

## AFD Ep 330 Links and Notes - The Memorial Day Massacre of 1937 [Bill/Rachel, Oct 25]

- Summary of Timeline of Events: Republic Steel in May 1937 provoked a seven-state strike from 78,000 steelworkers trying to organize a union as part of a nationwide inter-racial and inter-ethnic effort by Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to unionize steel plants or shut them down. This was about 5 years before the CIO launched the United Steelworkers. The national campaign, financed by the United Mineworkers whose coal is used for steel production, had already won a union at US Steel, the successor of Carnegie Steel that had so famously been murderously anti-union, as we talked about in previous episodes on the Homestead Strike and on the Pinkertons. But Republic Steel was unwilling to yield and was leading a coalition of right-wing anti-New Deal interests under the nickname "Little Steel" because the six steel companies in the coalition while large were small relative to US Steel. Republic funded Chicago Police details with extra equipment and had them shoot unprovoked into (and then severely beat and teargassed) the crowd of strikers and their families and other labor protesters who were present in solidarity. There are varying estimates on the number of people present from several hundred to 2,500 and on how many people were injured, but certainly 10 people died. There is also some disagreement on the number of police officers present. The massacre took place in a field outside the plant and many people had brought picnicking supplies, partly because it was Memorial Day. The crowd had been joyful before the massacre. Paramount Pictures had been at the field filming a newsreel and tried to hide it because it showed what had actually happened and they claimed they were afraid it would provoke riots. Newspaper and wire service still photographs were used by the national press to imply that the police were simply defending themselves from violent, rioting strikers. Despite a Senate investigation, the national strike fell apart because of how severely violent the crackdown had been at Republic Steel and their allied firms in other locations.
- <http://laborpress.org/the-memorial-day-massacre-of-1937/>
  - *Though the Wagner Act, giving workers the right to organize and strike, had been in effect for nearly two years, Mr. Tom Girdler, Chairman of the Board of Republic Steel, then the third largest steel company in the nation, refused to negotiate with the CIO in their organizing efforts. In fact, he viewed them as nothing more than "communists and racketeers." So, when on the Memorial Day weekend of 1937 union members marching beneath an American flag and singing union songs, arrived at the gates of Republic Steel with children and picnic baskets in tow, they were greeted not with civil discourse, but with a hail of bullets. Rather than sink one dime into wages or benefits, Girdler chose instead to authorize sizable expenditures to provide Chicago police with additional armament and weaponry with which to greet the protestors. (The receipts for those expenditures are today a matter of record.) Be assured that they were put to use. The policemen fired upon the crowd of 1,000 striking United Steelworkers and their wives and children, killing 10 workers—each one shot in the back or side. Their attempt to flee the violence of the day was unsuccessful. An additional 30 people were wounded by gunshot and blows from truncheons. Many were crippled for life.*
  - *With the absence of today's cell phone technology, which has placed ability to capture events in real time in the hands of virtually everyone, initially, the truth was successfully suppressed. In fact, all the major newspapers of the period, including the New York Times reported the incident as a rioting mob viciously attacking police who valiantly defended themselves. Even FDR originally heaped scorn on the union, because of how events had been portrayed. It seemed dark day for labor and a major setback to the cause. But the dawn of truth slowly*

*began to break thanks to the efforts of a reporter on staff at the St. Louis Dispatch, Paul Anderson. He uncovered newsreel footage taken by Paramount Pictures who were purposely blocking its release. When Anderson viewed the footage of what had actually happened, he said: "Those of us who saw it were shocked and amazed by the scenes showing scores of uniformed police firing their revolvers pointblank into a dense crowd of men, women and children, and then pursuing and clubbing the survivors unmercifully as they made frantic efforts to escape." Anderson took his new found evidence to Wisconsin Sen. Robert LaFollette, Jr., who was then chair of the nascent Civil Liberties Committee. After viewing the newsreel, The LaFollette Committee reported: "The Republic Steel Corporation has a uniformed police force of nearly 400 men whom it has equipped not only with revolvers, rifles and shotguns, but also with more tear and sickening gas and gas equipment than has been purchased...by any law-enforcement body, local, State or Federal in the country. It has loosed its guards, thus armed to shoot down citizens on the streets and highways."*

- <https://www.chicagotribune.com/nation-world/chi-chicagodays-republicsteelstrike-story-story.html>
  - *the massive [Republic] steel plant, the only one in the Chicago area that had stayed open during a bitter nationwide showdown between a number of steel companies and the Steel Workers Organizing Committee, which was trying to unionize the plants.*
  - *Police said they were fired upon by the strikers, but hospital reports showed no gun wounds among the police.*
  - *A Paramount photographer captured some of the mayhem, but the company refused to release the newsreel, saying it might incite audiences to riot. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch published an account of someone who had seen the suppressed film, describing the police firing on the marchers without warning and beating up the marchers in a "businesslike" way.*
- <http://www.illinoislaborhistory.org/labor-history-articles/memorial-day-massacre>
  - *As a show of support, hundreds of SWOC sympathizers from all around Chicago gathered on Memorial Day at Sam's Place, where the SWOC had its strike headquarters. After a round of speeches, the crowd began a march across the prairie and toward the Republic Steel mill. They were stopped midway by a formation of Chicago police. While demonstrators in front were arguing for their right to proceed, police fired into the crowd and pursued the people as they fled. Mollie West, a Typographical Union Local 16 member and a youthful demonstrator at the time, still recalls the command addressed to her: "Get off the field, or I'll put a bullet in your back."*
  - There is a sculpture memorial at the corner of South Avenue O and East 117th St in Chicago, which you can look at on Google Streetview if you aren't able to go in person. It is across a still existing field and some railroad tracks from the former steel plant on South Burley Avenue by the Calumet River.
    - *The sculpture was created by Ed Blazak, a former employee of the Republic Steel company. [...] The sculpture, with its ten steel pipes, represent the smoke stakes of the ten steel mills within the area, now closed. They can also be representative of the slain ten demonstrators.*
- <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/810.html>
- Jacobin article on the Little Steel coalition against the New Deal: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/05/memorial-day-massacre-little-steel-strike-violence-police>

- *Republic was a powerful company, one of the largest steel producers in the world. It stood at the head of a coalition of corporations, industry groups, and wealthy people who were intent on destroying the CIO. In fact, the broader aim of this coalition, which counted among its key members the National Association of Manufactures, the Chamber of Commerce, and a semi-fascist organization called the American Liberty League, was to undo the entire New Deal. Accomplishing this required defeating the CIO, which had emerged as an increasingly powerful ally of the Roosevelt administration. It also required finding a way to undermine the National Labor Relations Act, or Wagner Act. This new statute was the legislative centerpiece of the New Deal. Just declared constitutional by the Supreme Court in April, it purported to protect the right to strike and engage in collective bargaining, and gave legal license to the CIO's campaign. Backed by this coalition, Republic and several other steel producers known collectively as "Little Steel," unleashed a counteroffensive. They responded to the CIO's organizing efforts by firing, threatening, and assaulting hundreds of union supporters and categorically refusing to bargain with the union. This was all illegal. But Little Steel's aim was not to abide by the Wagner Act but to nullify it. These practices provoked a strike which began on May 26 and quickly grew to include seventy thousand workers at thirty steel plants spread across the industrial heartland. The strikers demanded that the companies respect their rights under the Wagner Act, including the right to picket.*
- *The Little Steel companies were eventually held liable under the Wagner Act for assaulting and threatening workers, for firing union organizers and supporters, and for refusing to rehire the strikers when the walkout ended. But ironically, by losing in court, they discovered how little they need have worried about the Wagner Act in the first place. The penalties they faced were strictly civil ones and didn't amount to much. Republic, which paid the most, had to pay three thousand workers several hundred dollars each, on average, for holding them out of work for over a year — and they didn't get paid for five years, by which time Republic was rolling in cash from war-related orders. At least three thousand other workers, illegally put out of work for over a year, got nothing.*
- *in understanding where American workers are today, we must not forget the kind of violence inflicted upon them that Memorial Day eighty years ago.*
- *"Reframing Chicago's Memorial Day Massacre, May 30, 1937" by Carol Quirke | American Quarterly Vol. 60, No. 1 (Mar., 2008), pp. 129-157*  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40068502>
  - *in large part the Massacre's contemporaries and its historians have treated newsreel footage and news photographs as indisputable evidence, transcriptions of reality. [However] Archival materials, along with captioned news photographs that appeared in the national press and metropolitan dailies, and three Paramount newsreels - distinct newsreels that previously have gone unnoticed - reveal an untold story. In the weeks after the Massacre, Chicago newspapers printed the same iconic photographs and Paramount News edited the same newsreel footage, in both instances purporting to show strikers as a "riotous mob," a representation justifying police action.*
  - *Republic Steel CEO Thomas Girdler had "hired the public relations firm Hill and Knowlton, and he advocated the [National Association of Manufactures]-sponsored Mohawk Valley Plan, in which corporations labeled union leaders outside agitators with a small following. A "back to work" campaign instigated by "loyal" employees supported by the*

company often led to violence, which demoralized unionists. Publicizing such violence also branded organized labor a threat to law and order, tarnishing it in the public eye. Girdler brandished brutal force when the velvet glove of public opinion failed, firing workers and purchasing twenty-six times more tear gas and munitions than the city of Chicago had in one year."

- There are just 168 frames of unedited newsreel footage of the actual shooting. The newsreel included what happened before and what happened after but the cameraman was changing a lens when the shooting started and it lasted for just 14 seconds, of which he captured 7.
- The crowd was filled with women, many wearing brightly patterned clothing, which made the footage so inflammatory when it finally came to light. One woman who survived but had been injured or wounded in the front line was five months pregnant. She was a member of the CIO's Women's Auxiliary.
- Lupe Marshall, a woman social worker who worked with Mexican steelworkers and had come to support them, was also on the front line, wearing a suit, and she is visible in the footage and survived the attack to testify to Congress on the shock and confusion of the marchers when the shooting began because it had come out of nowhere without warning. She was 4 foot 11 and 97 pounds and was beaten severely while trying to stop police from beating people already lying on the ground. She accompanied many of the severely beaten men to the hospital in a paddy wagon, some of whom died on the way.
- The incident took place just 2 years after the Associated Press had figured out how to transmit photographs by wire, and their still images were what accompanied newspaper stories and the public's (and even the White House's) initial understanding of events. The PR machine working for Republic Steel made sure that their previously prepared spin was the official story. Newspaper accounts even explicitly cited the photographs as proof that the police were defending themselves. The captions often literally contradicted what was visible in the images. Paramount similarly released a highly edited newsreel that would match that narrative.
- What the PR machine and newspapers had not counted on was that many of the marchers had also been carrying personal still cameras. Chicago liberals and the strike organizers knew that they could craft a counter-narrative about what really happened by showing photos from within the crowd proving it had been happy and peaceful. Moreover, Paul Anderson of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch decided to actually do real interviews with participants the day after and got a leaked copy of the unedited Paramount footage, which he turned over to the LaFollette committee at the US Senate. His print account drew a poetic and tragic narrative from the raw newsreel footage, highlighting patriotism and religiosity and happiness (then despair) of the protesters. He used phrases like "brains literally had been beaten out." He also countered the PR firm's intentional narrative that the strikers were "cowards" who ran away, by showing photos from behind police lines facing the crowd with its back turned running away and yet still being attacked by police, which made the police look like the cowardly ones. He said the police were

“appallingly businesslike” and “grimly methodical, as if they were killing snakes”

- The LaFollette Senate investigation hearings and their own edit of the newsreel were so dramatic that newspapers across the country had to release new versions of the story of what had happened, shifting public opinion in favor of the demonstrators
- The Library of Congress has photographs of Chicago residents watching a funeral procession of the victims pass through the streets (although they're apparently not online): <https://www.loc.gov/item/2010651584/>
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memorial\\_Day\\_massacre\\_of\\_1937](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memorial_Day_massacre_of_1937)
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little\\_Steel\\_strike](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Steel_strike)
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic\\_Steel\\_Strike\\_Riot\\_Newsreel\\_Footage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_Steel_Strike_Riot_Newsreel_Footage)