

Labor History: The Herrin Massacre

By Ed Leavy

Most of the events in labor history that include the word “massacre” are about company workers or the police shooting unarmed union workers. The Ludlow Massacre and the Haymarket Square Massacre are two such famous examples. The Herrin Massacre of 1922, which has unexpectedly reappeared in the news recently, is a very different story.

The first quarter of the 20th century featured a number of coal strikes throughout West Virginia and the Midwest. Working conditions were brutal and dangerous, and pay was very low. Often the only housing and supplies available were provided by the coal companies, leaving the workers little more than indentured servants. In April of 1922, a national coal worker strike had been declared. Mines were shut down throughout the country, and coal prices shot up. James Lester, owner of the Southern Illinois Coal Company, saw the rising prices resulting from the strike as an opportunity to make huge profits; he fired all the union members and brought in scab workers, primarily Slavic immigrants from Chicago. It is unclear if the strikebreakers, who were hired by a local employment company and few of whom spoke English well, were aware of the strike when they agreed to the jobs. To the surprise of no one, this action only stoked the inflamed emotions surrounding the strike. Several days of gunfire between the strikers and the company guards followed. By the night of June 21, two union workers had been killed.

A truce was requested by the national militia, and Lester quickly agreed. Union official Fox Hughes also agreed, and went to the mine carrying a white flag. The gunfire stopped. Union workers still surrounded the mine, however, leaving the strikers trapped inside. One company guard finally stepped out of the mine, and a union worker yelled that if the strikebreakers came out they would be led out of the county. When they emerged, they were instead taken to a wooded area where they were lined up in front of a barbed wire fence and shot. Those who tried to escape through the woods were tracked down, tied up, and killed. The victims were buried in unmarked graves in the field; no services were held. Thousands later turned out for the ceremony to honor the two union members who had been killed.

Time passed, and the event slipped from consciousness to a local legend. Ninety-two years later, no one personally remembered it of course, and the incident had become forgotten and even denied by the townspeople. “People didn’t talk about it,” explained Herrin Councilman Bill Sizemore. “I think people were hoping it would just go away.” Scott Doody, who is considered somewhere between the local historian and the village crank, began clamoring to have the field excavated to show that the bodies were there. The proposal was very controversial. Mayor Vic Ritter opposed the excavation, expressing about both the financial and psychic cost. “I believe in rest in peace,” he explained. Others, including Sizemore, disagreed: “I don’t think we should ignore it. I believe we should grow from it, learn from it, and become better people.” Excavations began last November and have continued sporadically through today. Several of the bodies have been uncovered. It’s been discovered through artifacts found at the site that several of the victims were World War I veterans. Work is ongoing to identify the victims so that their names will not be lost to history.

It is tempting, at least for me, to pause here and repeat the terrible conditions in the mines, and how the owners grew rich by impoverishing and endangering their workers. As someone

who reveres the labor movement, who honors the sacrifices working people have made and looks to the past as a way to point the direction we must go in the future, I want to claim that like King Lear we are “more sinned against than sinning.” Yet we cannot hide from the fact that in the name of unionism, workers lined up poor, unarmed people and gunned them down. No cause makes that action acceptable. We must agree with Bill Sizemore; we must acknowledge the sins of the past, grow from them, and honor the victims by striving to be better people and a better movement.

This is based primarily on a Chicago Tribune article from August 19th, with additional information from other articles found on the internet. Thanks to my friend Terry Reed from the Illinois Federation of Teachers who posted the Tribune article (along with dozens of other fantastic labor history articles) on Facebook.