

## **The Literary Club: 11/28/11 Budget Paper**

### **“A Power Clash”**

A never-ending confrontation in American society has been the battle between Management and Labor over the benefits of the capitalist system. In the private sector there is now an informal truce in which hard bargaining results in terms that can only be granted if the results will not negatively affect the health and growth of the business. At the same time, the rewards for labor must be attractive enough to ensure a skilled and motivated work force. Work stoppages, be they lockouts or strikes, are usually avoided today by both parties. It all sounds simple, but we have reached this healthy standoff only after many years of strife. The most contentious period fell between the fifty years from the end of the Civil War to the start of World War I.

During that time immigrants, almost all from Europe, flooded into the country. They were hungry for work at any wage. But they often discovered the price they had to pay was too great in low wages and abysmal, often dangerous working conditions. To counter the power of the capitalists and their managers, the workers turned to socialism and extremism. The new industries, expanding at a rapid rate, sought to protect their position through laws, lobbyists, and lawyers. And they were much better at that game than the workers and their usually feeble unions. So the laborers turned to tried and true methods to put forward their aims – violence and terror.

Three examples stand out. In the anthracite region of Pennsylvania in the late 1860's and early 1870's a group of workers with the name *Molly Maguires* terrified management. Their name came from the widow who railed at the rent system in her native Ireland in the 1840's. She

was a barbaric and picturesque character. Under her petticoat she carried two pistols strapped to her stout thighs. Her special aversion in the Old Country was for the landlords, agents, bailiffs, and process servers. Her hatred was expressed by beating them up or murdering them. She did this with her own hands or through her “boys”, who called themselves *Molly Maguires* or *Mollies* for short.

If a landlord or his agent evicted a peasant who was not making his rent payments, that person was as good as dead. Eventually, the man’s corpse would be found in some ditch or even on the floor of his own house. Finally the authorities, at the urging of desperate land owners began to prosecute Molly and her boys until in the 1850’s hordes of them, including Molly herself, emigrated to America. Many sought work in the Pennsylvania coal mines. These *Molly Maguires* became fiercer here than in the Old Country. They were not organized as a union, but rather as a secret society. At the height of their power in the 1870’s, their presence in the coal regions became a byword for terror.

Their killings were performed in a cold, deliberate, almost impersonal, manner. The *Molly* who wanted a boss assassinated reported his grievance in a prescribed manner to the local committee. If the group approved a request, as it usually did, two or more *Mollies* from another county were assigned to do the job. Being unknown, they could not be easily identified. In 1875, after a number of especially gruesome murders, several members of the gang were arrested and tried. Pinkerton detectives, who had infiltrated the *Mollies*, were key witnesses. In the course of the next few years, ten *Mollies* were executed, and fourteen sent to prison for long terms, breaking their grip.

This victory for law and order shortly became sour for both the new industrial might of the country and the labor movement. Over expansion brought on the panic of 1873 that lasted six years. Hundreds and thousands were thrown out of work. Wages were reduced causing prolonged and desperate strikes. Every one of these failed. By 1880, wages were cut almost in half. Labor organizations went out of existence. In New York City alone trade union membership dropped from 45,000 to 5,000. There were no leaders to lead them, and no workers to pay the dues. Then came another import from Europe, Johann Most, with a revolutionary background and eighteen months of imprisonment in his resume. He became the leader of the extremists. His cry was “Extirpate the miserable brood”, meaning all exploiters of the masses.

And the battle raged on. A second tragic confrontation took place in May 1886. A group of trade unions started to campaign for an eight hour day. Eight hour leagues were formed in cities throughout the country, and huge labor rallies were held in the Fall of 1885 and Winter and Spring of 1886. Employers determined they would grant no such concession. It all came to a head in Chicago when a general strike was called.

The McCormick Reaper Company had locked out its workers three months earlier and brought in readily available replacements. The out-of-work men held a mass meeting near the plant on May 3. A hot tongued union organizer was addressing the group when the factory whistle blew and out poured the scabs, done with the day’s labor. A pitched battle ensued with fists, stones, sticks, and bricks. A few shots were fired. Then the police arrived. Opening fire on the crowd, they killed several men in a few minutes and wounded many more. The union leaders were outraged, and rushed out a circular named *REVENGE*. The streets were soon flooded with these leaflets.

That evening, some three thousand men, women, and children gathered in the same square adjacent to the McCormick plant. The police stood by waiting for trouble. But the speeches had lost their violence, perhaps due to the weather. Drops of rain fell. A cold wind blew off the lake carrying dark, threatening clouds. People were beginning to go home, lest they be caught in the storm. At ten o'clock the mayor of Chicago, who was in attendance, remarked, "Nothing is likely to occur to require interference" and left to go home.

But less than fifteen minutes later the police inspector in charge ordered out his entire force of 176 men to march to the square and demanded that the mob disband. Who or what motivated him to do so remains unanswered. The captain in command brought his police force within a few feet of the thinning crowd. He ordered that they peaceably disperse. Intense silence followed. Then suddenly a blinding flash, a cloud of smoke, a terrific detonation and loud screams. Someone had hurled a bomb. Within two or three minutes firing broke out from both sides. Sixty-seven police were wounded and seven killed. The workers' casualties were possibly three times as heavy. The number was never determined.

A Grand Jury indicted eight union leaders on the charge of murder. Not that any of the eight were accused of having thrown the bomb, but rather that their inflammatory speeches and editorials had prompted the bomb thrower to act. Three and one half months later, seven of the eight were found guilty and sentenced to hang. In the end, the Illinois governor commuted the sentence of two to life in prison – a third committed suicide in his cell. The final four were hung. Each made a brief, stirring statement from the gallows.

By that time a new means of destruction was at hand. Back in 1846 an Italian inventor named Ascanio Sobrero created an explosive liquid by treating glycerol with a mixture of nitric

and sulfuric acid. He named it nitroglycerine. In the dry words of chemistry, the reaction which follows is highly exothermic. In other words, a big hot explosion. Alfred Nobel of Sweden tamed the process by mixing it with another element. The results were a paste that could safely be kneaded and shaped. He called his concoction dynamite. He also developed a blasting cap for detonation. It was a boon for the mining industry. It also gave labor extremists an easy weapon to attack their adversaries.

The next sensational episode in the war of labor versus capital took place in Idaho in December of 1905. The ex-governor, Democrat Frank Steunenberg, was mortally wounded by dynamite that had been triggered by his opening the gate to the lawn of his house. In the eyes of the workers he was an oppressor because he had called in Federal troops six years earlier to break a miners' strike in Coeur d'Alene. Then he worked with the state legislature to pass a law forbidding miners to organize unions. Though he had been out of politics for some time, he was still a hated symbolic figure.

A young hit man was arrested and confessed to the deed as well other grisly attacks on labor enemies in the West. He sought clemency by claiming that the plot to kill the ex-governor had been planned and directed by three union officials with headquarters in Denver. To bring them to trial, they would first have to be extradited from Colorado. That required the agreement of the Colorado governor, but he was not inclined to sign the papers. So the Idaho officials turned again to the famous Pinkerton Detective Agency to solve their problem. The solution was to kidnap the three men at gunpoint and spirit them by train to Idaho. Despite the illegality of the action, Idaho officials argued that even though the accused had not been in the state when the

ex-governor was murdered, they had conspired in the act and so were for all purposes present in executing the plot.

Clarence Darrow, the famous and flamboyant lawyer for the underdog, came to Idaho to defend the men. There were several twists and turns in the case before the prosecution zeroed in on the most prominent, and possibly notorious, of the three defendants. This was William (Big Bill) Haywood, a founder of the Industrial Workers of the World, better known by its acronym IWW and feared as the “Wobblies”. Emotions ran high across the country. On the eve of the trial, President Teddy Roosevelt called the defendants “undesirable citizens”. On the other hand, Darrow argued there was no convincing evidence that Haywood had been involved with the killing. He charged instead that the young leader was on trial for his political beliefs. The case created great excitement in the United States and worldwide. It was the first to be covered by newspaper wire services with reporters coming to Idaho to file their reports by telegraph wires around the country. Despite Darrow’s legal skills, all expected Haywood to be convicted and hung. The murdered ex-governor was a well-respected local citizen, and the jury was made up of men who knew him well.

Darrow called on the jury to look beyond the facts of the case, to the importance their verdict would have in the nation and the world. Here are the emotional words he used in his final address:

“I speak for the poor, for the weak, for the weary, for that long line of men who, in darkness and despair, have borne the labors of the human race. Their eyes are on you twelve men of Idaho tonight. If you should decree Bill Haywood’s death, in the railroad offices of our great cities, men will applaud your names – in every bank in the world, where men hate Haywood because he

fighters for the poor and against that accursed system upon which the favored live or grow rich and fat, they would receive blessings and unstinted praise. But out on our broad prairies and where men toil with their hands, and out on the wide ocean where men are tossed and buffeted by waves, through our mills and factories, and down deep under the earth, thousands of men, and of women and children will kneel tonight and ask their God to guide your hearts – these men and women and their little children, the poor, the weak, and the suffering of the world, are stretching out their helpless hands to this jury in mute appeal for Bill Haywood's life.”

Darrow's partner in the defense was skeptical and cynical. He doubted that this melodramatic plea would sway twelve Idaho farmers that Haywood was innocent. He remarked dryly that Darrow's speech was better suited to a labor rally than an Idaho courtroom. But he was wrong. The jury deliberated twenty hours and acquitted Haywood. Though most jurors believed he had been involved some way in the conspiracy to kill Steunenberg, the prosecutor had not, in their eyes, established his guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

The victory made Darrow world famous. And a few years later he was again enjoined by the leader of the U. S. labor movement, Samuel Gompers, to defend two men from Cincinnati accused of dynamiting the Los Angeles Times in 1910. The paper was famous for its virulent anti-union press coverage in the fastest growing area of the country. But that is another story for another time.

World War II and the exclusion Act in the 1920's dried up the flood of immigrants seeking work at any wage. Capital and management realized they had to treat their employees in a better fashion for their own good. And while the conflict has never really ended, it subsided

with the establishment and acceptance of unions in such major industries as steel, coal, and automobiles. While there has been sporadic violence on the picket lines, dynamite has gone out of fashion. Labor became more expert in its own use of lawyers, lobbyists, and negotiating ploys. And as time went on, management found ways to treat employees in such a way that the unions lost their appeal for the working man. The only place they seem to thrive today is among government groups, where the lack of will of politicians and administrators has fostered an economic imbalance between labor rewards and tax income.

A final postscript! Bill Haywood and his “Wobblies” lost their clout by the early 20’s. He became disillusioned and emigrated to Moscow, seeking the solace of the proletariat under Communism. When he died, he was interred in the Kremlin. Clarence Darrow’s final famous case was the Scopes Monkey Trial in the mid ‘20’s in Tennessee.

The management/labor tension continues today with current issues like Collective Bargaining for public employees in Wisconsin and Ohio. It will always be with us in a democratic society. But at least the major weapons today are words and not dynamite.

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