

The Lattimer Massacre and the Meaning of Citizenship

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The other papers published here on the events that transpired in Lattimer, Pennsylvania in the summer of 1897 describe that tragedy more fully and eloquently than I could ever imagine. What I can try to accomplish in this brief piece, however, is to suggest how the Lattimer Massacre fit into the larger story of labor and general United States history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Lattimer may have been exceptional in the number of lives lost and the intensity of the violent outburst by local sheriff's deputies. But in nearly all other aspects it fit neatly into the narrative of labor's coming of age in the industrial United States. Like the strikers at Homestead and in the Idaho Coeur d'Alenes in 1892; like the Pullman strikers of 1894; the lead miners of the Coeur d'Alenes again in 1899; the silver miners of Cripple Creek, Colorado in 1894 and again between 1903-1905; the Ludlow coal miners in 1914; and millions of industrial workers during and just after World War I; the coal miners of the Hazleton, Pennsylvania district were contesting the meaning of citizenship in the United States. Were immigrants and wage workers equal citizens in a democratic republic, or were they a subaltern class subject to the whims and wills of their employers and more advantaged local citizens?

The behavior of Lattimer's mostly immigrant coal miners during their protest marches in the summer of 1897 illustrated precisely how their actions signified the contested nature of citizenship. During both marches, the initial peaceful parade and the subsequent violent debacle, the marchers in the van of the demonstration held high American flags as a symbol of their equal citizenship rights under United States law. And it was also why the Italian immigrant protestor in the first march carried with him his naturalization papers as evidence that he had a constitutional right to march and to protest on public highways and streets as a United States citizen-to-be. The flags, the naturalization papers, the marchers claims to the rights of citizenship attested to the reality that Italian, Slavic, and other immigrant coal miners of the district had shed

their sojourner status as temporary residents in a new land for an identity as "Americans" entitled to the same respect and rights as their older-stock and more fortunate neighbors and fellow townspeople. The contingent of immigrant workers that marched into the deputies' line of fire on September 10, 1897, however, learned the hard way that common wage workers and recent immigrants were not yet deemed equal citizens by those who wielded power locally and regionally. Not only did nineteen immigrant marchers lose their lives and a far larger number suffer grievous injury, but the deputies who caused the deaths and injuries were acquitted of crimes by a jury of their peers.

This was a lesson, or reality, that millions of workers, U.S. and foreign born, learned before and after Lattimer. It was the lesson that Homestead, Pennsylvania's steelworkers had discovered in the summer of 1892. Led primarily by U.S.-born skilled and unionized men allied to newer immigrants from eastern Europe, the workers of Homestead in their struggle against the Carnegie Steel Company claimed their rights to a secure job in the mills that their labor power had made productive and profitable. Already full citizens in the political community of Homestead, which they dominated and administered through their votes in public polling places, the strikers demanded similar participatory rights in the workplace as part of their American birthright. In short order, however, the governor of Pennsylvania through the use of state troops taught Homestead's strikers that they had few, if any, rights as workers and that the political rights that they had exercised as local citizens could be usurped by a higher authority. Not only did troops assist Henry Clay Frick and Andrew Carnegie in breaking the strike, but they also removed from local municipal office union members and their sympathizers. And to rub salt into the raw wounds of the strikers, the state of Pennsylvania initiated legal proceedings against the strike leaders, charging them with murder and assault. Although a jury acquitted the indicted strike leaders, for the next forty years Homestead's workers remained noncitizens at work and second-class citizens in a local community dominated absolutely by their employer.¹

Two years later, during the Pullman strike and boycott of 1894, Eugene V. Debs learned the same lesson. At the time a firm believer in

1. Paul Krause, *The Battle for Homestead, 1880-1892: Politics, Culture, and Steel* (Pittsburgh, 1992) provides the most complete treatment of the two contending versions of republican citizenship at stake during the conflict between workers and employers. For the classic treatment of the circumstances of the steelworkers, see David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (Cambridge, 1960), Chs. 3-6.

a constitution and a political system that promised equal rights to all citizens, Debs, simultaneously an equally loyal trade unionist and U.S. citizen, discovered that his dual loyalties could not be balanced. Proving loyal to his trade union brothers and sisters employed at the Pullman Palace Car Works, Debs found his public citizenship put in peril. The state to which Debs voluntarily assigned his loyalty condemned as criminal the boycott that he called, interdicted the strike and boycott by judicial injunction, and imprisoned Debs for violating the injunction. Just as had happened at Homestead two years earlier, once again the state used its police power—troops, marshals, and legal process—to restrain workers' ability to exercise their full rights as citizens. Debs' experience during the strike and boycott set him directly on the path to socialism and to a future life and career as the most famous radical of his generation.²

Similar experiences in 1892, 1899, and between 1903-1905 drove hard-rock miners and their leaders in the Rocky Mountain West down the road to political radicalism. In the former two years miners in the northern panhandle of the state of Idaho saw their union power and local political power trumped by the might of the state and federal governments. Twice able to close local mines through effective strikes supported by municipal and county authorities, the miners suffered defeat as Idaho's governors appealed for federal troops to assist them in maintaining law and order. Both in 1892 and 1899 troops assisted state officials in arresting hundreds of union members and imprisoning them in temporary stockades known as "bullpens" prior to trying scores of putative strike leaders for criminal acts.³ The events that transpired in Colorado between 1903 and 1905 justly merited the appellation that they received at the time, "a civil war." In this instance, the state not only used troops to break a strike but approved the military commanders' decision to suspend civil law in favor of martial law, to try strike leaders before courts martial, and to transport beyond the state's border hundreds of strikers and sympathizers without a shred of due process.

2. Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs, Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, 1988). Notice how Salvatore chose to define Debs as a citizen as well as a socialist in the book's subtitle. And see especially Part II: "The Meaning of Citizenship."

3. Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago, 1969), pp. 29-35; Melvyn Dubofsky, "James H. Hawley and the Origins of the Haywood Case, 1892-1899," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, LVIII (January 1967), 23-32. See J. Anthony Lukas, *Big Trouble: A Murder in a Small Western Town Sets Off a Struggle for the Soul of America* (New York, 1997), for a more recent and dramatic treatment of the same events.

And when strike leaders appealed to Washington to protect workers' rights as U.S. citizens, the administration of Theodore Roosevelt turned a deaf ear.⁴ Once more, workers, U.S.-born and immigrant alike, discovered that their citizenship rights did not equal those of their employers or social betters.

Ten years later and once again in the state of Colorado, striking workers learned the hard way how limited were their rights and privileges as citizens. In this instance, a largely immigrant labor force of coal miners who chose to strike for basic rights against the Rockefeller-dominated Colorado Fuel and Iron Company saw themselves and their families evicted from company housing, denied access to all company-supplied facilities, and denied a right to reemployment as union members. And they could not even find safety in the temporary tent camp that their union, the United Mine Workers of America, built to shelter them. There on April 20, 1914 they suffered as victims of a poorly disciplined force of Colorado National Guardsmen who attacked the camp, put its tents and other facilities to the torch, made few distinctions among men, women, and children, and caused the deaths of two women and eleven children, who had suffocated in underground trenches where they had sought safety from the rampaging troops (ten men and one child had been killed by gunfire). Again, as union leaders had done a decade earlier, United Mine Workers' officials appealed to Washington to intervene on behalf of the constitutional rights of Ludlow's abused workers. Woodrow Wilson proved more attentive than Theodore Roosevelt, sending federal troops to Colorado to separate armed strikers who were waging a guerilla battle against undisciplined guardsmen and to maintain a patina of just order, but the president would not, or could not restore the strikers' rights to a place in the coal mines as union members.⁵

Workers' demands for equal citizenship rights came to a head during the World War I years. Not only did the domestic propaganda circulated to win support for a war waged against the Kaiser and his Prussian autocracy suggest that this was a struggle about essential democratic citizenship rights; it also fit into a government and corporate campaign to has-

4. M. Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, pp. 36-56; J.A. Lukas, *Big Trouble*; and especially George G. Suggs, Jr., *Colorado's War on Militant Unionism: James H. Peabody and the Western Federation of Miners* (Detroit 1972).

5. Howard M. Gitelman, *Legacy of the Ludlow Massacre, a Chapter in American Industrial Relations* (Philadelphia, 1988), Chs. 1-6. See also Zeese Papanikolas, *Buried Unsung: Louis Tikas and the Ludlow Massacre* (Salt Lake City, 1982), Chs. 3-15.

ten the "Americanization" of immigrant workers and to transform them from sojourners with no commitment to the nation of their immigration into citizen-workers who identified themselves with the American state. During the war the federal government encouraged workers to join unions, legitimated the process of collective bargaining, and made the notion of industrial democracy as common as that of political democracy. By the middle of 1918, it was common for union leaders and rank-and-file workers to assert that political democracy was meaningless without industrial democracy and that a worker could not act as a citizen in the public arena while remaining a slave at work. Two federal institutions, the President's Mediation Commission, dominated by Felix Frankfurter, and the National War Labor Board, co-chaired by Frank P. Walsh and William Howard Taft, endorsed the concept that workers would not be full citizens until they had participatory rights at work that equaled the public citizenship rights accorded them by the Constitution.⁶ The postwar domestic settlement, however, left the vast majority of workers with rights on the job as minimal as those held by Lattimer's immigrant coal miners and with public citizenship rights that were less than complete.⁷ Not until the New Deal and World War II would the vast majority of workers be able truly to claim for themselves the citizenship rights that in 1897 had eluded the protestors in Lattimer and millions of their working-class brothers and sisters just before and after.

The contested claims for citizenship that arose from the Lattimer Massacre as well as the industrial conflicts that proceeded and followed it resonate among us today when the definition and significance of United States citizenship seems once again to be hotly contested. Today, as was true a hundred years ago, millions of immigrant workers who lay claim to the rights of citizenship are defined either as non-assimilable or

6. Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor's Great War: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern American Labor Relations, 1912-1921* (Chapel Hill, 1997) is now far and away the best study in print of these developments. For other less complete treatments of the same subject and from somewhat different perspectives see Alan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State* (Cambridge, 1991), Ch. 5, and Melvyn Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill, 1994), Ch. 3.

7. For events during the war years, such as the deportaton from Bisbee, Arizona, of more than 1,200 copper miners and other male workers, the judicial repression of the IWW, and the repressive and violent actions of local officials and vigilantes that presaged the postwar restoration, see, among other works, M. Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, Chs. 14-17; A. Dawley, *Struggles for Justice*, Chs. 5-6; James Byrkit, *Forging the Copper Collar: Arizona's Labor-Management War* (Tucson, 1982), and Arnon Gutfeld, *Montana's Agony: Years of War and Hysteria, 1917-1921* (Gainesville, 1979).

too primitive to be accorded equal treatment as citizens by other older-stock Americans who swell the ranks of a growing anti-immigrant movement. Today again, as a century ago, workers who seek to form trade unions, strike, and bargain collectively as part and parcel of their heritage as citizens with equal rights find themselves lectured that the market, not the constitution or the law, should serve as the proper adjudicator of workers' rights, and the devil take the hindmost. Hence the labor movement in the private sector today is almost as minuscule and impotent as it was at the time of Lattimer.

Other lessons, however, may lurk in the subtext of the Lattimer Massacre and its aftermath. Then, unlike now, the discontent protestors sought to establish their identity not as Italian-Americans or as Slovak-Americans but as non-hyphenated citizens entitled to use the national flag as a symbol of their claim to the rights of equal citizenship. We might well ask why immigrants deemed a non-assimilable inferior race by their social superiors in northeastern Pennsylvania rejected the imperative of racial or ethnic identity in favor of the search for a more common identity (and the same might be written of immigrant working-class strikers in Homestead, Ludlow, Lawrence, Paterson, and scores of other industrial communities). What has changed over the last century to make the claims of today's less advantaged and more oppressed inhabitants of our land so different in character, style, and aims from those of the immigrant workers who marched to Lattimer a hundred years ago? Or, are today's immigrant and minority workers actually discarding their claims to a common citizenship for a more primal identification as an ethnic, racial, or gender group? Are "identity politics" the justified expression of oppressed minorities, or are they instead the product of "imagined communities" created in the heads of discontent academics at play in the lush fields of cultural studies? To ask such questions, I think is one more way to commemorate the martyrs of 1897 and the world that they sought to make.