

Martin Irons, Martyr (December 9, 1900)

It was in 1886 that Martin Irons, as chairman of the executive board of the Knights of Labor of the Gould Southwest Railway system, defied capitalist tyranny, and from that hour he was doomed. All the powers of capitalism combined to crush him, and when at last he succumbed to overwhelming odds, he was hounded from place to place until he was ragged and foot-sore and the pangs of hunger gnawed at his vitals.

For 14 long years he fought singlehanded the battle against persecution. He tramped far, and among strangers, under an assumed name, sought to earn enough to get bread. But he was tracked like a beast and driven from shelter. For this "poor wanderer of a stormy day" there was no pity. He had stood between his class and their oppressors — he was brave, and would not flinch; he was honest, and he would not sell; this was his crime, and he must die.

Martin Irons came to this country from Scotland a child. He was friendless, penniless, alone. At an early age he became a machinist. For years he worked at his trade. He had a clear head and a warm heart. He saw and felt the injustice suffered by his class. Three reductions in wages in rapid succession fired his blood. He resolved to resist. He appealed to his fellow workers. When the great strike came, Martin Irons was its central figure. The men felt they could trust him. They were not mistaken.

When at the darkest hour Jay Gould sent word to Martin Irons that he wished to see him, the answer came, "I am in Kansas City." Gould did not have gold enough to buy Irons. This was the greatest crime of labor's honest leader. The press united in fiercest denunciation. Every lie that malignity could conceive was circulated. In the popular mind Martin Irons was the blackest-hearted villain that ever went unhung. Pinkerton bloodhounds tracked him night and day. But through it all this loyal, fearless, high-minded workingman stood steadfast.

The courts and soldiers responded to the command of their masters, the railroads; the strike was crushed and the workingmen were beaten.

Martin Irons had served, suffered for, and honored his class. But he had lost. His class now turned against him and joined in the execration of the enemy. This pained him more than all else. But he bore even this

without a murmur, and if ever a despairing sigh was wrung from him it was when he was alone.

And thus it has been all along the highway of the centuries, from Jesus Christ to Martin Irons.

Let it not be said that Irons was not crucified. For 14 years he was nailed to the cross, and no martyr to humanity ever bore his crucifixion with finer fortitude.

He endured the taunts and jeers and all the bitter mockery of fate with patient heroism; and even when the poor dumb brutes whose wounds and bruises he would have swathed with his own heart-strings turned upon and rent him, pity sealed his lips and silent suffering wrought for him a martyr's crown.

Martin Irons was hated by all who were too base or ignorant to understand him. He died despised, yet shall he live beloved.

No President of the United States gave or tendered him a public office in testimony of his service to the working class. The kind of service he rendered was too honest to be respectable, too aggressive and uncompromising to be popular.

The blow he struck for his class will preserve his memory. In the great struggle for emancipation he nobly did his share, and the history of labor cannot be written without his name.

He was an agitator, and as such shared the common fate of all. Jesus Christ, Joan of Arc, Elijah Lovejoy, John Brown, Albert Parsons, and many others set the same example and paid the same penalty.

For the reason that he was a despised agitator and shunned of men too mean and sordid to comprehend the lofty motive that inspired him, he will be remembered with tenderness and love long after the last of his detractors shall have moldered in a forgotten grave.

It was in April 1899, in Waco, Texas, that I last pressed this comrade's hand. He bore the traces of poverty and broken health, but his spirit was as intrepid as when he struck the shield of Hoxie 13 years before;¹ and when he spoke of Socialism he seemed transfigured, and all the smoldering fires within his soul blazed from his sunken eyes once more.

I was pained, but not surprised, when I read that he had "died penniless in an obscure Texas town." It is his glory and society's shame that he died that way.

His weary body has at last found rest, and the grandchildren of the men and women he struggled, suffered and died for will weave chaplets where he sleeps.

His epitaph might read: "For standing bravely in defense of the working class, he was put to death by slow torture."

Martin Irons was an honest, courageous, manly man. The world numbers one less since he has left it.

Brave comrade, love, and farewell!

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ⁱ Herbert M. "Hub" Hoxie (1839-1886) was Jay Gould's 1st Vice President of the Southwestern system from 1883.