

HISTORICAL MOMENTS OF POLICING, VIOLENCE, AND RESISTANCE  
VOLUME 2

# THE MEMORIAL DAY MASSACRE



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Chicago, IL

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## ABOUT THIS SERIES

In the last few months of 2011 into early 2012, the issue of police violence once again burst into the mainstream with the treatment of Occupy protesters.

While we were appalled at the violence directed at peaceful protesters by law enforcement, we were also dismayed that this phenomenon was treated as a novel one. The incidents were discussed in a way that was divorced from historical context. After all, the black and white images of police dogs being unleashed on peaceful protesters during the black freedom movement of the 1950s and 60s would not have been alien to the young people who were abused by law enforcement in New York and Oakland at the Occupy protests. Police violence is unfortunately not new.

In an attempt to inject some historical memory into the current considerations of police violence, Project NIA and the Chicago Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) Teaching Collective decided to develop a series of pamphlets to inform and educate the broader public about the longstanding tradition of oppressive policing toward marginalized populations (including some activists and organizers).

This series titled “*Historical Moments of Policing, Violence & Resistance*” features pamphlets on various topics including: Oscar Grant, the Mississippi Black Papers, Slave Patrols, the Young Lords, the 1968 Democratic Convention, the Danzinger Bridge Shootings, Black Student Protests on College Campuses, Timothy Thomas, Resistance to Police Violence in Harlem, and the 1937 Memorial Day Massacre, among others.

The pamphlets are available for free downloading at <http://policeviolence.wordpress.com>. Please spread the word about the availability of these publications.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Every single person who worked on this series volunteered his or her time to this effort. We are grateful beyond words for your support and for your talents.

Special thanks to the following people who have contributed to making this project possible:

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## BACKGROUND

What we today call the Memorial Day Massacre of 1937 occurred when Chicago police officers opened fire on a group of 1000 protestors attempting to establish a picket line in front of Republic Steel, on the city's southeast side.

Similar to the Haymarket Tragedy fifty years earlier, no direct documentation exists from which to ascertain how the violence began that Sunday afternoon. A Paramount news cameraman filmed much of the march and the brutal beatings police laid on injured and fleeing protestors, but he was changing lenses at the moment shots rang out, leaving open questions of interpretation about what sparked the violence.

In the days and months that followed two narratives emerged, strikingly different in the way they explained the cause of the massacre and the events that led up to it.



The story of how this became known as the Memorial Day Massacre is one of how the victims of police violence, with their allies in law and elected office, in the labor movement, in their communities, and in radical political organizations countered a hostile and wildly inaccurate report of details to reframe public perception and reveal a brutal display of class violence perpetrated against working people by state and capital through their agents, the police.

## **4 DEAD, 90 HURT IN STEEL RIOT**

**POLICE REPULSE  
MOB ATTACK ON  
S. CHICAGO MILL**

**26 Bluecoats Are  
Injured in Battle.**



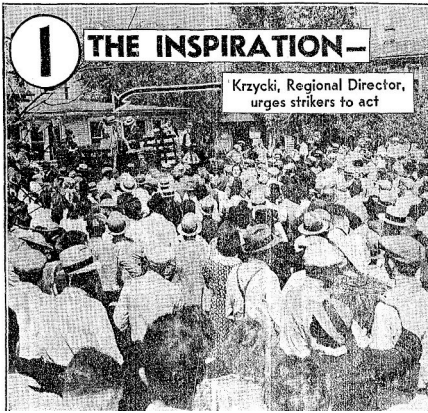
“POLICE GO INTO ACTION TO DISPERSE STRIKERS – Defending their position with nightsticks, policemen are shown here beating off attaching rioters at the Republic Steel company's South Chicago plant. Note the upraised stick and falling rioter.” *Tribune photo*



“RIOTER WOUNDED IN THE LEG – Police carry rioter off the field after he has been struck in the right leg by a bullet or some sharp missile. He was given hospital treatment for his wound, a serious one.” *Tribune photo*

This much was certain: Around four o'clock in the afternoon at 117th Street the protestors encountered a line of Chicago police officers, 200 in number. By the end of the day four protestors were dead and nearly 100 hospitalized with serious injuries.

Another six men would die before the week's end. The police sustained no major injuries. Many of the 65 people they arrested were seriously wounded.



The *Chicago Tribune* immediately built a narrative which established the protestors as the provocateurs, justifying the police's use of lethal violence to stop an enraged mob, led or inspired by communists, intending to invade the mill and forcibly halt production.



Coroner Frank Walsh personally declared to “fix the blame” on “the mob.” His report ruled the death of the ten men as 'justifiable homicide,' despite the fact that the deceased's wounds were on their backs or sides, indicat-

ing they were trying to flee, not attack, the police. Together with police testimony, forces loyal to the Republic Steel corporation engaged in Red-baiting as a means to shape public and legal perception of the incident.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, “Riots Blamed On Red Chiefs,” June 1, 1937

## FINDINGS FROM A SENATE INQUIRY

However, a Senate investigation that June, led by Wisconsin Senator Robert LaFollete, Jr., revealed glaring inconsistencies and outright inaccuracies in earlier accounts.

There is little doubt that the corporation was preparing for class war. The investigation uncovered that Republic Steel had established its own police force of 400 men armed with pistols, rifles, shotguns, and a stockpile tear gas larger than any law-enforcement body in the country.

“Sure we got guns!” boasted corporation president Tom Girdler, who also stated he would “go back to hoeing potatoes in Idaho” before recognizing the workers' right to organize for collective bargaining. Republic Steel had, according to the Senate report, “loosed its guards, thus armed to shoot down citizens on the streets and highways.”



Senator LaFollete's Committee came to four conclusions:

**First, the objective of the protestors was to establish a peaceful picket in front of Republic Steel, not a violent one.** The police had no right to prevent the establishment of a peaceful picket and their claim that protestors intended to commit violence was groundless.

**Second, the police were unprepared and unorganized.** With careful preparation and discipline the situation could have transpired without violence. Individual police officers acted on “perfunctory instructions, if any.”

**Third, the force shown by the police exceeded any perceived provocations from the protestors.** The use of abusive language from the protestors, and even the throwing of projectiles from the rear of the crowd, did not necessitate the instantaneous use of firearms. The violent outcome resulted from either 'gross inefficiency' or a 'deliberate effort to intimidate the strikers' on the part of the police.

**Finally, the bloodshed and death could have been avoided by responsible action from the police.** Failure to place responsibility on the police would invite, according to the report, “the repetition of similar incidents in the future.”<sup>2</sup>

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2 Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, “Violations of free speech and rights of labor: Hearings before a subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor,” United States Senate, Seventy-fourth Congress, second session[--Seventy-sixth Congress, third session] pursuant to S. Res. 266, 1937.

It would be four years until the workers of Republic Steel gained the prize they marched for that Memorial Day. In August, 1941, just months before the United States would enter World War II, Republic Steel agreed to cease its unfair labor practices to prevent its employees from collective bargaining through their own independent union.

# SHAPING & CELEBRATING A NARRATIVE OF RESISTANCE

Our understanding of this event, even the way we refer to it - the **Memorial Day Massacre** - results from the diligent and tireless work of the labor movement and its allies. Labor historian Carol Quirke explains that the sophisticated use of visual representations, still photographs and film footage, marked the emergence of the labor movement's power to win public support by “using mass media to document class violence against workers.”



“WOMEN IN MOB SUBDUED BY POLICE FORCE – Three women are in the group above which felt the force of law and order. Many are lying on the ground to escape blows from the defending force's nightsticks or stray shots from police guns.” *Tribune photo*

The same visual materials used by the police, the corporation, and the mainstream media to “prove” that protestors initiated and deserved the violence were reframed and reinterpreted “to restrict corporate and state violence against unions.”<sup>3</sup>

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3 Roger Bybee, “Memorial Day Massacre of 1937 Offers Stark Reminder: Media Usually Side With Corporations, Police,” In *These Times*, [www.inthesetimes.com](http://www.inthesetimes.com), 2011.

The history and meaning of the Memorial Day Massacre has been recounted over the years as an example of people triumphing over corporate interests.

In 1967, on the 30th anniversary of the massacre, the United Steelworkers of America commissioned a plaque at the base of a flagpole in front of a union hall bearing the names of the 10 men - "Martyrs, Heroes, Unionists" - who lost their lives in the struggle for industrial democracy and "justice and equality for working men and women everywhere." The Illinois Labor History Society, the Southeast Chicago Historical Society, the Chicago Labor and Arts Festival, and many more have continued to preserve and transmit this history through tours, publications, the archiving of important primary documents, the Internet, and memorials.





Fitting symbolism can be found in a statue rededication in 2008. A rusted and forgotten sculpture, commissioned by Republic Steel in 1981 to represent the corporation's bond with the community, was removed from an obscured, shrub-covered area where the factory once stood to a more prominent location across the street, near the union hall.

Often mistaken as an official commemoration to the ten martyrs, the sculpture, created by former Republic Steel employee Ed Blaszak, now boasts new plaques on its pedestal commemorating the names of the martyrs and telling the story of the Memorial Day Massacre.



## RELEVANCE FOR TODAY

We must continuously revisit and reclaim this history of struggle, our history. It is all the more urgent now, as labor eliminating technology like robotics and computers render redundant a growing segment of the working class.

Labor reporting has disappeared from the mainstream media.

Flourishing again in the major newspapers and television news networks are ideas that unions and collective bargaining are useless relics of the past, that they are antithetical to prosperity and security, and that we must accept the 'neoliberal' vision of the capitalist class as the only viable vision for human social, political, and economic relations.

Just as the *Chicago Tribune* demonized those parading for democracy and justice that Memorial Day in 1937, we are seeing a similar approach in the way most mainstream media has covered the 2011 uprisings in Madison, Wisconsin, the Occupy Movement, attacks on teachers and other public workers, the criminalization and illegalization of immigrants, the demonization of Muslims, the LGBTQ community, the war against women.

Behind all of these attacks is a systematic attempt to deny people's right to organize and collectively demand fairness, freedom, and a living wage.

Speaking at the strike committee's headquarters moments before the protestors set out to establish their picket, Leo Krzycki, a talented labor organizer, uttered something prophetic, something as completely relevant to us today as it was to the world of 1937.

“Violence against peaceful picketing must stop,” Krzycki told those assembled in an eloquent speech recalled by witnesses as equal parts humor and fierce determination. “We don't want fascism in America.”<sup>4</sup>

There is a concerted effort to divide and conquer working people across the globe. We are working class. The rights of workers are human rights.

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4 Chris Mahin, “The 1937 Memorial Day Massacre: ‘We Don’t Want Fascism in America,’” Chicago Labor and Arts Blog, [chilaborarts.wordpress.com](http://chilaborarts.wordpress.com), 2010.



# DEDICATION

(Ten people killed during the massacre)

ALFRED CAUSEY

ANTHONY TAGLIEN

EARL HANDLEY

HILDING ANDERSON

JOSEPH ROTHMUND

KENNETH REED

LEE TISDALE

LEO FRANCISCO

OTIS JONES

SAM POPOVICH

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the police responded to the protestors so violently?
2. Why do you think the media was so quick to uncritically accept the police's version of events? Why do you think they were hostile to the protestors' version?
3. The Senate commission suggested police should use only tear gas to disperse 'unruly' crowds. Do you consider this a violent or a non-violent response?
4. How would you commemorate the ten people killed by police on Memorial Day, 1937?
5. Do you think that this story is relevant for today? In what ways?