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Historian

HISTORY > The Haymarket Affair

Now it might be worth talking about what the labour movement was doing in the 1880's and 1890's. And the labour struggles against the corporations after 1877. I mean one, one of the most important moments in the history of the labour movement, of course was more than a moment, it was several years in the 1880's when the labour movement of which the AF of L, CIO was sort of the leading part, but not the only part.

But in which the labour movement decided to work for the 8 hour day. People had been working 10, 12 and 14 hours a day. And they discovered there was nothing in the constitution to prevent employers from working people 12 and 14 hours a day. No economic bill of rights in the constitution. And so workers had to do it for themselves. And so they organized and went on strike all over the country for the 8 hour day.

And this exploded in 1886 in Chicago with the Hay Market Affair. Where workers were out on strike against one of the most powerful corporations in America, the International Harvester Corporation. And in that strike the police were called out, workers were killed, a protest meeting was held. The police attacked the protest meeting. A bomb was thrown in the midst of the police. Policemen were killed. Anarchist leaders in Chicago were arrested, although there was no evidence connecting them to the bomb. There never was but still four of them were executed.

And it was, it became a national, national issue, a national scandal for working people. It became an international issue. In fact George Bernard Shaw sent a telegram at a time after the Illinois Supreme Court had okayed the conviction of these anarchists on no evidence. George Bernard Shaw said if the United States must lose eight men, there were eight Hay Market accused in prison, said if the United States must lose eight men it could better afford to lose the eight members of the Illinois Supreme Court than the eight anarchists who are in jail.

But the Hay Market Affair had a very powerful affect on a lot of people. You know I'm thinking of, I'm thinking of Emma Goldman, the anarchist feminist who became one of the most important labour leaders and speakers, and organizers of the late 19th, early 20th century. And her, one of the defining moments of her rise to radical thought was the news that the four men had been executed in Chicago.

So in 1886 we had huge number of strikes all over the country. And the 8 hour day became more and more won, again not by government action but by strike action, direct action as the anarchists would put it, direct action against the employer. It wasn't until the 1930's that the government stepped in under the New Deal and actually enacted 8 hour legislation. But it was the unions that did it first.

And in the 1890's we began to get a series of important labour struggles against the corporate interests in the country. And in 1892 a great strike against the steel mills. By then the steel mills, the Carnegie Steel Corporation had become huge. In 1900's the Carnegie Steel Corporation was going to combine with other steel corporations under the kindly tutelage of JP Morgan. Who made probably a few hundred million dollars on the deal.

HISTORY > The Strike Is Born

In the years before World War I we saw the, probably the greatest labour struggles in American history. And there are two very important organizations which devote themselves to fighting the power of the corporation which is greater at this point than any other point. And those two organizations are one, the socialist party which is very powerful. Has a million, two million readers of its newspapers all over the country. Has 35 locals in Oklahoma and elects a socialist to legislatures, even to Congress.

Socialist party is one of those groups. And the other is the IWW, the Industrial Workers of the World which sets up in 1905. A radical labour organization, one big union. No craft unions like the AF of L' you're all workers who work in one establishment, join one union. And fight the employers, not just for improved wages and conditions, but to eventually take over the economy. Take over the corporation. I mean, they're serious the IWW.

Anyway they, with these two organizations and support workers all over the country, go on strike in various ways. In 1912 probably the most successful of these strikes, Lawrence Massachusetts textile strike. Mostly immigrant women striking against the great textile corporations of New England. And it looks hopeless because they're fighting enormous power.

The IWW comes in to help them and organize them. And they organize these 20 different nationalities into an amazing determined group of strikers who go through the winter of 1912 and hold out and they refuse to give in. And they send their children off to other cities so that they can be fed because they will starve if they stay in Lawrence Massachusetts. And they're helped by people in other cities who take care of their children. And the children going to the train station are clubbed by policemen.

And the amazing thing about it is that they win, they refused to submit. And what they learned is that against the power of corporations, if you can withhold your labour and withhold it long enough, the corporations will see their profits dwindling, dwindling, dwindling. And you can pull in your belt with more determination than they can see their profits sacrificed. So they win in Lawrence.

In 1913/14 there's a very bitter strike in southern Colorado. Coal mine strike against the Rockefeller interests. But by now Rockefeller has moved from oil to railroads to coal mines and so on, huge corporation. And they strike, very bitter

long strike. Culminating in 1914 what is called a Ludlow massacre. There is an attack on the 10th colony of the miners by national guardsmen paid by the Rockefellers. And they lose the strike. But it becomes a national, national issue.

And World War I really leads to the real destruction of the IWW and the socialist party and for a while, the workers movement, because wars have a way of galvanizing the power of the national government. Everybody for the war and forgetting about everything else and putting protest against war in jail which is what happened.

And so we come into the 1920's with a very weak labour movement but still powerful corporations, even having their own personal representative as Secretary of the Treasury, Andrew Mellon, who sees to it that the tax plans of the 1920's benefit the corporations and not ordinary people.

So we, the so-called prosperity of the 1920's is very much a distortion because its prosperity well, very like, very much like prosperity, the so-called prosperity of the 90's. Prosperity for people who own a lot of shares, or stock. Prosperity for Wall Street but not prosperity for ordinary working people living in tenements or in Appalachia or in small farms, or in the south all over the country. So that was the 20's and so in a certain sense the Depression was not the opposite of the 20's, it was an intensification for the whole country what was already happening to many, many people in 1920's.

What happens in depression is that there's a kind of interesting interplay of pressures on the New Deal administration by corporations on the one hand, and working people on the other. The rise of the CIO and the strikes, this reburgeoning of the labour movement. The sit down strikes of '36 and '37. Tenants movements, Unemployed Council movements. All of these acting on Roosevelt to get him to pass some legislation on behalf of ordinary people.

And the same time corporations on the other side fighting this legislation but some corporations actually siding with Roosevelt and saying no, we need to pass reforms. Or we will not just have our profits lowered, we will have our profits eliminated, there'll be a revolution. And so it's in response both to the workers and their strikes and to those, you might say far-sighted business people who see it would be a good idea to begin to do something on behalf of all of these agitated people, that we get the reforms of the New Deal.

General Motors never imagined that it could lose a strike to its workers. Ford Motor Company never imagined that it would lose a strike to its workers. But that is what happened in 1936 and 1937 when the CIO began to organize along industrial lines and organize the workers in these plants. And carried on these militant labour struggles. So this was very definite and very bitter contests between huge corporations and newly organized, newly militant workers. Very conscious of the fact that they were fighting large corporate interests.

As far as understanding that the corporations were perhaps responsible for the economic crisis by amassing large sums of money while the purchasing power of most people was going down, down, down. Well the fact was that corporations

became the target of radical groups in the 1930s.

Socialists and communists they were the ones who pointed out to other people that the big business, and that was the phase that was used more often than anything else. Big business was behind the economic crisis and big business had to be fought. And that big business really controlled the agencies of the state and of the federal government.

And in fact, in the 1930's the radical movements really reached the height of their power and influence over the American people. In a certain sense McCarthyism was based on a half truth. That is McCarthyism exaggerated the existence of a communist movement in the United States. But it was also true that the communist and socialist movements had influenced a lot of people and gotten them to think about the power of big business and the need to organize against it.

HISTORY > Backlash To The Future

But I'd suggest one strong possibility which might turn out to happen fifty years from now, is that it might have developed out of the first stirrings in the year 2000 and 2001.

They might have developed a powerful anti-corporate movement in the United States which would take down the power of the corporations and lift up the power of organized working people or middle-class people all over the country.

Because what happens in the year 2000 is we get unprecedented protests against corporate power in Seattle, in Washington D.C., in Philadelphia, and crossing over into other countries, in Prague. For the first time, a movement in which the labour movement which in the 1960's was kind of quiet in the protest movements. But now the labour movement in Seattle is taking centre stage, joined to the environmental movement and the feminist movement. And if that kind of anti-corporate movement can be joined also to a hispanic and black movement, understanding that by the year 2050 the majority of people in the United States will be non-white, it is possible to conceive of a social movement in the year 2050 which would dwarf the social movements of the 1960's or the 1930's.

And what you have in the year 2000/2001 are perhaps just the first stirrings of that. And the fact that it takes place with international connections.

Understanding that now corporations are global, and understanding now that anti-corporate protests must also be global and connected to one another. That I think, may be a particularly important development of the year 2000.

Mark

So from a historical prospective, does this kind of feel like the real thing?

Howard

It could be the real thing. It's like asking me after the four Black guys students sit in the Greensboro, North Carolina in February, 1960, is this the beginning of a great civil rights movement? And I'd have to say, maybe, possibly. But movements have to act on the basis of possibilities. If they didn't, nobody would do anything.