
The Butte Affair Reviewed

by Eugene V. Debs

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The assault upon the Butte Miners' Union, the wrecking of its hall with dynamite, and the looting of its safe by its own members, coupled with the riot which followed between the two factions into which the union had been torn, egged on by a vicious element imported for that purpose, has made June 23 [1914] a memorable date in the annals of the labor movement.

There is much in this deplorable affair that is still wrapped in mystery, but enough is known to warrant the general conclusion that the Butte Miners' Union has long been marked for destruction and that its enemies have for months been conspiring to deliver the coup that should put an end to its existence.

Has Decided Views.

Since that fateful night at Butte which witnessed this brutal and disgraceful scene, this rioting among men who wear the union badge and call themselves brothers, and the wanton killing and maiming of innocent people, I have read everything in the way of a report which has been issued by the respective factions and which has found its way into the public print, and I confess that I am as yet unable to account for this tragic and inexcusable affair. But I have some decided views upon the matter which I will now proceed to express in the briefest manner possible.

First of all, I know Butte Miners' Union and am familiar with its record from the beginning. Frequently have I been a visitor at the hall now wrecked and many are the times that I have spoken under its auspices.

Butte Miners' Union, let me say, has the best record for sympathy with the working class and fidelity to the labor movement of any labor union in the United States, barring none.

The members of this union have contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars of their hard earnings in support of strikes in other industries and in relieving suffering in the working class, even to the remotest parts of the country. There is no other union that has a record that will begin to compare with the Butte union for the kind of loyalty that is not merely expressed in resolutions but is backed up with moral and financial support to the full extent of its capacity and resources.

Best Organized Mining Camp.

For years Butte has been known as the best organized mining camp in this country. The working conditions there are admittedly superior to those of all other camps, the wages are as high or higher, the hours as low or lower, and all other conditions approximate as favorably as it has been possible thus far to realize under the capitalist system.

These things being true the conclusion is unfavorable that whosoever raises his hand to strike this union or conspires to overthrow it is the enemy not only of this union but of the whole working class.

Now as to Charles Moyer, president of the Western Federation of Miners, whom the rioters and destructionists sought to murder on the night they blew up the hall in which he was announced to speak. It is impossible for me to understand how any man professing to be a union man could have any part in such a treasonable, cowardly, and disgraceful plot, and I shall believe that every criminal gunman who had a hand in this affair was the hired assassin of the criminal corporations which for years have been hounding Moyer because they have not been able to buy, bully, or browbeat him.

How can any union man possibly find it in his heart to threaten bodily harm to "Charlie" Moyer? Has he not been sufficiently crucified in the service of the working class? Has he not stood often enough in the shadow of the gallows with the hangman's noose dangling above his head for his unswerving loyalty to the labor movement.

Moyer Never Flinched.

I was present at the convention in Denver where Moyer was first elected president of the Federation, and from that day to this, to my

personal knowledge, Moyer has been on the firing line and has never once shown the white feather or flinched in the performance of his arduous duty.

There is not a man in the labor movement who has gone through more that is calculated to try men's souls and break their hearts than has Charles Moyer during the last 10 years.

He has lain in a bullpen months at a time, threatened to be shot; he has been deported, kidnapped, and thrown into the penitentiary of a foreign state and held there incommunicado while preparations were made to hang him; he has been assaulted by thugs and prodded by bayonets in the hands of uniformed brutes; he has been insulted, spat upon, and goaded into resentment that he might be murdered.

He has been set upon by a mob, shot, slugged, and dragged half dead through the streets and threatened with lynching by an infuriated mob of labor's enemies; all of this has Moyer suffered and a thousand times more, not on his own personal account but because he was true to the working class and would rather be burned at the stake or torn limb from limb than to betray the labor movement, and yet we are told that in the recent Butte affair men wearing union badges, some belonging to the very union for which he has shed his heart's blood and sacrificed all but his life, were looking for him with the ferocity of fiends and with murderous weapons upon them with which to slay him as if he had spent all these years in base and corrupt betrayal of the working class.

Assailants Hired Assassins.

It is worthy of note that not one of the many other labor chieftains who draw enormous salaries and live in comfort and ease and never spent an hour nor a minute in jail in the service of the unions of which they are the professed leaders, was ever made the victim of such outrageous persecution, and in the case of Moyer I am bound to conclude that his assailants and would-be murderers were either the most lamentable dupes that ever stabbed their friends at the behest of their enemies or that they were the hired sleuths and assassins of the powers which have for months waged the pitiless warfare for the extermination of organized labor in Michigan and Colorado.

Of course I admit that all was not as it should have been in the Butte Miners' Union, but when all is said that can in truth be said against the union and the maladministration of its affairs, the fact still

remains that its attempted destruction was a monumental shame to those who incited it and nothing less than a crime against the labor movement. The wrongs of which the insurgents complained were as nothing compared to the outrages they perpetrated in their blind frenzy to redress these wrongs.

But the truth is that the inciters and leaders of this malicious assault were not bent upon righting wrongs but upon committing a crime. They had long been laying their plans and hatching their conspiracy to destroy the Butte Miners' Union and unfortunately they were able to deceive a considerable number of its members who, smarting under certain grievances, real or fancied, became the willing tools of the conspirators in dynamiting their own union hall and laying their own home in ruins and ashes.

Catastrophe Without Parallel.

Sad catastrophe this, the devastation by union men of their own hearthstone and fireside, the destruction of their own family altar, the ravishing of their own kin, and the reddening of their hands in their own fratricidal blood! It is without parallel in all the tragic struggle of labor from brutality to brotherhood.

When Charles Moyer went to Butte as president of the Western Federation of Miners to look into the matters that were causing dissension among the members of that union he acted as fairly and squarely and honorably as any man could possibly have acted under the circumstances. He admitted the wrongs of which the members complained and gave every assurance that he stood ready to do all in his power to have those wrongs righted. But, as already said, the conspirators did not want these wrongs righted but seized upon them as their pretext for "reorganizing" the miners by smashing the Butte Miners' Union, the consummation devoutly wished for by every labor-hater in the land.

When it is charged that Moyer had a self-perpetuating machine I answer it is false for the reason that there is not a more democratic labor union than the Western Federation of Miners, and if there is a self-perpetuating machine in it the rank and file have themselves to blame and they but add crime to stupidity when they blow up the union with dynamite to destroy the alleged machine.

Raiders Were Looters and Robbers.

But the element that blew open the safe and robbed it of its contents were not after any machine but only the cold cash, and that element furnishes one of the keys to the situation. The leaders in this raid were common looters and robbers and quite likely corporation detectives and secret service agents besides.

It is said that they were also members of the IWW. This may not be true but in any event it is certain that the conspirators and would-be union destroyers were known as IWW men and did not deny it, and it is quite probable, judging from the way they did their work, that they were both IWW disrupters and Wadell-Mahon detectives imported by the malevolent powers that were bent upon wiping out organized labor in Butte for that low and infamous purpose.

In this connection it should not be forgotten that the workers at Lawrence and at Akron were most basely betrayed, sold out, and treacherously delivered to their enemies by IWW Judases, who while passing as industrial unionists were at the same time on the payrolls of the detective agencies in the service of the corporations, and now when there is a union to be wrecked, or a strike to be sold out, or a union hall to be dynamited, or a union safe to be blown and busted, the gang put into commission for that infamous purpose are labelled IWW and are given credit by the capitalist press for being in revolt against alleged wrongs which could not be righted, according to them in any other matter.

Foes of All Unionism.

Claiming to stand for industrial unionism by the way of sabotage and direct action, this element is the archenemy, the treacherous foe of all unionism, the infamous trafficker in and seller-out of the working class, and after what has been brought to light at Lawrence and Akron and what is certain to be brought to light in Butte, the whole labor movement should be on the lookout for this base and treacherous gang and be prepared to deal with it as it deserves when it projects itself into a local disturbance with professions of loyalty to labor upon its lying lips and treason to labor in its venal heart.

John O'Neill, editor of the *Miners' Magazine*, has been criticized in certain quarters for dealing with the disreputable element without gloves, and I wish here to say that I heartily approve of the castigation

he has administered to these miscreants and that, however severe has been his characterization of their perfidy, he has given them no more than they deserve. It is only by unmasking these traitors and laying bare their infamous plots that their power for disruption can be destroyed.

The lesson of Butte is that the affairs of a labor union must be honestly managed and that the rank and file must always be in control. Where this rule is observed there can be no chance for the police spy and professional disrupter to ply their nefarious trade.

The new union, born of dynamiting the old, will be of short duration. The very elements that gave it birth will combine to destroy it.

Union Will Be More United.

Butte Miners' Union must and will emerge from the ruins stronger, more united, more militant and progressive than ever before.

The members who were temporarily led astray will soon realize that they have been deceived and that their pretended friends were in fact their worst enemies. They will return to the fold the wiser for their experience and the most loyal for their seeming disloyalty.

Now is the time for every true union man to stand by the Western Federation of Miners. Now is the day of its supreme trial and now is the test of every local adherent to its principles.

The corporations would give millions to destroy it but they shall not succeed. The assault upon the Butte Miners' Union has aroused the whole labor movement and the whole labor movement, to which the Butte miners have contributed of their substance so free-heartedly all of these years, will loyally stand by them in this hour of the trial until every treacherous foe has been put to flight and their banner waves in triumph over the greatest mining camp in the world.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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