

A Labor Strike Turned To Bloodshed



On May 5th, 1886, the Bay View Tragedy occurred. It's one of the most tragic events in recent labour history. A simple strike that turned into the death of seven men. It's a very sorrowful event, yet one that changed current labor hours to the current hours that they are today. The Bay View Tragedy is a very powerful event that broke the barrier of standing up for what people believe in, and affected everyone in the Milwaukee-area labor community.

Before labor workers won rights they deserved, they would work for 6 days per week, 10 hours per day, for a pay between 90 cents to \$1.15 a day. On May 2nd, 1886, the Central Labor Union held a sort of parade in Milwaukee, where workers carried banners with sayings, such as Eight hours is our battle cry¹ and The workmen do not beg, they demand.² Wisconsin governor Jeremiah Rusk was concerned violence would unfold as a result of the strike for the eight hour workday. On April 29, 3 days before this parade-type gathering, he called the militia to be on standby, incase they needed to shoot if violence had occurred.

On May 3rd, they had shut down every factory but one; the North Chicago Railroad Rolling Mills Steel Foundry in Bay View, which was then the area's biggest manufacturer. The chant then changed to, Eight hours, everyone must strike, onto the mills³.

On May 4th, Governor Rusk called the Mills and told Captain Treauer of the Lincoln Guard If the strikers try to enter the mill, shoot to kill.⁴ Treauer then ordered his men to pick out a man and, when the order is given, shoot. At about nine in the morning the next day, the strikers rejoined once again, still chanting Eight hours.⁵ A

reporter who had slept with them overnight reported that it was Odd that this was a group with no real leadership, but everyone was united in one single purpose.⁶ The crowd approached the mill and faced the militia who were ready to fire if necessary. Before Captain Treumer knew the crowd's real intentions, he ordered them to stop, but the strikers, about two hundred yards away, did not hear him. The militiamen fired into the crowd, killing seven people⁷. The crowd was in chaos as people tried to run.

The Milwaukee Journal reported that six were dead and at least eight more were expected to die within twenty four hours⁸. Meanwhile, some strikers wanted revenge on the militia but to no benefit. For several days afterwards a few strikers were still marching throughout the city but no one would join their protest. Those who died included a boy, about thirteen year old, who tagged along with the crowd, wondering what was going on, and a retired worker who was living in Bay View. He was struck down by a stray bullet as he was getting water, even though he was not part of the strike. On May 6th, leaders of labour groups met with Governor Rusk and asked him to pull back the Militia. They stated they would police their own actions, but Rusk refused until the strikers disbanded and went back to work. I seen my duty and I done it⁹ said Governor Rusk. To this day, people still gather and remember the unforgettable strike that happened on those fateful few days in May.

Bibliography

Gurda, John. "Bay View Tragedy." *Wisconsin Labor History Society*, 30 Apr. 1995, www.wisconsinlaborhistory.org/resources/bay-view/.

Semenske, David. "1886: The Bay View Massacre." *Libcom.org*, 24 July 2007, 14:09, libcom.org/history/1886-bay-view-massacre

