

AFD Ep 338 Links and Notes - The Toledo Auto-Lite Strike of 1934

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auto-Lite_strike
 - April 12 to June 3, 1934, peak action in the final days of May
 - 10,000 AFL union strikers and their allies vs Electric Auto-Lite auto parts maker and 1,300 Ohio National Guard plus assorted local law enforcement
 - AFL was trying a new approach of quasi-industry-level unionization to feed auto workers into member craft unions. [see below, 2nd libcom post] In Toledo, as part of this wider union drive across the local sector, the AFL had managed to start unionizing the various different worker types at Auto-Lite and its subsidiary companies, which allowed for a single temporary industrial union to keep generating dues even if some of its members at one corporate entity were to go on strike but the others were to remain working, without undercutting itself. In February there was a smaller precursor strike for 5 days by a dozen workers to force management to the table for initial recognition. But no contract appeared, eventually leading to the second strike.
 - The AFL's approach remained very cautious (to the point of explicit anti-radicalism) but FDR was willing to negotiate for labor peace, which meant that more radical members had more leverage than leadership sometimes realized. [Side note not mentioned on Wikipedia but alluded to in the 2nd libcom link below: The year before, FDR had signed the [National Industrial Recovery Act](#), NIRA, which in section 7a enshrined a federal right to outside unionization for the first time. This was struck down by the Supreme Court but not until 1935 after the events in Toledo in 1934 had already concluded. Before the 1933 law, many employers basically contended, with some support from the courts, that unions were monopolies of the labor market and illegal under antitrust law. The Wagner Act in 1935 replaced the failed 1933 law with further union provisions.]
 - Toledo had been especially hard-hit by the Depression with local industry failing, local banks collapsing, local government in mass layoffs (including police, see below), and local unemployment at 70%. [Side note not mentioned on Wikipedia but mentioned in the 2nd libcom link below: Toledo's mayor at the time, Solon T. Klotz, was a former socialist, and one of his allies among municipal workers was one of the local leaders of the AFL unionizing push.]
 - The new [American Workers Party](#), a short-lived and tiny political organization formed in 1933 and dedicated to democratic and Americanized marxism, as opposed to the Soviet-aligned Communist Party USA, had spent a great deal of effort locally organizing the unemployed into the Lucas County Unemployed League for about a year so that jobless workers in the Toledo area would not only refuse to work as strikebreakers but also would have their own voice and representation in local matters. As the second strike by Auto-Lite workers struggled to get off the ground, especially without strong support from AFL leadership, the Unemployed League stepped in to the picket line to pick up the torch. A court injunction attempted to bar them from surrounding the plant, but they insisted on their right to peacefully mass thousands of unemployed picketers in support. They also picketed the court and packed the courtroom to prevent any further action being taken against them.
 - Auto-Lite had hired private security and purchased its own supply of gas for eventual use on the crowds. Police were increasingly viewed as unreliable and potential allies to the picketers because of the uncertainty of their own position within the city budget.
 - The "Battle of Toledo" began on May 23 as security forces lost control of the situation after repeatedly antagonizing the protesters and the factory began trying

to gas the crowd, who threw them back and tried to storm the building, fist-fighting their opposition. Under-prepared Ohio National Guard troops were brought in the second day, resulting in two deaths and several injuries after firing into the crowd and charging them with bayonets. [Details below at the Jacobin link.] On the third day, the company president was arrested for the tear gas use. Nearly half the unions in Toledo voted for a general strike. A federal mediation offer was rejected at this point as being wildly insufficient to the situation and the amount of leverage the workers now had. By day four, two of the three American Workers Party organizers for the Unemployed League had been arrested indefinitely to try to reduce their influence and direction over the crowds. The National Guard tear-gassed a six-block neighborhood to break up the remaining several thousand demonstrators on site. Union leaders accepted federal mediation and arbitration as long as the factory remained closed for the duration this time, although the company tried (ultimately unsuccessfully) to organize a company union to complicate talks. On the fifth day, resistance petered out in the eight blocks around the factory.

- The unions in Toledo continued talking to each other in the subsequent days and kept building further support for a general strike, prompting the Governor of Ohio to consider martial law, before instead withdrawing most of the National Guard troops, under federal instruction. 85 unions were on the brink of a general strike and on June 1 there was a peaceful torchlight march of 20,000 union workers. But key unions in other ongoing negotiations with their own managements began to get significant pay increases to buy off of joining the general strike. The Auto-Lite workers reached a deal with their own company on June 2 and ratified it on June 3. By June 6, under pressure from the federal government, the company had re-hired every previously striking worker in order to keep the peace. There was another 20,000-strong demonstration on June 9 to celebrate victory.
- Over the next year, Toledo unionists continued to organize auto industry workers, including a successful strike at Chevrolet, and eventually became Local 12 of the new United Autoworkers. Union density in Toledo remained very high into the 21st century. [further citations below]
- <https://ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p16007coll33/id/87841/> This is an absolutely crazy photo-journalism scrapbook from the Toledo News-Bee which makes clear (in the captions) once again how biased the media, even locally, was toward strikers and in favor of brutal force by the government. This collection of dozens of photos with hand-written captions at the time was only digitized in 2017. Called strikers “rioters”, praised the show of strength from the National Guardsmen. Chose to side with the Guardsmen even after they killed two men. Caption on page 20, re: arresting strikers: “Force often was necessary”. Completely covered up how the residents resented the money that was spent to feed and house the Guard and how they reacted to the deployment of tear gas in large areas of the city.
 - Toledo Lucas County Public Library writeup on the collection: <https://tlcpllaborhistory.omeka.net/exhibits/show/toledo-labor-history/auto-lite-strike>
Huge contrast with the Toledo News-Bee coverage, quoting an Ohio historical marker located in Toledo
 - More info on the collection: <https://ohiodigitalnetwork.org/odn-item-of-the-week-photo-history-of-the-toledo-auto-lite-strike/>

- <https://libcom.org/history/toledo-auto-lite-strike-1934-jeremy-brecher> This is an excerpt from “Strike!” by Jeremy Brecher and all the details are the same as those above from the narrative from Wikipedia. [No need for further notes here.]
- <https://libcom.org/history/overview-1934-toledo-auto-lite-strike-philip-korth-margaret-r-beegle> *'I remember like today: the Auto-Lite strike of 1934, an oral history'* by Philip A. Korth and Margaret R. Beegle, Michigan State University Press, 1988
 - *Federal Labor Unions appeared in the AFL well before 1933. Produced by the debates between craft union advocates and industrial union advocates, the Federal Labor Union provided the structure to organize entire industrial plants or complexes. During the initial organizing period, all workers, regardless of skill or work assignment, would be recruited into a single Federal Labor Union chartered for a particular plant or factory system. Once organized, workers would be assigned to new or existing locals of the appropriate craft international.*
 - There was initially relatively little union membership within Auto-Lite, but the few union members who did work there worked in key sectors like the punch press room that made the assembly line parts itself and thus had maximum ability to shut down all production. Even so, they almost failed in the February strike for initial recognition and were only saved by solidarity from the strikers from other unrelated companies who were part of the same union drive in the local industry. The April strike struggled similarly because about half the Auto-Lite workers had never been substantially brought into the new union and simply went to work as usual initially.
 - Recently laid off city police officers refused to work private security against the picket or to be deputized by the county sheriff. The courts struggled to break up the pickets because there were too many people during mass arrest attempts and anyone (not in leadership) who was actually arrested was bailed out within the same day due to being over-capacity, thereby defeating the purpose of arresting them to keep them off the picket.
- <https://ufcw324.org/toledo-auto-lite-strike/> Notes that Toledo became and remains one of the most heavily unionized cities in the country after the massive victory by the strikers. [No further notes here.]
 - 2019 Toledo Blade op-ed [REQUIRES LOGIN]:
<https://www.toledoblade.com/local/city/2019/09/02/toledo-blue-collar-labor-background-history-electric-auto-lite-strike-1934/stories/20190901025>
 - May 2001 memorial unveiling [REQUIRES LOGIN]:
<https://www.toledoblade.com/business/retail/2001/05/12/Auto-Lite-memorial-to-be-dedicated-today/stories/200105120049>
- <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/10/standing-rock-dakota-access-pipeline-toledo-auto-lite-strike/>
On May 21, a dozen fully armed companies of the Ohio National Guard arrived outside the Auto-Lite plant and began to barricade the entrance. Mindful of public opinion, Governor White chose not to send the Toledo 107th Cavalry, opting instead to pull troops from other parts of the state.

Commanding the Guard was General Frank D. Henderson — who, earlier that year, had attempted to break a strike in Lima, Ohio by issuing the two thousand Federal Emergency Relief Administration workers a “fasting order,” cutting off food and supplies. (His tactics were quickly denounced in the press and in the court of public opinion.)

In Toledo, many viewed the Guard with disdain. More than \$3,500 a day in public money was being spent to feed, house, and pay the deployed troops at the same time tear gas

permeated considerable swaths of the city. Entire neighborhoods petitioned the mayor and the governor for the Guard's removal.

Despite the large, well-armed contingency of troops — and the damage they were inflicting on the city — the strikers were relatively undaunted. Indeed, many strikers didn't even take the Guardsmen seriously.

Union member and organizer Charles Rigby voiced the opinion of many on the picket-line when he stated that the Guardsmen were confident, "until they learned they was dealing with some old veterans in World War I. So, the boy scouts come out kind of mild."

Many of the troopers were not even of age; journalist John Grigsby reported that several of them were crying, upset at missing their high school graduations that weekend. Finding the entire situation ridiculous — boys no older than their sons armed and marching in uniform — women on the picket line started chanting, "Go home to your mams and your paper dolls."

With all of their bravado, though, the strikers still had to deal with a pronounced disparity in arms. On May 24, after days of pitched back-and-forth melees — throwing bricks and stones, fighting with guns and clubs — the tensions on the picket line burst asunder.

The order was given to fire into the crowd.

The volley of bullets found their marks, wounding hundreds and killing two men: Frank Hubay and Steve Cyigon. Colonel William Martin, commanding officer of the company responsible for the shots, steadfastly denied ever giving such an order.

The deaths of civilians galvanized an already-militant strike. Strikers swarmed the Guard and drove the battle into the surrounding neighborhood. Over the next week, hundreds of people would be treated for injuries ranging from bayonet wounds and tear gas blindness to burns and broken bones.

The hostilities continued for days, until on May 31, federal mediators — under the direction of President Roosevelt — ordered the Guard withdrawn.

The removal of the National Guard was the beginning of the end for the anti-union forces. The negative publicity stemming from the shootings, as well as the burgeoning Teamsters strike in Minneapolis, forced Roosevelt to press for a speedy resolution.

Local 18384 emerged from the strike with a qualified victory, winning many of its demands, including a 5 percent raise and seniority recognition. As for the city as a whole, the untrammelled use of force left an indelible mark on its psyche.