

The McKees Rocks Strike, 1909

Since Pennsylvania railroads had switched from wooden to pressed steel cars, business at the Pressed Steel Car Company had been booming. With orders for 15,000 steel cars on the books, and with working conditions so dangerous that the plant had earned the nickname “the slaughterhouse”, the Slavic immigrant workers were overwhelmed. On July 13, 1909, 600 Pressed Steel Car employees went on strike, supported and encouraged by the Industrial Workers Union. The company president quickly fired and replaced all the workers. But the next day IWW representatives led thousands of immigrant workers in support of the strike which initiated a 2 month long work action that was marked by numerous violent altercations. For 5 weeks, strikers, replacement workers, company officials, and police men met, argued, and occasionally skirmished. On August 22, a State Constable shot and killed a striker. The standoff quickly turned into a riot. Seeking revenge, a bloody battle ensued through the night in which more than 500 shots were fired in 2 hours and where the dead and dying lay in the streets while ambulance crews risked their lives to save them. By the time the riot was over, 12 men were dead and 50 were wounded. The strike ended on September 8 when Pressed Steel Car agreed to the posting of wage rates, the end of abuses in company housing practices, and a wage increase for workers. The following primary source is an article written by American socialist newspaper editor, Marxist theoretician, and trade union organizer Daniel De Leon in response to the strike and the leadership of the IWW.

An Open Letter to Workingmen In and Around McKees Rocks, PA. by Daniel De Leon http://www.slp.org/pdf/de_leon/eds1909/oct16_1909.pdf

WORKINGMEN in and around McKees Rocks:— Your strike against the manifold despotism and chicanery of the Compressed Steel Car Company brought to light a state of things that was infinitely more distressing than even the conditions that you bravely revolted against. The real thorn in the flank of the Working Class, however galling, however intolerable the thorn, is not the misconduct of the modern capitalist. That thorn can be extracted. Indeed, the development of the thorn is a necessary condition precedent to the emancipation of the proletariat. So long as that thorn is only at the stage of small prickles, the issue that confronts the proletariat is bound to escape them; the opportunity to pull out the thorn is not yet there. The time is not, then, as yet ripe. In this sense, the fully concentrated thorn that galls you to-day was not, is not an unalloyed evil. The real thorn in the flank of the Working Class to-day is the disorganized condition that it finds itself in—a condition that utterly disables the proletariat to grip the capitalist thorn, extract it, and cast it off. Your strike brought this lamentable state of things to light—and it brought to light the circumstances that palsy your arms and hands. No sooner had your strike broken out than two sets of birds of evil omen to the Proletariat flocked around, and were allowed by your successively to perch upon your shoulders—the Pure and Simple Politician, and then the Pure and Simple Dynamiter. The Pure and Simple Politician turned up in the feathers of the so-called Socialist party. You were not and are not now organized in the Civic Federationized of Gompers and Mitchell and Duncan and Morrison Craft Unionism. That was well for you. The Craft Union system of economic organization, with its antiimmigration, high admission dues, and other such principles and practices is a Labor-dislocator. It is what the Wall Street Journal named it with glowing enthusiasm, “the bulwark of American Capitalism,” and what the Socialist Berlin Vorwaerts recently stigmatized it—“deadwood.” Whether accidentally or otherwise, you were fortunate in not starting handicapped by affiliation with such a body. However, you did not know

that the Pure and Simple Socialist party politician is bone of the bone of Craft Unionism, and flesh of its flesh, fusing with capitalist politicians as the Socialist party did this very year in St. Louis, and, as it has just done in your own State, by seeking the aid of capitalist officials against the appearance of the Socialist Labor Party on the ballot under its own name. Not knowing the oneness in spirit of Craft Unionism and the Pure and Simple Socialist party politician you gave an ear to his siren song—at least for a while, long enough to cause you to lose valuable time by keeping you in false gaze. Then came fluttering down upon you the Pure and Simple Dynamiter. He turned up in the stolen feathers of the name of the Industrial Workers of the World. The I.W.W. was summoned into existence by a Manifesto, published in January, 1905, which set its finger, among the evils of the day, upon the disunited and scattered forces of the proletariat on the POLITICAL as well as on the ECONOMIC field. The organization was constructed six months later upon the broad and sound foundations furnished by experience; and it did so in the teeth of opposition and manoeuvres conducted by Anarchists and Craft Unionists in Committee and on the Convention floor. In one short sentence the I.W.W. expressed the practical experience of the Labor Movement. Its Preamble declared that the exploitation of the Working Class would continue until its members came together “ON THE POLITICAL AS WELL AS ON THE INDUSTRIAL FIELD.” That was the I.W.W. The birds of ill omen who roosted upon you under the name of the I.W.W. struck out the word “political” from their Preamble; nor did the sincere ones among them leave any doubt upon what they meant, and mean. By their denunciation of the ballot they pronounced themselves—DYNAMITERS. The militant workingman can not, at this late date, surely not in America, any longer entertain any confused notions upon the mission of physical force in society, especially in a revolutionary movement. Right, without the physical force of Might, is a mock scare-crow for Wrong to roost upon. No more than the capitalist can maintain his “God-ordained” system without Force, can the Proletariat emancipate itself without Force, and maintain its emancipation. Force is a social, it is a natural necessity. But there is Force and Force—according to circumstances. The Force that circumstances demand is ORGANIZED FORCE. Organized military Force is beyond the reach of the Proletariat, especially the American proletariat, which, differently from the European Proletariat, is not, through compulsory military service, drilled in military tactics. Military, or destructive, organized Force being out of the question, the only destructive Force left is unorganized destructive Force. Unorganized destructive Force fatedly lands in DYNAMITE—the individual bomb, fired at random by individuals—a flash in the pan, from which the proletariat can expect everything, except its emancipation, and which lights the way to the Proletarian camp for the SLUMS—those jackals that hang on the rear and flanks of the Proletarian Army. Of the vilest of omens to you are the dynamiters who flocked to your strike. Pure and Simple Ballotism and Pure and Simple Bombism are twin harpies that screech their discordant notes over the Labor or Socialist Movement of the land. The ear that you successively gave to these twin birds of prey upon you brought to light the really most distressing of the thorns in your flanks—your disorganized condition. As completely disorganized for the work of its emancipation as the Proletariat is if organized in Craft Unions, just so disorganized is it if it allows itself to be a prey to Pure and Simple Politicianism, or Pure and Simple Bombism. So long as a workingman will listen to either, except to contemn it, he is bound to remain essentially disorganized for all practical purpose. The Proletariat is organized only when in the bona fide I.W.W.—the economic organization that seeks to unify the workers upon both the political and the economic field—the economic organization that, through its industrial structure, furnishes the all-sufficient Force for the revolutionary act of enforcing the fiat of the revolutionary ballot by overthrowing the modern

robber burg of the Political State, and rearing on its ruins the Industrial or Socialist Republic—the economic body that the Socialist Labor Party alone, by its literature and propaganda, in the past as now, agitates and educates for.