

Seventy-five years since the Memorial Day Massacre

29 May 2012

On May 30, 1937, Memorial Day, Chicago police opened fire on unarmed workers demonstrating against Republic Steel in the midst of the “Little Steel” strike of 1937, killing 10 people and wounding dozens more. Most of the workers were shot in the back as they fled. Another 28 were injured by police clubbing, 9 of them permanently disabled.

In the wake of the massacre, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt—a Democrat and purportedly a “friend of labor”—pointedly refused to condemn the murders or intervene in the strike in favor of the steel workers’ union federation, then called the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), which had backed him in the 1936 elections. (The following year, the CIO would be transformed into the Congress of Industrial Organizations.) Roosevelt instead issued his infamous “plague on both your houses” remark, largely blaming the workers for the violence.

The striking steel workers were demanding recognition of their union, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), which would in 1942 become the United Steel Workers of America (USW). SWOC was part of the CIO, which had recently broken from the American Federation of Labor (AFL). For decades, the AFL, a federation dominated by craft unions, had suffocated efforts to organize workers in basic industry.

Months earlier, the union officials who headed the SWOC had worked out a wage deal and union recognition with industry leader US Steel, the major “Big Steel” company. They thereby hoped to force the lesser producers—Republic Steel, Bethlehem Steel, Youngstown Sheet and Tube, National Steel, Inland Steel, and American Rolling Mills (“Little Steel”)—into line.

Most of the Little Steel firms instead fought bitterly against union organization. According to one historian, in preparing for violence against workers, steel firms purchased more nausea-inducing gas between 1933 and 1937 than the US military.

The steelmakers were following the pattern of industrial relations that had prevailed in the US from the 1870s on, a period dominated by massacres of workers, the use of

company spies and goons, court injunctions, and the anti-working class violence of the state. The Memorial Day Massacre is a reminder of the ruthlessness of the American capitalist class and the bitter and bloody struggles workers had to wage in order to realize even the most basic reforms.

The most critical lesson of this event is the paramount importance of politics, perspective and leadership in the struggle for the emancipation of the working class.

The Memorial Day Massacre and Roosevelt’s “plague on both your houses” speech, which came one month later, exposed the bankruptcy of the CIO’s political perspective—anti-socialism, nationalism and the subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party.

The CIO came into being in response to the powerful upsurge of the industrial working class during the Great Depression. This included the general strikes of 1934 in Minneapolis, Toledo, and San Francisco, and, in 1936 and 1937, the explosive sit-down strike movement that erupted in Michigan’s auto plants and spread throughout the North American auto industry and to other industries, leading to the consolidation and growth of the United Auto Workers union (UAW).

In all of these strikes, and most of the other great struggles of the 1930s—which unfolded contemporaneously with revolutionary upheavals in France and Spain—socialists and socialist-minded workers played a leading role. This was true in steel as well, where a group called the Rank-and-File Movement emerged as early as 1933 to fight against the bankrupt perspective of the AFL.

From its inception, the leaders of the CIO—John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers (UMW) and Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA)—sought to steer the industrial union movement away from socialism and into alliance with the Democratic Party. They were aided by the Stalinist Communist Party USA, which supported Roosevelt as part of the Kremlin’s counterrevolutionary “Popular Front” policy.

This perspective was already foundering by the time of the Memorial Day Massacre. The sit-down movement of late 1936 and early 1937, which secured UAW recognition at

General Motors and Chrysler plants, was the high point of the CIO. US Steel saw recognition of the SWOC-CIO as a means of avoiding the type of explosive struggles that had rocked Detroit and Flint months earlier and of gaining market advantage over its rivals.

No major organizational breakthroughs would come again until the eve of US entry into World War II, when both the CIO and the AFL offered up their services to Roosevelt and the American bourgeoisie by agreeing to enforce a war-time no-strike pledge. It was at this point that the CIO finally organized Little Steel and the Ford Motor Company. The overwhelmingly non-union and racially segregated South, dominated by the Democratic Party, was left untouched.

Trotsky, observing the American developments from his final exile in Mexico City, was acutely aware of both the potential of the upsurge of the industrial workers and the political trap being prepared by the bureaucrats.

“The rise of the CIO is incontrovertible evidence of the revolutionary tendencies within the working masses,” he wrote in 1940. “Indicative and noteworthy in the highest degree, however, is the fact that the new ‘leftist’ trade union organization was no sooner founded than it fell into the steel embrace of the imperialist state. The struggle among the tops between the old federation and the new is reducible in large measure to the struggle for the sympathy and support of Roosevelt and his cabinet.”

Trotsky saw that the seeds of the destruction of the CIO were present at its birth. This insight has been thoroughly vindicated.

The unions moved more sharply to the right in the immediate aftermath of the war. In the wake of the massive strike wave of 1945-1946—the largest in US history—the CIO launched an anti-communist witch-hunt and purged from its ranks the socialist and militant workers and organizers who had led the great struggles of 1933-1937. In this way, the union federation definitively demonstrated its defense of capitalism at home and support for American imperialism’s Cold War policy abroad. On this reactionary basis, the CIO reunified with the “business union” AFL in 1955.

The corporatist “social contract” worked out among the union heads, the corporations and both big business parties in the late 1940s—based on the defense of private profit and support for US imperialism abroad in return for a “seat at the table” for organized labor and limited material gains for workers—could be sustained as long as US industry dominated world markets. When this supremacy shattered in the 1970s and 1980s, the AFL-CIO transformed itself into an instrument of the corporations for imposing mass layoffs, wage cuts and speedup.

This anti-working class policy has reached a new stage with the global breakdown of the capitalist system that

began with the Wall Street crash of September 2008. Today, the trade unions—fully transformed into business entities that supply cheap labor to the corporations in return for a share of the profits sweated from workers—are collaborating in a social counterrevolution aimed at eradicating all of the gains won by the working class in the struggles of the past century.

The 2012 presidential election will see the union officialdom funnel more money than ever to elect a president, Barack Obama, who, as opposed to Roosevelt in the 1930s, has no connection with social reform. Obama has handed over trillions of dollars to Wall Street, slashed the wages of auto workers, and spearheaded a far-reaching attack on public education and other basic public services.

The ultimate lesson of the Memorial Day Massacre is that workers cannot put any confidence in the parties or politicians of the ruling class. They must build their own party to fight for the interests of the working class. This means a struggle to put an end to the capitalist system and reorganize economic life on the basis of social needs, not private profit—that is, on a socialist basis.

This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party, which is running Jerry White and Phyllis Scherrer in the 2012 presidential elections. We urge all workers and youth looking for a way to fight unemployment, poverty and war to actively support our election campaign, study our program and make the decision to join the SEP.

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