
The McNamara Case and the Labor Movement

by Eugene V. Debs

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This article is inspired by the report I have just read in a morning paper of a two days' conference held in Washington by the "McNamara Ways and Means Committee of the American Federation of Labor," and telling of the cowardly and contemptible action of that body, with Samuel Gompers presiding over it, in denouncing the McNamara brothers and exonerating themselves; and not only this, but "expressing the satisfaction of organized labor that the culprits have been commensurately punished for their crime"; and all of this abject sycophancy to curry favor with the capitalist class.

It is truly a spectacle to see these national leaders of the American Federation of Labor joining the Otises, the Posts, the Parrys, and the Kirbys¹ in savage denunciation of their own union brethren, whose crime consists in their having carried out the policy of Gompers craft unionism to its logical conclusion.

The McNamara brothers, whatever else may be said of them, are at least, in this respect, more decent and self-respecting than their former official associates; their lips are sealed. They have accepted the penalties imposed upon them without a word and have refused to implicate anyone but themselves.

The acts to which the McNamaras have confessed and for which they are now in prison I do not approve, nor does any other Socialist; and such acts would never be committed if it were in our power to prevent them. But realizing as I do, as a working class brother of the

¹ Reference is to Harrison Gray Otis (1837-1917), anti-union activist and publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*; C.W. Post (1854-1914), prominent food manufacturer and leading antagonist of the labor movement over the Los Angeles bombing; David M. Parry (1852-1915), President of the National Association of Manufacturers from 1902-06 and founder of the anti-union Citizens' Industrial Association of America (CIAA); and John Kirby, Jr., industrialist and activist in the "open shop" movement as a former head of the CIAA.

McNamara brothers after as well as before their confession and conviction, that there are mitigating circumstances of a vital nature to take into consideration, I absolutely refuse to join in the capitalist clamor and craft union claque of denunciation of these condemned unionists.

First of all, I am not caring what the capitalist class think of me and I am not tempering my judgment or shaping my acts to meet their favor. I am concerned only with what is right and what is my duty, and the rest can take care of itself.

Admitting that the McNamaras are guilty of all they are charged with in the way of dynamiting buildings and bridges, *their acts are the logical outcome of the impotency and hopelessness of the craft form of unionism*, typified by Samuel Gompers and his official associates in the American Federation of Labor, and of which the condemned men are faithful disciples and loyal devotees.

The McNamara brothers are not “Socialist fanatics” and “unbelievers”; they had no sympathy with industrial unionism; but they were members of the Democratic Party, and of the Catholic church, and of the pure and simple labor union. They were active allies of Gompers in the support of the Democratic ticket, and with their chieftain they believed in “rewarding their friends and punishing their enemies.”

And then they saw the representatives of pure and simple unionism kicked out of Congress and out of all the state legislatures, year after year, under both Republican and Democratic administrations; they saw their unions paralyzed by court injunctions; they heard the President [Theodore Roosevelt] denounce union men as “undesirable citizens,” deserving of the gibbet; they saw governors calling out the militia and sheriffs swearing in deputies to shoot union men dead in their tracks for striking against famine and picketing to save their jobs; they saw the Steel Trust crushing one union after another, discharging and blacklisting their members, throwing them into jail and putting human bloodhounds on their tracks to deprive them of employment and literally starve them and their wives and drive their daughters into prostitution; and understanding little or nothing of the philosophy of the class struggle and of the enlightened methods of working class warfare, reflected in the class-conscious movement of the workers, based upon the unity not of the craft but of the entire class, who shall say that these craft unionists, the McNamara brothers, defeated at every turn and threatened from every side by the re-

morseless power of the trusts and the forces of government, are conscienceless criminals when in such a desperate extremity they resort to the brutal methods of self-preservation which the masters and exploiters of their class have forced upon them?

As between this blind and cruel extreme and the opposite extreme of abject and cowardly surrender, the former is infinitely preferable; for at least the spirit of resistance to oppression, and the poverty and misery which spring from oppression, keep the hope alive that the horrors of slavery shall not endure forever. But for that spirit the sun of labor, if it ever had one, had long since set in everlasting gloom, and if unfortunately, or tragically as in the present case, that spirit is expressed in blind ferocity and brutal revenge, at least those who are morally responsible by having inculcated crime, should have humanity enough in their hearts to restrain their cruel hands from stoning the victims and rejoicing in their calamity. If they lack the moral fiber to avow their own responsibility and accept it as becomes men they should at least preserve the decency of silence.

Samuel Gompers and his official associates should be the very last to join the labor-crushing magnates of the trusts and their swarms of mercenary hirelings in condemning the McNamara brothers and expressing satisfaction over their tragic fate. Rather should they weep in anguish that in their moral cravenness they not only deserted their own deluded followers, but joined their enemies in the cry to crucify them *to exculpate themselves*. And here I leave them, the prey to their own remorse, those keen pangs will torment them in the days to come if their hearts are not dead and their moral sensibilities turned to stone.

We Socialists are making no apology for any word or deed of ours in the McNamara case, and as for myself personally I shall not denounce them. I condemn the crime, but I pity all the victims, all of them, the McNamaras included.

Jim McNamara said he did not intend to take life in the blowing up of the *Times*. I believe him against all the corporation detectives on earth.

Jim McNamara pleaded to go to the gallows, loaded with infamy, accepting it all to himself, to save the life of his brother. The love and fidelity of these two brothers for each other in the shadow of the gallows put to shame the spirit of those good Christians (!!!) who now traduce them, and if the Nazarene of twenty centuries ago, who was also crucified for opposing the rich, were here his voice would not be

heard mingling with the voices of the Pharisees in the city for their blood.

We are not forgetting in this hour of wholesale denunciation that the McNamaras were kidnapped; that an outrageous crime was perpetrated upon them, and we are not unmindful of the fact that their kidnappers have not been and will not be punished, nor of the reason why. We are going to see to it, moreover, that the fact is not forgotten, no matter how long it may be, until that crime against the working class has also been atoned for.

We Socialists are revolutionists, not murderers; we stand for education and organization, not assassination; and for that very reason we are opposed to capitalism, the prolific breeder of all these revolting crimes.

Roosevelt, who morally is still in the jungle, says that "Murder is Murder" in denouncing the McNamaras and congratulating Burns,² but murder is not murder when it is for capitalism, and killing is not killing when it is for capitalist profit.

The capitalist owners of the St. Paul mine at Cherry, Ill., buried nearly 300 miners two years ago, some of them surviving for over a week. Compared with this heart-breaking catastrophe the *Los Angeles Times* affair pales into insignificance, but this is not murder. The coroner's jury fixed the responsibility upon the capitalists, but they are not guilty of crime.

The capitalist proprietors of the Bayless mill at Austin, Pa., as deliberately killed their employees in the dam disaster there, according to the coroner's inquest, as if they had placed dynamite under the hovels, but this is not murder, and not one of them will be punished.

The capitalist mine owners of Pennsylvania had the sheriff and his deputies massacre a body of miners who were marching peaceably along the road near Latimer, with an American flag at the head of their procession, but this is not murder.

Under the ethical code of capitalism the slaying of workingmen who resist capitalism is not murder, and as a workingman I absolutely refuse to condemn men as murderers under the moral code of the capitalist state for fighting according to their light on the side of the working class.

² Reference is to William J. Burns (1861-1932), head of the William J. Burns International Detective Agency, hired by the city of Los Angeles to investigate the October 1, 1910 bombing of the *Los Angeles Times* building.

If the McNamara brothers had been corporation detectives and had shot dead 21 inoffensive union pickets, instead of placing dynamite under the *Los Angeles Times*, they would have been protected by the law and hailed by admiring capitalists as heroes.

I utterly abhor murder, but I have my own ideas as to what constitutes murder. John Brown was an atrocious murderer in the eyes of the slave power, but today he is one of the greatest heroes of history. Sherman blew up and otherwise destroyed all the property within his reach, killed indiscriminately, and spread desolation and despair all the way from Atlanta to the sea, but he was a hero and not a murderer.

Do the capitalists ever rave and tear their hair over killings committed by them, or their mercenaries, in their interests and for their profit?

Does an Otis ever howl with rage when workingmen are buried alive or blown to atoms in a mine through the criminal greed of their capitalist masters?

It is only when a killing interferes with their piracies that it is murder. All their tender sensibilities are then aroused and in frenzied concert they cry about "the law" and invoke all its terrors to glut their merciless vengeance.

I have not changed my mind about the theory that the dynamiting of the *Los Angeles Times* was instigated by the capitalists themselves. I am convinced that all these dynamiting crimes had their inspiration in capitalist sources and their genesis in capitalist camps. I have many reasons for this which time and space will not now permit me to fully set forth. I can but suggest a few of these, which to most of the readers of the *Review* are sufficient in their suggestiveness;

First, the war of the Steel Trust on all the iron and steel workers' unions and the declaration of [J.P.] Morgan that the unions had to be destroyed.

Second, the fate of the Amalgamated Association, the Lake Seaman's Union, and others which were crushed beneath the iron heel of the trust.

Third, the joining of these unions by the police spies and detectives of the Steel Trust, such as McManigal, who was permitted to continue his career of crime for three years without being apprehended, and if the whole truth were known it would be found that McManigal, the corporation hireling, who will be cleared, if tried at

all, is far more guilty than the McNamaras and led them into crime instead of being their dupe.³

Fourth, the fight between the Erectors' Association and the independent contractors. When the Whiskey Trust was organized the war raged fiercely between the trust and the independents and a number of distilleries were blown up with dynamite for the same reason that incited the war of the nightriders in the tobacco growing states of the South.

Certain it is that Otis and his Merchants' and Manufacturers' Association who had sworn to wipe organized labor from the Pacific coast had everything to gain and nothing to lose by blowing up the *Los Angeles Times*, while organized labor had everything to lose and nothing to gain from this and similar outrages.

But even if Otis and his union-wrecking pals were totally innocent of any direct connection with the crime, it would still be the fruit of their own mad policy and the responsibility for it will finally lodge upon their own heads. The *Times* explosion was one of the echoes of Otis's declaration of war of extermination, one of the answers, sharp and fatal, to his tyrannical pronunciamento against union labor. It was also an answer, and not the last, to government by injunction, anti-picketing ordinances, and other capitalist devices to stay the march of organized labor and keep the workers in bondage. It was likewise an answer to federal court decisions legalizing the kidnapping and blacklisting of workingmen at the command of their capitalist masters.

And now a word to those who over their champagne and in sleeping cars and at the clubs and other cozy places, with their stomachs well filled, are demanding that we join them in denouncing the McNamaras "to rid organized labor of its enemies." If the McNamaras had really been the enemies of organized labor this gentry would not condemn them and they would not now be in prison.

But there are some who are conscientious and who really feel that we ought to howl with the capitalist press against the McNamaras "to clear the skirts of the labor movement," and to these we want to say

³ Ortie E. McManigal, a member of the International Association of Bridge and Structural Iron Workers, admitted to having conducted previous terrorist activities on behalf of the union and confessed to complicity in the *Los Angeles Times* bombing on April 14, 1911. McManigal turned state's evidence in the *Times* case and his testimony was instrumental in securing guilty pleas from the McNamara brothers in their highly publicized 1911 trial. McManigal eventually served a prison term of 2-1/2 years for his activities in the *Times* bombing.

that before they are qualified to condemn the McNamaras they must put themselves in their places. The McNamaras were reared as wage-workers in the capitalist system. they were never taught in the delicacy and refinement of things. Life to them has been a struggle in which they and their class have always gotten the worst of it.

Who of those who are so fierce and relentless in condemning John McNamara would dare to serve as a structural iron worker, suspended in midair on a swinging beam, for a single day?

It is impossible for these people to know the psychology of the worker who is compelled to risk his life every minute of the day to provide for his wife and loved ones.

Every skyscraper is built at the sacrifice of an average of one structural worker for every floor in it.

This worker joins the union to better his condition and he finds that it is a crime to be a union man. His union is attacked, he is discharged, put upon the blacklist and hounded from place to place until he is an outcast and in rags. His little home is broken up, his family is scattered, and possibly the daughter he loved with all his honest heart is in a house of shame.

Have you, my friend, had these experiences, or any of them? If not, you are not qualified to sit in judgment upon men who have been driven to these cruel extremities and forced down to these infernal depths as thousands of honest men have been and thousands more will be in the class war that is being waged with increasing bitterness and intensity all over the civilized world.

The lesson of the McNamara tragedy will not be lost upon the American workers. It will be one more experience added to the many they already have and all of which are necessary to clarify their vision, increase their knowledge, and strengthen their determination to put an end to the system in which classes war on each other to death and destruction, and workingmen are imprisoned and hanged for crimes of which they are only the blind and deluded victims.

In closing I want to express my satisfaction that the lives of the McNamara brothers have been saved. For this neither praise nor censure is due to the capitalist class. The self-confessed dynamiters owe their lives to the Socialist movement. The American Federation of Labor did not save them.

Had it not been for the menace to the Otises of the impending Socialist political conquest of Los Angeles both the McNamaras

would have been sentenced to the gallows. As to this, there is no shadow of doubt.

There is in this incident food for reflection for those who sneer at political action and decry the political power of the working class.

If the McNamara case teaches us anything it is that *we must organize along both economic **and** political lines*, that we must unite in the *same union* and *fight together*, and in the *same party* and *vote together*, and stick unflinchingly to that program, growing stronger through defeat as well as victory, until at last the triumphant hosts of labor crown the final class struggle with the glory of emancipation.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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