

The Trial and Its Meaning (June 8, 1907)

Perhaps the most unfortunate thing about the trial now in progress in Idaho from the working class point of view is that so few understand its true meaning, its real significance, its full import. It is one of the strange freaks of history that its makers are not to be understood by their contemporaries, but that they, especially the greatest among them, must die ignominiously and wait for succeeding generations to interpret their works and do them justice.

When John Brown was put upon trial in Charlestown, Virginia, 48 years ago, few people, extremely few, understood its meaning. Although half a century has passed and the fiercest civil war in history, of which that trial was but the prelude, has been fought, the great mass of the people has not yet awakened to its significance. Another century or more will be required before the strike at Harper's Ferry and the trial at Charlestown will be understood in their larger meaning, as written in subsequent events, by the American people and the world.

Ralph Waldo Emerson¹ was one of the few who understood that historic trial of half a century ago, the trial of a despised agitator and hated insurrectionist. His prophetic eye pierced the future as he said: "John Brown will make the gallows as glorious as Jesus Christ make the cross."² The coming centuries will vindicate the prescience of the Sage of Concord and the gallows upon which John Brown, the liberator, perished will be kept green with wreaths of immortelles³ by the countless children of freedom.

The outcome of the pending trial is awaited with equal concern by the tsar of Russia and the president of the United States. They at least understand in some measure the vital issue that is involved and the widespread influence the outcome will have upon their respective countries.

When the tsar of Russia expressed his imperial approval of President Roosevelt's characterization of Moyer and Haywood as "undesirable citizens" he not only added his testimony to the worldwide interest in the trial, but unwittingly recognized the international class struggle of which the trial in itself is but the merest incident.⁴

It is this very fact — a fact of the supremest importance — that the capitalist powers are striving by all conceivable means to conceal from the working class; upon their success in so doing depends the consummation of the conspiracy to destroy organized labor and rule the wage-slaves of the western mines and smelters with a rod of iron for years to come.

The trial now going on, viewed from any comprehensive standpoint, is anything but a murder trial. In the war between labor and capital in the Rocky Mountains during the last 30 years — sometimes in pitched battles and again in guerrilla fashion — hundreds have been slaughtered, but not all of them combined have created a tithe of the furor aroused by the taking off of Frank Steunenberg, the particular murder which lies at the foundation of this prosecution and which must be understood in at least its essential features to account for the worldwide interest it has awakened.

Hundreds of miners have been killed under circumstances quite as cruel as the assassination of Steunenberg, but who can pronounce the name of even one of them?

Why was no great reward offered for their slayers? Why did not the legislature of Idaho appropriate \$100,000 for the conviction of the murderers of these miners?⁵ And why did the governor of that state not lay snares to kidnap the supposed instigators of these crimes? Or the president of the United States pronounce them “undesirable citizens?”

Ah, that is the point! Why were the hundreds of workmen slain so inconsequential and easily forgotten, while the killing of Steunenberg has aroused the whole universe?

The answer comes of itself. Frank Steunenberg belonged to the ruling class. As governor of Idaho he had served that class with particular fidelity. As a retired capitalist he was identified with that class. Had he been killed while still a union printer under precisely the same circumstances scarcely anyone outside of Idaho would have even heard of it and by then it would soon have been forgotten.

With Frank Steunenberg it was different. He was dear to the hearts of the mine and smelter trust and the lumber trust and the Standard Oil trust. He had served them loyally in a grave crisis and under peculiarly trying circumstances. Elected as a union man and supported solidly by the Western Federation of Miners upon the express understanding that he was and would continue to be a true friend to organized labor, no governor of any state ever served the master class with more abject servility than did Frank Steunenberg, the supposed union man, as every old miner in Idaho knows

to his sorrow. It is not now necessary to dwell upon this feature of the case. The record is there and will speak for itself now and for years to come. The mine and smelter trust and its organs declare it a record of honor, but it must be remembered that their testimonials are based upon services received and it would be strange indeed if even an octopus without conscious failed to vouch for those who conserve its interests.

It is not that these sharks had any particular love for Steunenberg. Not at all. They have no love for anybody, for the reason that they are incapable of love. They devour; they do not love. And when they are not devouring the working class they turn on each other. But Steunenberg had become one of them and the attack upon him was an attack upon the capitalist ruling class and could be made the excuse for a formidable assault by the whole capitalist administration, state and national, upon the strongholds of labor unionism, the only menace to the undisputed sway of the corporate brigands.

Steunenberg amounted to something — he was not a workingman. He was a capitalist and had been the governor of Idaho for the capitalist class. Having so basely betrayed the union workingmen who elected him, rewarding them with bullpens and bullets, the presumption was natural that they had a hand in his death, but why they should have waited seven years to avenge their grievances has not yet been explained.

We are not now interested in any theory or motive relating to the assassination, but only in showing that this case is not a murder case at all; that at bottom it is a secret plot to destroy organized labor and that it is this, and this alone, that gives it national and international character and significance.

Had Davis H. Waite, the grand old governor of Colorado, been assassinated, as he was often threatened, would the mine and smelter trust have turned heaven and earth and two governors turned kidnappers to punish his suspected slayer?

Had John P. Altgeld, the greatest governor in all the Union, been murdered by his enemies, as they swore he should be, would the Standard Oil Company have set all its vast machinery in operation and President Grover Cleveland, a twin Roosevelt, applied all his administrative powers to apprehend the culprit and bring him to justice?

Had it been William D. Haywood instead of Frank P. Steunenberg, what capitalist governor would have been the least concerned? What legislature would have changed the organic laws of the state to punish his

alleged assassin? What capitalist daily papers would turn black in the face denouncing editorially the atrocity of the crime?

Everything connected with this case, from the perjured affidavit in which it had its legal (?) inception, the gubernatorial conspiracy, the secret arrest, the midnight kidnapping, the special train, the Pinkerton “confessions,” the special acts of the legislatures, the denial of habeas corpus, the princely treatment of Orchard, the Taft invasion, the support of the national administration, the concerted cry of the capitalist press from New York to California for revenge — everything from the infernal beginning to the empaneling of a jury without a workingman upon it proves conclusively, in detail and on the whole, that all the powers of capitalism are behind the prosecution and that it is folly to expect justice when all the machinery of government has been primed for the one specific purpose of pronouncing death upon the leadership of organized labor and carrying the sentence into execution.

Nevertheless, there is plenty of room for hope. The capitalist powers may commit crime without compunction, but they are not fools. They are wise enough to know how far they can go and when to call a halt.

They did not dream of the uprising of the working class that has swept across the country like a tidal wave. They can not yet realize that 100,000 indignant and protesting workingmen and women thronged Boston Common and made the welkin ring; that 50,000 marched through the streets of New York and 30,000 through the streets of Chicago proclaiming their fealty to the heroic leaders on trial in Idaho.

This it is that is making itself felt in the trial and will continue to be an increasing factor until the final outcome. So far as the alleged “fair trial” is concerned, when the ruling powers make up their minds to commit murder they scruple at nothing, and since they control the legislative and administrative machinery it is an easy matter for them to commit their crimes “legally,” according to the “forms of law,” and thus satisfy the feeble-minded, who are quite prepared to see even their best friends hanged by the necks until they are dead, provided the ropes are of the legal length and the proceedings bear the “legal” trademark of the capitalist regime.

So much for the scruples of the ruling class.

But as already stated, they have sense, if not scruples. They have their fingers upon the social pulse and know precisely how it is beating.

Will it pay? is the only question with them.

Will it pay to convict innocent men? What will be the consequences? That is what they are asking themselves from Rockefeller down. They hate Bill Haywood as the devil hates a white soul, and for the same reason.

Bill Haywood has been bravely fighting for his class. They know it. He is not a murderer. They know that. He is loved and honored by millions of his fellow workers. They know that, also. To hang him would make him a martyr and a hero, precipitate a conflict, and a million aroused workingmen would spring from the soil fertilized by his noble blood to avenge his cruel death.

The working class of the United States may not comprehend the full meaning of this historic trial, but they are sufficiently awake to its significance that they will watch it eagle-eyed from day to day and from hour to hour, no matter how far it may be prolonged, until the end, and their vigilance and determination will not relax until justice has been done, and in that hour their fellow workers will walk forth free men.

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¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was a philosopher and poet and is recognized as a founder of the transcendentalist movement, based upon individualism, freedom, and appreciation of the natural world. An ordained protestant minister, Emerson was a staunch supporter of the controversial abolitionist movement and was personally acquainted with anti-slavery insurrectionist leader John Brown.

² The exact words of Emerson, uttered as part of his lecture "Courage," delivered on November 8, 1859 at Tremont Temple in Boston, called John Brown "The Saint, whose fate yet hangs in suspense, but whose martyrdom, if it shall be perfected, will make the gallows as glorious as the cross." The large crowd assembled is said to have responded in a "most enthusiastic manner." See: *The Liberator* [Boston], vol. 29, no. 45, whole no. 1506 (Nov. 11, 1859), p. 2.

³ *Long-lasting floral arrangements, frequently made of evergreens.*

⁴ This comment by Russian Tsar Nikolai II has not been located, although it was also briefly mentioned, before being stricken by objection, by Haywood defense attorney E. F. Richardson during jury questioning on May 24, 1907.

⁵ The Idaho legislature approved two funding measures totaling more than \$100,000 to pay for the costs of prosecuting the Western Federation of Miners leaders, thereby transferring the legal expense from the county to the state government.