

## **Labor History: Robert Neidig, “The Lone Fighter”**

*By Ed Leavy*

The history of labor is not free from the greed and corruption that too often mark human activity. The New York building trades union at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> was especially corrupt. Sam Parks, the head of the union, became rich through extortion, blackmail and bribery. Worse, Parks gained his riches by betraying the people he was supposed to serve, his members.

Fuller Construction was a Chicago firm that had moved to New York in the late 1890's. Within five years, the company had become the largest construction company in the world. Fuller was secretly bankrolled by a who's who of turn-of-the-century industry moguls – Cornelius Vanderbilt, James Stillman from the Rockefeller's bank, and Charles Schwab from Carnegie Steel (not the Charles Schwab who formed the investment company). Also arriving from Chicago was Sam Parks. Once Parks took over the building trades union, Fuller Construction boomed. Parks used his union position to threaten smaller construction companies with strikes that would prevent them from finishing their projects. These companies could pay Parks huge bribes to prevent the strike or have their business shut down. Unable to afford either the strike or the bribe, company after company went bankrupt. The building trades never struck a Fuller project, however; Parks was on Fuller's payroll to ensure strikes only happened with other companies. As construction companies folded, Fuller developed a monopoly on building projects, depressing the wages and working conditions that Parks in theory was paid to protect. Parks was hardly subtle about the benefits of these deals: though he was supposedly paid the same salary as the workers he represented, he wore diamond jewelry and owned numerous race horses.

Inevitably, his flaunting of his wealth caught the attention of both the District Attorney and the press. McClure's Magazine was the most highly successful and respected magazines of its time, and in its November 1903 issue Ray Stannard Baker wrote “The Trusts New Tool – The Labor Boss,” exposing how Parks worked with the trusts to grow rich while his members suffered. Baker then followed the article up with “The Lone Fighter,” a description of Robert Neidig, a building trade worker who got involved in the union and worked to return the union to the members. “He got it in his head,” Baker wrote, “that he couldn't expect the union to do everything for him if he did nothing for the union.” Neidig began attending every meeting, spending long hours after a day as a steelworker on construction sites asking questions and challenging the status quo. “By God, I won't be bossed by Sam Parks,” he insisted.

At a time when the repercussions for getting involved in labor fights were often fatal, Neidig had to buy a gun to protect himself from Park's henchmen. He refused to back down. “Should I let the union run itself and not attend meetings because I do not like its methods, or should I turn in and help change the methods?” He attracted attention when he refused to march in the Labor Day parade when Parks, facing indictment for racketeering, insisted on leading it. When Parks was imprisoned, Neidig was elected president. He quickly resolved the factions that had split the union and negotiated agreements on behalf of the entire membership. He was an outspoken voice for worker safety, and was important in the union leadership for decades. Throughout his career, he was known for his integrity and fearlessness.

Robert Neidig and Sam Parks are mostly lost to history now, but the struggle for the soul of unions remains. The conflict between people who see the union as a way of benefiting themselves and people who see the union as a way of benefiting its members continues. It is up to the membership to demand that their issues be the focus of union leadership. As Baker wrote, “Freedom is an expression of character, a condition of morality.” It was not simply Robert Neidig who saved the building trades' union; it was the membership who supported him

and demanded change. Neidig inspired the members to be a better union. It is an example we cannot forget.

*Information came from The Bully Pulpit by Doris Kearns Goodwin – a book I highly recommend – and the two articles mentioned above, which are available on the internet.*