

Collective Action

Seeing the 1934 Minneapolis Truckers' Strike Today

By Keith Christensen

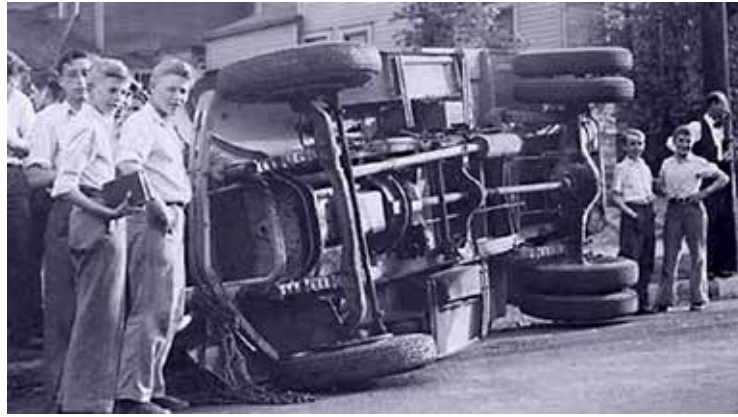
Overview

A HEAVY, DARK cloud enveloped the country during the Great Depression. Poverty, hunger, and fear blanketed the most vulnerable. Many were unemployed and those who did have jobs suffered with very meager wages. The haze created hopelessness, and many felt powerless. There wasn't a path out of the gloom. Tension was in the air. Class resentment was growing.

In 1934 Minneapolis was under the control of the Citizens' Alliance, an employers' group that effectively banned unions. The city was an open-shop system; employers would not recognize unions. Workers were fired on whims and for any effort to organize when they tried to negotiate for better conditions. However, the General Drivers Local 574 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) organized workers of the trucking industry into an industrial union. This was a trade union that combined all workers, both skilled and unskilled, in the transportation industry.

When employers refused to recognize the union, its leaders called a strike. They strategically began it during the Minnesota winter when coal transports were necessary for heating and so forced the employers to make an early settlement. However, the employers reneged on their agreement when it became warmer, which was no surprise to the strikers who had enlarged their local's membership from 75 to 3,000. The strike was on again.

The details of the strike are complex as well as dramatic. The strikers endured a brutal police force, a hostile press, and resistance from the parent union. They published their own strike newspaper, *The Organizer*, to inform the public of the strike's aims and to keep work-



A produce truck overturned, with school boys, August 1934.

ers informed of developments. They gained the support of other unions and cultivated favorable public opinion. The strike had a contingent called the Women's Auxiliary that helped feed strikers and nurse the injured. After the police violently attacked the strikers the women marched on City

Hall to protest the brutality. Thousands attended the funeral procession of strike martyr Henry Ness.

The police and the National Guard were called in to guard trucks driven by scabs. The Citizens' Alliance activated their local militia. The strikers countered with effective picketing and stoppage of commerce. Conflict escalated daily throughout May and reached a peak late in the month at the city market, where strikers clashed with police, who were trying to break the strike. Hundreds were involved in the battle that raged on violently for two days. Many were injured and several were killed. It was called the "Battle of Deputies Run" because the police and deputies were forced to flee. However, things changed when on July 20, 1934 police staged a revenge ambush, where scores of strikers were shot and two died from their wounds. The day became known as "Bloody Friday." The strike continued even with the leaders arrested and imprisoned by the National Guard. It finally ended because of the strikers' persistence, compelling President Franklin Roosevelt to step in and stop the turmoil. The President's representatives pressured the banks by threatening to call in federal loans and so forced the employers to agree to a settlement. The strike ended on August 21, 1934. Minneapolis became a union town. The Truckers' Strike marked a turning point in state and national labor history, opening the way for enactment of laws acknowledging and protecting workers' rights.



Photographs courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Above: A scene from the "Battle of Deputies Run," May 1934. // Below: Keith Christensen, a card from the *Game Turn* Project, 2017.

Relevance

The significance of the 1934 strike continues today. We have similar problems of social inequalities. People continue to face inaccessible medical care, insufficient education, and unaffordable housing. Low-wage workers are unable to represent themselves through a union under Amazon, McDonald's, and Walmart. Meanwhile, the impending catastrophe of climate change is endangering everyone. Still, the corporate owners and their followers fiddle while all around is burning.

Participation

I personally was introduced to the strike history by my friend and colleague Mike Alewitz when we both lived in NYC. We worked together there on mural projects. He gave me a copy of the book *Teamster Rebellion* by Farrell Dobbs. As a Minnesota born and raised guy I was intrigued to learn of a local event that had such an impact.

After returning to live in Minneapolis I became involved with the Remember 1934 collective that commemorated the strike. It sponsored street festivals, picnics, and other events that included speakers on current labor actions, theatrical reenactments, and music. Many descendants and union families attended these activities which are documented in an archive. My role



was to work with others to install street art at the sites. I also designed posters and flyers. And I was a part of the group that created a historical plaque describing some of the events. At this time it is the only public artifact in Minneapolis that memorializes the strike.

GAME TURN: Telling a story with play

In 2017 I created the *Game Turn* project that describes the strike's history in cards and a game board (see page 6). The installation includes a map of the strike events and other explanatory elements. An accompanying book provides the historical framework, photos of events, and the game guidelines. It shares the problems the organizers faced as well as their solutions. The game includes information on how the strikers confronted the police and employers. One part of the game focuses on the role of frenemies. For example, Governor Floyd Olson was a liberal supporter of workers, but in the end he called in the National Guard to try and break the strike. President Roosevelt was instrumental in ending the strike after he put pressure on the bankers to repay federal loans; however, later his Attorney General prosecuted many of the strike leaders on illegitimate charges. The *Game Turn* project was installed at the East Side Freedom Library in St. Paul and has been played by students and visitors there.

IN UNION: Two Native Strike Leaders

Ray Rainbolt (1896-1978) and Emanuel (Hap) Holstein (1906-1986) both figure prominently in the history of the Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934. They served in leadership roles and were relied upon as frontline fighters. They both were considered part of the backbone of the strike.

Ray Rainbolt was a senior leader of the strikers. He was an army veteran and truck driver, age 38 in 1934. He identified as Dakota and was a committed Trotskyist. In *Teamster Rebellion*, strike leader and author Farrell Dobbs explained that "Ray was capable of fairness towards the deserving, but deaf to the wheedling of petty chislers." At a critical point in the strike, he was asked to negotiate with Governor Floyd Olson to settle the strike after the union leaders were arrested and imprisoned. He refused to do so, forcing the Governor to release the prisoners and reach a final agreement. Later, in 1938, he was elected as head of the Union Defense Guard (UDG) that confronted the pro-fascist Silver Shirts, who had threatened to attack unions as well as Jews and communists. He and the UDG confronted them and forced their departure from the area. The fascist influence and presence soon subsided. Rainbolt was known as a tough, union man and devoted to the cause. In 1940 he was indicted as a member of the union on charges of sedition and became a victim of the notorious Smith Act Trials,



Ray Rainbolt



Emanuel (Hap) Holstein

but was found not guilty. After the strike he served as a union organizer in the region. Rainbolt was 82 when he died in Minneapolis.

Emanuel (Hap) Holstein was an Ojibwe from the White Earth Reservation, who moved to Minneapolis in the early 1930's. Off work he was known to have danced in Native costume as an entertainer at events. At work he was either a truck driver and/or a warehouse worker. He was 28 in 1934 and was a leading figure in the Strike Committee of 100, the representative group overseeing the strike. Known as a fighter during the strike, he is recorded saying, "The police were brutal and sent some 40 strikers to the hospital. They showed us how to use the clubs and so we used them ourselves (the next day). We beat them back." He was charged with murder of a police deputy, one of two who died. Charges were later dismissed. He joined with the Communist League of America/Socialist Workers Party and was vilified by anti-unionists as a "Red amongst the reds." However, he would no longer be a member of the party by the 1940's. After the strike, he became an organizer for the Teamsters and traveled throughout the region, eventually becoming involved with the Native community development programs in Minneapolis. He was 81 when he died in Minneapolis. —kc



Police and striker during the pitched "Battle of Deputies Run" where hundreds of police deputies and workers fought, May 1934.

Photograph of Ray Rainbolt courtesy of Dave Riehle

Photographs courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society



Photographs courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Women's Auxiliary members supporting strikers in the commissary.



Above: The strike newspaper, *The Organizer*, declaring victory on August 22, 1934. Below: Scene from the funeral procession for strike martyr Henry Ness, August 1934.

Red Scare and Race in 1934

The excerpt that follows is from Dining Out in Dinkytown: Remembering the Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934.
By Bryan D. Palmer

www.lawcha.org/2014/11/07/dining-dinkytown-remembering-minneapolis-truckers-strikes-1934-bryan-d-palmer/
From a version of the essay "Red Teamsters" published by *Jacobin Magazine*, 10.14.2014
(www.jacobin.com/author/bryan-d-palmer)

THE AFFRONT of labor effectively standing up against its class adversaries (did not) win the Minneapolis teamsters acclaim locally, at least as far as conventional authority was concerned. The General Drivers Union, known as Local 574, and its Trotskyist leadership were vilified in the mainstream newspapers. Anti-communism blanketed Minneapolis in 1934 like a dense fog; you could cut it with a dull, bourgeois blade. Demanding 42-and-a-half cents an hour for the drivers and insisting on the right of those handling crates of vegetables in the market to join the union were the thin edge of a

wedge ostensibly opening the door to a Soviet Minneapolis. Or so the Citizens' Alliance, the employers' voice in the strikes, claimed.

The Organizer countered, "They accuse us in this local of being un-American but how's this for some real American Members: Happy Holstein, Chippewa; Ray Rainbolt, Sioux; Doc Tollotson, Chippewa; Bill Bolt, Chippewa; Bill Rogers, Chippewa; Joe Belanger, Chippewa." The Red Scare was no doubt driven by the employers and their political and socio-cultural allies, but conservative laborites also contributed. One Native American wrote as "A member of 574, not a Communist, but a Chippewa Indian and a real American." He protested the ways in which the ossified trade union tops occupying the plush office seats at the headquarters of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters red-baited the Minneapolis strike leadership. These underhanded attacks did the bosses' bidding, adding 'fuel to the fire' of the employer association's anti-communism.

Teamster Reminiscences

By Mike Alewitz

I WAS STILL an ultra-left teenager when I hitchhiked through a winter storm from Kent State University to a socialist convention in Minneapolis in 1969. It was an amazing gathering. The backdrop for the convention stage was a giant hammer and sickle from the revolutionary struggle in France, May–June 1968. Around the auditorium were large posters of revolutionary figures, including the angry countenance of the armed Geronimo, feared warrior from the Bedonkohe band of the Ndenahe Apache.

One of the featured highlights of that convention was a special celebration of the 1934 strike, with about a dozen participants on a panel—men and women who played a critical role in one of the most advanced working-class strikes in history.

The panelists included V. R. Dunne, earlier an IWW militant, then a central leader of the strike; Farrell Dobbs, a strike leader who went on to lead the transformation of the Teamsters into a powerful industrial union and whose books remain essential texts for revolutionaries; and Marvel Scholl, who led the militant Women's Auxiliary. It also included Jake Cooper, a truck driver and militant in the strike who later served as one of Leon Trotsky's bodyguards. Our paths last crossed as he championed the militant P-9 Hormel meatpacking strike in 1986, when I painted a mural with the striking workers in Austin, Minnesota.

To my surprise, I was seated at a banquet dinner table with Farrell Dobbs, Marvel Scholl, Tom Kerry, and some other old-timers. Bedraggled and seriously lacking in social skills—I'd never been to anything like a banquet—I wondered why they put me there. But I came to believe that what they saw was a rebellious



At a commemorative event for strike martyr Henry Ness. Emanuel (Hap) Holstein is at the far right, 1935.

kid who was willing to hitchhike through a storm to be part of a revolutionary struggle. And that was worth something.

Reports from the 1969 convention, I realize Farrell might as well be speaking to us today, as he urged the gathering to “refute the lesser-evil swindle, point the way toward mass anti-capitalist political action.” He called on us to “refute the scoundrels who corrupt program in the name of bigness. Sheer force of numbers does not assure attainment of goals. If a movement lacks a class-struggle program and a class-conscious leadership, it will crumble in the test of battle, no matter how big it may be. The pages of history are replete with proof of that fundamental fact.”

The early generation of socialists seemed to have limitless patience in explaining and teaching revolutionary politics. They were thoughtful, fearless, and generous—representing the best qualities of the working class. These remarkable organizers could have enjoyed comfortable lives as labor officials—instead they remained revolutionaries. After the strike they were framed up and sent to prison for their political views and opposition to World War II. They remain largely unknown, but they were a different breed than those presented to us today as leaders: gathering honoraria, headlining events, or appearing in the “progressive” media. But having notoriety, titles, or positions is not the same as leadership.

A few months after the Minneapolis convention, my life changed dramatically as I watched fellow antiwar activists gunned down at Kent State University. Swept up in the national student strike of May 1970 (think, *Four Dead*

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in Ohio by Neil Young).

I eventually wound up with a pioneering band of lively socialists in Texas. We were anxious to learn from and emulate the old timers. We had no money, but we would save up and would fly people in to give classes on labor history, Marxist economics, philosophy, or other topics. Over a weekend, we forced them to give five or six class presentations and then we'd wring out every bit of knowledge we could during informal discussions over meals and beers. And a banquet, of course.

Over the years, in several cities, I had the opportunity to learn from earlier generations of revolutionaries. I had no special relationships, but I was lucky enough to attend classes, organize meetings for, meet, or interview comrades like Farrell Dobbs, Edmond Kovacs, James P. Cannon, Peng Shu-tse, Hugo Blanco, and many others.

How generous they were. They never asked anything for themselves, never tried to advance themselves with a career—they only tried to leave us with the precious insights they had gained in bloody, hard-fought struggles. Whether it was understanding the dynamics of world revolution or how to organize the defense of a picket line or maintain a headquarters, it was treasure that needed to be passed on. It was inconceivable to imagine them chasing after some liberal capitalist candidate in an elusive hunt for crumbs.

In 1997, I worked with striking Teamsters to paint a giant mural in Teamster City Chicago, near Haymarket Square, where the frame up and execution of revolutionaries in the fight for the 8-hour day inspired the beginnings of May Day, the international holiday of the working class.

I painted a small vignette of angels in the heavens—Farrell, Marvel, and the Dunne brothers throwing bolts



Strike leader V.R. Dunne under arrest, August 1934.



Detail: *TEAMSTER POWER! EL PODER DE LOS TEAMSTERS* (now destroyed) by Mike Alewitz, 1997 (www.tinyurl.com/Teamster-Power). Artwork courtesy of the artist.

of red lightning to earth and holding a banner reading “Minneapolis 1934—The Fight Has Just Begun!” Henry Ness was also included. Murdered by the police, Ness's funeral drew 100,000 mourners. A thrilling account of the strike and that event was written by Meridel LeSueur, titled “I Was Marching.” It still gives me chills (www.tinyurl.com/I-Was-Marching).

The dedication of the mural *TEAMSTER POWER! EL PODER DE LOS TEAMSTERS!* was a militant, spirited rally with hundreds of Teamsters and labor activists. I stand by my words to the rally, “This union did not come into being as a gradual process. It was built as a modern industrial union—as a powerful force for working people—through a massive

struggle that shook this country to its foundations. The Minneapolis strike, along with San Francisco and the Toledo Auto-Lite strikes, laid the basis for the formation of the CIO. That's where our industrial unions come from.

“What motivated Farrell Dobbs, Marvel Scholl, and the others was not a buck-an-hour more or a period of relative peace with the boss. What motivated them was the idea of building an organization that could change society from the top to the bottom. And that is what they did. They were ordinary workers like you and I. They were no smarter or talented than us. What characterized them was their tremendous confidence in the ability of working people to change the world. They never doubted that. And so, they were able to make historic changes.”

It remains for us to carry it forward—through our art and organizing—to bring to birth a new world based on human needs, respect for nature, and international solidarity.

Photographs courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society