation of the press during the steel strike greatly helped expose the brutal tactics of the steel corporations and create the public outcry that pushed President Harding to urge the corporations to cut the hours of work.

In 1909 President Barrack Obama was due to address the AFL-CIO convention in Pittsburgh. I got a call asking me for a one-page outline of major labor events in Pittsburgh history that the president could use. When I sent in my list, I got a frantic call from Washington saying: "Charlie, four out of the five events you describe were defeats!" I thought, but did not say – "Like the early Christians: The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Organized labor's defeat in fierce and sustained battle has at times materially benefited the working class as a whole. Other employers fearing similar resistance back off and improve conditions. This was the case after the great labor upheaval around the 1877 Railroad strike when many employers reduced work hours fearing rising worker militancy. The incremental but uneven advances that followed led workers to unite militantly around the goal of the eight-hour day in the 1880s.

The 1919 steel strike in the Pittsburgh district was centered in the Eastern European immigrant experience of the Slovak, Polish, Croatian, Rusyn (or Ruthenian), Ukrainian, Russian and Serbian communities. Two decades after the 1919 struggle two great artistic achievements gave voice to the "Hunky" labor experience. Croatian Maxo Vanka's magnificent murals at St. Nicholas in Millvale combined socialist class-consciousness with a mystical religious celebration of the dignity and power of womanhood. Thomas Bell (Belejckak)'s *Out of this Furnace* is generally recognized as the greatest work of literature to come out of our region. Bell expressed a deep-seated love of American ideals that emerged from his engagement in the steel union's struggle for worker rights and civil liberties against the powerful forces of greed and domination that compose our nation's dark side.

...it wasn't where you were born or how you spelled your name or where your father had come from. It was the way you thought and felt about certain things. About freedom of speech and the equality of men and the importance of having one law – the same law – for rich and poor, for the people you liked and the people you didn't like. About the right of every man to live his life as he thought best, his right to defend it if anyone tried to change it and his right to change it himself if he liked some other way of living better.

In conclusion:

The questions "Who is an American?" and "What is an American?" became central political issues in the first half of the 20th Century that received sharp definition in the 1919 strike. They have reemerged early in 21st Century.

Who is an American? The ‘100% American’ questions the civic aptitude of the descendants of natives or slaves, or Orientals, or Mexicans, or Hunkies, or Catholics, etc. However, unlike nations where one’s ancestors lived in the same location for many hundreds of years, a degree of insecurity should accompany the demand for a pedigree in the United States given our anti-royalist, democratic, revolutionary, immigrant roots. Only Native Americans have any degree of antiquity to their claim on this land.

“What is an American?” on the other hand, goes to the question of meaning. Is an American someone who has loyalty to a set of ideals including freedom of speech, assembly and religion, that strives to extend the blessings of freedom and justice to all, who pledges allegiance to a government that provides for the common defense and promotes the general welfare? Or does being an American come wrapped in an imperial flag, demanding unregulated private control of the nation’s wealth and lifeblood, and the use of its military to pursue ambitions of expansion and domination at home and abroad?

Who is an American? That is a question susceptible to many perspectives and points of view, but the general parameters were written in the blood of more than 700,000 dead in a Civil War that abolished legalized slavery, recognized birthright citizenship, asserted equal protection of the law to all citizens, and guaranteed the sacred right to vote without regard to race or color.

What is an American? on the other hand, goes to the question of meaning. What do we stand for? That is the question moving forward.

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