

AFD Ep 346 Links and Notes - Floyd B. Olson and The 1934 Minneapolis Strike [Bill/Rachel] - Recording Jan 31

- This episode ties together a bunch of our recent themes: The victorious 1934 strikewave, the role of genuinely pro-labor elected officials in creating a pathway to labor victory, and progressive governors of the Great Lakes region
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minneapolis_general_strike_of_1934 (May 16 - Aug 31, 1934)
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloody_Friday_\(Minneapolis\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloody_Friday_(Minneapolis)) (Friday July 20, 1934)
 - Causes
 - This was during the Great Depression, under the new and short-lived federal unionization legal regime passed in 1933, and happening at the same time as the events in Toledo and San Francisco that we discussed on two recent episodes
 - Also as mentioned before, the Teamsters' locals were split into "craft" unions, which made them weaker as they weren't organized across job lines, eg milk drivers were separate from ice drivers were separate from produce drivers etc.
 - This was essentially a recognition strike at its inception. The objective here seems to have been basically just to try to make Minneapolis a union town, however that could be done, and recognizing and unifying truck drivers into a broader independent union seemed like a good point of leverage
 - The employers of the trucking companies refused to recognize the union
 - The big strike was a followup to a very brief strike of coal drivers in February 1934
 - Following the coal drivers strike, 574 began to build on their victory by organizing more drivers to prepare for a bigger strike, renting a large meeting hall to act as headquarters, also adding a women's auxiliary to help run things at headquarters. Also entered into discussions with groups of farmers and also unemployed people to support the upcoming strike.
 - In terms of policy, as we will explain momentarily, Minneapolis was a very union-unfriendly city at the beginning of 1934. The union at the center of our story today began the year with only 75 official members, mostly socialist organizers who were attempting to build up the city's union density by focusing on coal drivers in 1933.
 - This source says 50% of Minnesota industrial workers were unionized by 1919, especially in the Twin Cities, but it's vague: https://commons.nmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=upper_country
 - Participants
 - Local 574 Trotskyist Teamsters (not supported by national Teamster leadership, which was very opposed to striking in general although not opposed to supporting strikes by other unions)
 - Minneapolis Police & Citizens' Alliance
 - Citizens' Alliance was a national organization (with a notably powerful local branch in MPLS) dedicated to preserving Open Shop business communities in Minnesota, where union membership wasn't required to work https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizens%27_Alliance They often worked with groups like the Chamber of Commerce or the

- National Association of Manufacturers. They had been around since the turn of the century and were aggressively anti-socialist.
- Gov. Floyd Olson (Farmer-Labor) & 4000 Minnesota National Guard
 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Floyd_B._Olson
 - NOTE: This was before the Farmer-Labor Party merged into the Democratic Party to form today's Democratic-Farm-Labor (DFL) Party of Minnesota. The Minnesota FLP was dominated by Scandinavian-American leftists like Olson (as well as by socialist or syndicalist Italians & miners from what had recently become Yugoslavia).
 - https://commons.nmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=upper_country
 - Gov. Olson had a brief, bright political career from 1919 to his death from cancer in 1936.
 - After dropping out of college, he had worked on the Northern Pacific Railroad and then joined the IWW in Seattle while working as a stevedore. He came back home to Minneapolis and went to law school.
 - He had replaced the Hennepin County (ie Minneapolis) DA in 1920 when that guy was busted for taking bribes. Olson became known as a prosecutor against municipal corruption and the big business community, specifically targeting the Citizens' Alliance and the KKK.
 - <https://hennepinhistory.org/blood-in-the-streets-governor-floyd-b-olson-and-the-teamsters-strike-of-1934/> *He garnered further acclaim among Minneapolis' workers by defending wrongly accused union members in a bombing case and helping to lower freight rates on coal shipments to the city.*
 - https://commons.nmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=upper_country
 - Ran unsuccessfully for the US House in 1920 (barely losing the Dem primary), for Governor in 1924 (losing respectably in the general as a Farmer-Labor candidate), for Governor in 1930 (winning by a landslide with a left-liberal working class/middle class coalition, joining the southern industrial cities with the northern militant mining towns and the rural farmers).
 - Olson even campaigned fluently in Yiddish in Jewish neighborhoods although he wasn't Jewish himself
 - <https://www.jta.org/1933/08/06/archive/his-glib-yiddish-once-passed-nordic-governor-of-minnesota-as-avrom-yitzcock-greenburg> (Aug 1933 article in the Jewish Telegraphic Agency)
 - *Unassuming in manner, this governor who speaks Yiddish has come to be known both in his own state and throughout the nation as a standard bearer "of the masses of the people." During the recent economic crisis he used his executive powers to forbid foreclosures of mortgages on farms and homes. When this power was questioned he caused the Minnesota legislature to enact a law preventing foreclosures, except in special cases, for a two-year period. [Side note: His initial action was a unilateral emergency order prohibiting further foreclosure actions by*

local sheriffs on the basis that foreclosures were a threat to public order because they could spark riots. The legislature's codified foreclosure moratorium survived a US Supreme Court challenge, unlike the emergency order the state courts overturned, and was extended until 1942.

<https://open.mitchellhamline.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2614&context=wmlr>] As governor, he has also established minimum wage scales for highway labor and fixed a maximum eight-hour day, six-day week. He is an admirer of the great Jewish leaders of the world. A convincing speaker, he has lifted his voice at public protest meetings held in Minnesota against Nazi treatment of German Jews.

- Before the federal government banned Yellow-Dog anti-union contracts [in 1932](#), Olson had already banned these in Minnesota: <https://open.mitchellhamline.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2614&context=wmlr>
- His governorship rapidly progressed from a standard progressive movement legislative agenda (<https://www.minnpost.com/minnesota-history/2013/01/gov-olson-80-years-ago-proposed-progressive-taxes-and-unemployment-insuran/>) into an increasingly radical leftist agenda with open class warfare rhetoric and public denunciations of the existing system of government. The labor movement and leftists continued to support him while middle class supporter became skittish, but he was re-elected easily to two more two-year terms, for a total of five and a half years before his fatal cancer during his US Senate campaign in 1936
- **January 1933, 2nd Inaugural address:** *"the United States has created the greatest industrial system in the history of the world, but that system has concerned itself almost entirely with profit and has been blind or selfish insofar as the welfare of the mass of the people is concerned."* *"We are assembled during the most crucial time for the nation and our state. An army of unemployed ... an ever-increasing number of mortgage foreclosures; and thousands of people in want and poverty are evidences not only of an economic depression but of the failure of government and our social system to function in the interests of common happiness of the people. Just beyond the horizon of this scene is rampant lawlessness and possible revolution. Only remedial legislation, nation and state, can prevent its appearance."* He called for a progressive income tax, which passed, and for the creation of the state's first unemployment insurance system, which died in the state Senate.
<https://www.minnpost.com/politics-policy/2009/01/bold-proposals-minnesota-governor-hard-times-floyd-olson-1933/>
- **April 1933** [for context: during FDR's First Hundred Days], **Floyd Olson speech to poor protesters outside the Minnesota capitol as the legislature dithered ahead of the end of the spring 1933 session:** "I am making a last appeal to the Legislature. If the Senate does not make provision for the

sufferers in the State and the Federal Government refuses to aid, I shall invoke the powers I hold and shall declare martial law. ... A lot of people who are now fighting [relief] measures because they happen to possess considerable wealth will be brought in by provost guard and be obliged to give up more than they would now. There is not going to be misery in this State if I can humanly prevent it. . . Unless the Federal and State governments act to insure against recurrence of the present situation, I hope the present system of government goes right down to hell."

<http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,769776,00.html> TIME Magazine remarked: "Governor Olson's threat to attack misery by declaring martial law and confiscating private property was the first of its kind in the land. Newspapers picked up his words and headlines far beyond the borders of the State made conservative readers shudder."

- From a 2016 article in Upper Country: The Journal of the Lake Superior Region --

https://commons.nmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=upper_country

- *he helped enact several new laws that benefited men and women across the state. These included a progressive income tax, a social security program for the elderly, equal pay for women, the right to bargain collectively, unemployment insurance, and a minimum wage. He was unable, however, to pass legislation that allowed for state ownership of grain elevators, meat packing plants, public utilities, or the iron mines. Olson's programs provided relief for many citizens during the height of the Great Depression, even predating many reforms instituted by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.*
- **December 1933 special message to the legislature on its special session:** *"we must keep in mind at all times that the care of the destitute is a public obligation and not a private one, and that this fundamental obligation of government must be performed even to the exhaustion of all the resources of the state and its communities."* He requested that the legislature pass a state version of the National Industrial Recovery Act for intra-state commerce. On taxes again: *"In order that adequate funds may be available for the relief of the destitute and unemployed, it is absolutely essential that taxes be collected, particularly from those who have the means and ability to pay. There are many persons and corporations in the state of Minnesota having the means and ability to pay taxes owing under existing tax laws, who and which are wilfully refusing to pay such taxes. This wilful refusal is made possible by reason of the leniency of the existing tax collection laws, and by reason of the lack of drastic power in the state and its local political subdivisions to compel payment of such taxes by such persons and corporations."* He proposed a system of instant state receivership for any non-farm businesses and individual major property owners (especially forest owners) who fail to pay taxes on time, so that the state can collect income directly. He

also called for the creation of a state-run liquor dispensary system in the aftermath of the repeal of prohibition.

<https://www.leg.mn.gov/docs/pre2003/other/1533.pdf>

- **“I am not a liberal,” Olson declared to the Farmer-Labor convention in March 1934. “I am what I want to be—a radical.”**
<https://www.southwestjournal.com/voices/historyapolis/2015/09/re-membering-floyd-b-olson/>
<http://cooperativecommonwealth.com/FLA%201934%20Platform.html> March 1934 MFLP platform: *“Palliative measures will continue to fail. Only a complete reorganization of our social structure into a cooperative commonwealth will bring economic security and prevent a prolonged period of further suffering among the people. We, therefore, declare that capitalism has failed and immediate steps must be taken by the people to abolish capitalism in a peaceful and lawful manner and that a new sane and just society must be established; a system where all the natural resources, machinery of production, transportation and communication shall be owned by the government and operated democratically for the benefit of all the people and not for the benefit of the few.” [...] “To protect our citizens from exploitation through industrial profits, we demand public ownership of all mines, water power, transportation and communication, banks, packing plants, factories, and all public utilities. However, this shall not apply to bona fide cooperative enterprises.”*
- Olson’s official portrait as governor includes him gripping a radio microphone stand: <https://www.mnhs.org/capitol/learn/art/8897>
- Also just need to note in passing that Olson was accused of having ties to (Jewish) organized crime and having a critical newspaper publisher machine-gunned down, but this connection has never been proven or substantiated. I wonder if the accusations had more to do with his close relationship with Minnesota’s Jewish community and his radical agenda...
- Adjutant General Ellard A. Walsh of the MN National Guard was the commander from 1925 to 1949!
<https://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/files/4913/3374/8949/AlliesJan2012Final.pdf> (Newsletter for the Members and Friends of the Military Historical Society of Minnesota)
 - General Walsh had spent the previous several years getting the National Guard into much better condition and training, having experienced it get federalized and deployed for real military service twice in the 1910s (Mexico & WWI)
 - *One of Walsh’s toughest assignments in the 1930s came during the 1934 Truckers’ Strike in Minneapolis. Fights that spring and summer between striking workers and sympathizers on one side, and business interests supported by the police and strong-arm Citizen’s Alliance “militias” on the other, had devolved into chaos with four dead and hundreds injured. Governor Floyd B. Olson placed the city under martial law on July 26, declaring it to be in a state of insurrection. Four thousand Guardsmen were immediately activated and put under the direct command of Adjutant General Walsh. **It was a patent breach of military custom because***

Walsh was a staff officer, not a line officer, but Walsh was the man Olson most trusted. Working in concert with the Governor, Walsh moved decisively to restore order in the streets and protect citizens on both sides. Military zones and checkpoints were set up; the strike headquarters was shut down and its top leaders confined for a few days until tempers cooled; a curfew was imposed on businesses; assemblies without military authorization were prohibited; only vehicles with military permits were allowed into certain areas; and troops were assigned to protect shipments of essential goods, such as food, into city markets. Both sides grumbled, complaining that Walsh was overreaching his authority, but Walsh's firm actions brought an immediate end to violent confrontations and set the stage for federal mediators who secured an agreement on August 21, ending Walsh's month-long tenure as the de-facto head of Minneapolis.

- Phase 1:
 - Strike begins, shutting down most commercial traffic (farmers were allowed to deliver directly to grocers, bypassing market); local clashes with police, private security, and scabs immediately start. Hundreds of Citizens Alliance members were deputized by police. Battle between picketers and strikebreakers over trucks attempting to move quickly turned into general melee as each sides' supporters joined the fray
 - Sympathy strikes by building trades, etc; the AFL also provided support, both financial and allowing the strikers to organize in their headquarters.
 - local police caravans escort in trucks
- The lull: May 25-July 17, then the disaster, then phase 2
 - A deal mediated by Gov. Olson seemed to have been confirmed between union members and employers, but when it came time to prepare an official contract and agreement, the employers tried to leave out the warehouse workers (as opposed to the delivery workers outside), and the strike kicked off again. The National Guard was mobilized to be available but was not deployed.
 - The Teamsters tried in the second phase after the lull to avoid being armed at all times, but on Friday July 20 (Bloody Friday, just a few weeks after the July 5 Bloody Thursday in San Francisco) some of them were supposedly carrying clubs and the police escorting a single truck opened fire on the picketers, shotgun blasting everywhere for an extended period, injuring 67 people (some very severely) and killing two. The dead were John Belor, an unemployed laborer there in solidarity and Henry Ness, a striking truck driver and WWI veteran, whose grandchildren attended a 2015 plaque dedication.
 - See page 14 of this August 2015 report in the MN AFL-CIO's Minneapolis Labor Review:
<http://www.minneapolisunions.org/assets/MLR-2015-08-21-complete.pdf>
 - A report from the Governor's public commission on the crisis found that "Police took direct aim at the pickets and fired to kill. Physical safety of the police was at no time endangered. No weapons were in possession of the pickets."
 - The Teamsters redoubled their efforts to remain unarmed and nonviolent as additional unions go on strike in protest of the police violence. They

counter-convoys the increasingly massive police convoys (up to 40 police cars per truck!) to make sure the police didn't feel confident trying to bring in more than a few trucks even if no one was explicitly blocking them

- State martial law (July 26) after Bloody Friday (July 20)
 - Action was still not immediate, but almost a week later, and a couple days after a funeral procession drew 100,000 spectators (<http://www.minneapolisunions.org/assets/MLR-1934-07-27-01.pdf>), Olson finally declared martial law & brought in the MN Army Natl Guard under Walsh
 - Walsh's troops raided the offices of both sides (first the union, then the Citizens Alliance, although more action was taken against the union and some leaders were detained)
 - Olson directed the National Guard to permit and escort trucks in and out of the city if they were unrelated to the core Teamsters dispute at the heart of the strike (though strikers felt this protection was overly generously applied)
- Federal pressure:
 - By July 26, the day martial law began, strikers had voted to accept the outlined proposal from federal mediators, but it took nearly a month for those mediators to get the employers to agree
 - After Bloody Friday on July 20 1934 and the declaration of Martial Law, President FDR visited Minnesota (but not the Minneapolis area) on August 8 and was briefed in person by Gov. Olson. The Roosevelt Administration then began leaning very hard on the Minneapolis business community to reach a settlement with the striking workers, threatening to withhold Great Depression relief dollars to uncooperative businesses via the Reconstruction Finance Agency
 - <http://www.minneapolisunions.org/assets/MLR-2015-08-21-complete.pdf> see page 14 for a passing mention
 - Further detail: <https://hennepinhistory.org/blood-in-the-streets-governor-floyd-b-olson-and-the-teamsters-strike-of-1934/>
 - The federal mediators obtained the assent of the Citizens' Alliance to the biggest demands of the strikers on August 21, ending the strike
 - The socialist Teamster organizers then quickly worked to help other private sector unions in Minneapolis get off the ground to bring thousands of workers into union contracts after decades of Open Shop rule. The Local continued to have a rocky relationship with the national leadership, but they were so popular with members around the country that it compelled some changes within the organization
- <https://mndigital.org/projects/primary-source-sets/minneapolis-teamsters-strike-1934> (The Organizer, the local's daily newsletter, fought the employer's propaganda, solicited donations to the strike fund, and highlighted labor struggles across the country (especially the West Coast Longshoremen's strike happening at the same time) Clearly published list of demands of the strikers, as well as the terms of the agreement reached August 22.
- <http://www.minneapolisunions.org/assets/MLR-1934-07-27-01.pdf> Wow who could have predicted that a bunch of Trotskyists would produce a detailed newspaper... Also pointed out the local media's anti-striker bias in reporting police violence "Daily Papers

Hiding Facts of Massacre” sub-head “Most of strikers shot in murder trap were hit in back; SOME SHOT DOWN FOR GIVING AID TO WOUNDED”

- Supposedly this link has an interview with one of the 1934 strike organizers but it is down right now along with the entire state library system website:

<http://collections.mnhs.org/cms/display.php?irn=10446082>