

Memorial Day Massacre, Chicago, 1937

This excerpt from a larger documentary includes the unedited Paramount newsreel footage of the 1937 Memorial Day march by steel unionists and their supporters to the Republic Steel plant. The events captured in the newsreel are explained by one of the workers who participated in the march.

[Memorial Day Massacre in Chicago, 1937 -- Paramount Newsreel & Sam Evett Oral History](#)
[Primary Source Excerpt = Minutes 3:43-9:59](#)

Editor's note: In order to approach this as a primary source, start and stop at the times indicated above.



Source Curated by: Randi Storch, Professor of History, State University of New York, College at Cortland
Excerpted from: "Chicago Memorial Day Massacre, 1937," Part 1. Illinois Labor History Society.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Q3RUGLfV0>

DOCUMENT 8.4

Historical Era

**THE GREAT DEPRESSION
AND WORLD WAR II
(1929-1945)**

Document Title:

Memorial Day Massacre, Chicago, 1937

Document Type:

Newsreel & Oral History**BRIEF DESCRIPTION:** An eyewitness narration of unedited newsreel footage of the 1937 Memorial Day Massacre in Chicago, Illinois when steel unionists and their supporters were met with police violence on their way to demand the right to set up a mass picket in front of Republic Steel.**Document Selection and Teaching Guide by:**

Randi Storch, Professor of History, State University of New York, College at Cortland

SOURCING THE SOURCE

Documentaries use primary sources to make interpretive arguments about the past. In 1974, in collaboration with the Film Department of Columbia College, the Illinois Labor History Society (ILHS) produced a 17-minute documentary about the 1937 Memorial Day massacre. The documentary uses a number of primary sources, including newsreel footage taken by a Paramount News cameraman, Orlando P. Lippert, during the Memorial Day march, and an oral history interview with a man who participated in that 1937 Memorial Day march. Les Orear of the Illinois Labor History Society conducted the oral interview in 1974. The six-minute clip selected here isolates these two primary sources from the larger documentary. In the six-minute clip the voice of the oral history interviewee, Sam Evett, is heard over the silent Paramount newsreel. Sam Evett was a leader of the Steel Workers' Organizing Committee in the 1930s when he participated in the events he describes. At the time the interview was conducted, Sam Evett was president of United Steel Workers District 31, part of the union that formed during the years-long struggle that included the Memorial Day massacre.

The Illinois Labor History Society was established by labor activist Les Orear and others committed to workers' rights to promote labor history and highlight workers' ongoing struggles for social justice and democracy. In the 1970s when political uprisings around the Vietnam war, civil rights and women's rights mobilized hundreds of thousands of people, AFL-CIO leadership took a stand against these movements and at the same time they faced early signs of a weakening industrial economy and the loss of union jobs. By focusing on the events of 1937, the Illinois Labor History Society was reclaiming the labor movement as a force for progressive change in the ongoing battle for workers' rights.

Intended Audience: The ILHS, a non-profit labor history organization, conducted the oral history interview and produced the documentary for an audience sympathetic to workers and unions, for the public to have a better understanding of events that led to the building of the labor movement, and to depict unions as engines of progress. The 1937 Paramount newsreel shown in the documentary was created by a news and entertainment company for a mass consumer audience that watched news at movie theaters in that pre-TV era.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE

□ **Historical Context:**

With the development of industrial capitalism, mass production, and the search for global markets came new and often deadly conflicts between workers and employers over the power of each to determine conditions in the workplace. Laws and court rulings often declared workers' organizations to be illegal because of their ability to restrain trade. Employers regularly turned to public and private militias and spies to repress labor organizing. From the 1877 railroad strike to major labor battles in coal mines, factories, and fields across the country, workers faced uphill and often bloody battles in their attempts to form unions. Although the legal landscape changed during the Great Depression of the 1930s, workers who demanded rights guaranteed by the new laws, including the Memorial Day marchers, confronted employers and local governments determined to resist those changes.

In his first 100 days, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt won passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). The NIRA passed in the context of the Great Depression after Americans elected FDR on the promise that he would bring a "New Deal" to the nation. In addition to addressing banking, establishing federally-funded arts and infrastructure programs, and subsidizing farming, the New Deal included government support for workers' right to unionize. The NIRA included a provision recognizing workers' right to form unions and engage in collective bargaining. The law now required employers to negotiate in good faith with their employees. The problem was that employers were largely opposed to sharing power in the workplace. Despite the NIRA, employers resisted workers' attempts to unionize, and the NIRA did not include any enforcement mechanisms or penalties for violations. Staunchly anti-union industrialists stockpiled weapons and turned to local police forces and private militias to squash union organizing by their workers.

In 1935 Congress enacted a second labor rights law. The 1935 National Labor Relations Act (also known as the NLRA or Wagner Act) provided stronger protection than the NIRA of workers' rights to unionize and bargain collectively. This new federal law recognized workers' right to unionize and established a federal board, the National Labor Relations Board, to certify unions and penalize employers who engaged in unfair labor practices. This dramatically changed the workplace balance of power by providing an enforcement mechanism through the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Employers across the country were convinced that the federal government had extended its authority too far and wanted no interference in their authority in the workplace. Such beliefs led employers to violently oppose union drives initiated by Minneapolis Teamsters, and West Coast Longshoremens during the NIRA era, and by Detroit's autoworkers after passage of the NLRA, to name a few of the many labor battles of the 1930s.

Workers and their unions understood they could not rely on the law or employers' good will. The realization that they would have to continue to fight for their right to union representation led to a split within the American Federation of Labor (AFL). AFL unions largely organized skilled, craft workers, leaving behind immigrants, African Americans and women who labored in low-wage, industrial jobs considered unskilled. United Mine Workers' leader John L. Lewis, saw the Wagner Act as a chance to bring union representation to industrial workers who had been ignored by the American Federation of Labor (AFL). When in the spring of 1936 the AFL proved unwilling to change its course, Lewis broke with it and formed a new labor federation, the Committee for Industrial Organizations (it would change

its name in November 1938 to the Congress of Industrial Organizations, CIO). Lewis and the UMW committed money and people to organize workers in mass production industries. Their earliest success came in 1936 and early 1937 in the auto industry as a result of the General Motors sit down strike.

The victory of the autoworkers energized the CIO's campaign to organize steel. The steel industry was key to the CIO's organizing effort because steel was at the heart of the nation's industrial economy and steel workers represented racial and ethnic workers who had lacked a representative voice at work. In 1935, there were about 400,000 steel workers in the country and practically all of them lacked union protections despite a long and bloody history of such labor struggles that included the 1892 Homestead strike and the 1919 national steel strike. Throughout 1936, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), urged steel workers to sign union membership cards and support the wider organizing efforts of the CIO. The SWOC was led by Phil Murray of the United Mine Workers (UMW) and composed of African American and foreign-language speaking ethnic workers. Lewis also used UMW funds to hire a number of SWOC organizers who were members of the Communist Party because of their strong commitment to workers' rights, experience organizing among the city's unemployed, and willingness to do the hard work of labor organizing. By March 1937, in the aftermath of FDR's re-election and the autoworkers' victory over GM, SWOC won union recognition from US Steel, the largest employer in the steel industry.

Despite the workers' victory at US Steel, Thomas Girdler, President of Republic Steel, and other leaders of what was known as 'Little Steel' (a group of steel corporations that included Republic Steel, Bethlehem, Inland, Youngstown Sheet and Tube, National, and American Rolling Mill) refused SWOC's call for union recognition. Despite the April 1937 ruling by the Supreme Court that upheld the constitutionality of the Wagner Act (*United States v. Republic Steel Corporation*), Little Steel employers refused to obey the law. Girdler, acting as spokesman for all of Little Steel, continued to call on police and the national guard and to hire private militia to suppress workers calling for unions. In May, 1937 SWOC called a strike against Little Steel to win union recognition. More than 70,000 steel workers in seven states went on strike.

In Chicago, SWOC organized pickets at Little Steel mills throughout the Calumet region of South Chicago and northwest Indiana, but Chicago's police sided with Little Steel and committed themselves to stopping mass picketing, which was a standard anti-union strategy. The city of Chicago's corporation counsel ruled that mass pickets were legal, but Chicago police refused to allow more than a handful of pickets at any mill gate. On May 26th police arrested twenty strikers heading for picket duty. On May 28th a thousand picketers marched to Republic Steel, got into a physical scrap with the police, and scattered at the sound of the police shooting into the air. On May 30th, SWOC organized a Memorial Day rally to push their demands for a mass picket. Girdler and the Chicago police turned the event into what would become known as the Memorial Day Massacre.

Earlier in the day, union members, workers, their families, and supporters (including doctors, social workers, University of Chicago students, and church groups), gathered outside a local restaurant, Sam's Place, used by the union as an informal meeting site. The group of about 2,000 enjoyed their picnic lunches, listened to speakers and sang labor songs. At the end of the speeches, the group marched behind two American flags across the prairie field toward Republic Steel where they planned to press for a mass picket. Across the field were about three hundred Chicago police officers, armed with Girdler-issued billie clubs (longer than traditional billie clubs), guns and tear gas. Orlando Lippert, with his camera

mounted on a standard newsreel truck, was stationed behind the police along with a number of other news cameramen. New camera technology meant that film crews did not wait until after the fact to capture the aftermath of action. Still and motion cameras allowed them to record events as they occurred.

A few marchers in the crowd brought rocks and tree branches as makeshift weapons, but the majority, including women and children, were unarmed and peaceful. Words were exchanged between the marchers and the police. Later accounts point to the police captain ordering the strikers to disperse and some strikers throwing branches and rocks at the police. Paramount newsreel coverage missed the event that triggered the police violence. According to Lippert, he was changing the lens of his camera when the violence began. Despite missing the first seven seconds of action, Lippert successfully recorded a brutal police assault on panicking marchers in retreat. Police shot four people dead on site. Six died later from their wounds. Seven of the ten killed were shot in the back, as they retreated. Thirty others suffered from bullet wounds, including an eleven year old boy and a baby. Because of police attacks on pickets in the days before the Memorial Day march, unionists had prepared first aid and triage for victims of violence back at Sam's Place. Meanwhile, Chicago police crammed people into paddy wagons. According to reports, police did not bring these bloody and bruised workers to Bridewell Hospital for over three hours.

Immediately following this deadly confrontation, Chicago police and Republic Steel spun a narrative that blamed the violence on rioting workers and communists. Girdler, who was well-versed in the art of public relations disinformation campaigns, distributed over 40,000 pamphlets that characterized union efforts as threats to law and order and portrayed John L. Lewis as a representative of the Communist Party and therefore dangerous and un-American. The newsreel documenting the confrontation was shown in some parts of the country, with the Girdler spin campaign serving as the only context for movie theater audiences.

At the end of June, a Senate committee chaired by Senator Robert LaFollette opened hearings on the "Memorial Day Incident." The committee subpoenaed the Paramount newsreel footage and interviewed witnesses. The film footage and hearing testimony confirmed that police violence was not provoked by a "mob riot," but represented a police violation of workers' civil liberties. The LaFollette Committee also found that Girdler had stockpiled tear gas and weapons that he then made available to Chicago police officers to use against peaceful protesters, as Evett makes clear in his oral history. By 1942, five years after the massacre, workers in every Little Steel plant would win a union representation election. However, it would take the LaFollette Committee hearing, continued organizing efforts, and the need for war production before the federal government finally forced Little Steel companies to follow the law.

□ **Meaning and Significance of the Source**

In the 1930s, Americans watched news at their local movie theaters and believed that the images they watched on the screen could not lie. But images lend themselves to interpretation. Since the LaFollette Committee hearing the Paramount newsreel has come to represent the way that police used excessive force and violence against a largely peaceful group of workers and their supporters.

This understanding is borne out by Sam Evett's oral history narration of the events captured in Paramount's Memorial Day newsreel. Evett describes a large police force prepared and waiting for a conflict with the marchers (many uniformed police are gathered together in the early moments of this clip; more can be seen joining the police line as the marchers arrive). He points to workers' attempts to

negotiate with the police to allow a peaceful picket in front of Republic Steel's gates (starting at about the 5:00 mark and running for almost a minute in this clip marchers and police are seen face-to-face, quite close to one another, but with no evidence of hostilities). No video is taken of the spark that led to the police assault, but Evett narrates the violence that ensues. As police use clubs and tear gas and shoot into the retreating crowd, Evett explains how he knew at the time that the billie clubs were not standard police issue, a fact confirmed by the LaFollette Committee. Evett explains that those killed were shot while retreating from the police and the-newsreel shows people scrambling away from the police, police clubbing people, and smoky haze that Evett explains was tear gas. In the aftermath of the worst of the violence, he takes viewers through the police round-up of wounded being pushed into overcrowded paddy wagons. Evett notes the aggression police showed to Hull House social worker Lupe Marshall, showing that despite the gender mores of the day even middle-class, female supporters were not immune from police violence. In one case, the newsreel records the police laying a wounded man on the ground. Evett's anger at his treatment seethes through his statement that the man was "allowed to bleed to death." While police mill about, others he identifies as union men carry the man to a makeshift ambulance that Evett explains was part of advance preparations after the confrontation with police two days earlier. Evett observes people in plain clothes sprinkled among the police and states that the workers had some ideas who they were, suggesting awareness of Republic Steel's use of private militia to suppress the organizing drive.

In an era before television or cell phone cameras, this kind of newsreel footage of events as they happened was rare. The use of local police, private militias, and violence against working people and their supporters was not. The Paramount newsreel dramatizes the fact that winning a union was a life and death battle. The marchers' use of American flags to lead the procession symbolizes unionists' attempts to identify their demands for workplace representation with the nation's commitment to democracy, and to counter employer and police claims that union drives were un-American, communist ploys. The march's interracial composition of families and middle-class supporters, such as Hull House social worker Lupe Marshall, showcases a wider CIO culture that cultivated activism across race, ethnicity, and gender lines.

The events surrounding the Memorial Day massacre reveal the uphill battle unionists faced in the 1930s (and continue to face today) to secure workers' rights to have a voice in determining the conditions of their work. The willingness of 1930s workers to put themselves in harm's way to secure their right to union representation is a testament to the unsafe conditions, harsh treatment, and low wages that industrial employers forced on them. The violence they endured proves that legislation in support of worker and union rights did not mean that employers willingly obeyed the law. It also shows how local police, established to protect private property, served (and continue to serve) as a weapon in the service of anti-union employers, against labor drives and rallies. Finally, it reveals how employers used communism as a scare tactic to paint union rights as radical and un-American. The ILHS's choice, in 1974, to create a documentary about this 1937 event shows that the lessons of the 1930s – that the steel union was built through deadly, hard won struggle and that unions are needed to protect workers' rights – were timely in 1974. They still are today.

GLOSSARY

AFL: The American Federation of Labor was a federation of unions that largely represented skilled, craft workers who were white and male. There were a few industrial unions within the AFL, such as the United Mine Workers, but as a general rule, the AFL resisted organizing immigrants, African Americans, and women who worked in industrial settings.

CIO: The Committee for Industrial Organizations was a newly formed labor federation in 1936 that sponsored the organization of unions in mass production industries among diverse groups of low paid, unskilled workers. In 1938 it changed its name to the Congress of Industrial Organizations. In 1955 it merged with the AFL to form the AFL-CIO.

Collective Bargaining: Collective bargaining refers to the formal process between employers and union representatives of negotiating the terms and conditions of employment and agreeing to them in the form of a contract.

Communist Party (USA): The Communist Party (USA) was a branch of the international Communist Party. The party in the United States formed in 1919, in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution in the Soviet Union. In the 1930s its members focused on organizing against unemployment, for labor unions, and to end racial discrimination.

Hull House: Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded Hull House in Chicago's near west side immigrant neighborhood in 1889. It was the first settlement house in the United States, offering social, educational, health and art programs to the low-income and immigrant people living in the neighborhood.

Little Steel: The group of small steel companies that refused to recognize their workers' rights to unionize despite the 1937 Supreme Court ruling that found the Wagner Act constitutional. Little Steel companies included Republic Steel, Bethlehem Steel, Inland, Youngstown Sheet and Tube, National, and American Rolling Mill.

LaFollette Committee: The LaFollette Civil Liberties Committee was formally constituted as the US Senate Committee on Education and Labor's subcommittee on violations of free speech and rights of labor. The subcommittee held hearings and published reports between 1936 and 1941 documenting industrial espionage, private police agencies, and other employer methods to break strikes and disrupt union activities. The committee was led by Robert M. LaFollette, Jr., a Senator from Wisconsin.

National Labor Relations Act (aka Wagner Act): This federal Law, passed in 1935 and ruled constitutional by the Supreme Court in 1937, recognized private sector workers' right to collective bargaining. It established a presidentially appointed National Labor Relations Board with the authority to certify union elections and outlaw anti-union employer activity as unfair labor practices.

Paddy Wagons: The term "paddy wagons" refer to police vans and likely got their names from the prejudices about the Irish (derogatively referred to as "paddies") who dominated police departments in New York and Chicago in the late nineteenth century. There is also the possibility that their name came from the fact that many of those arrested at the time were Irish.

Paramount newsreel: Beginning in 1927, Paramount News distributed two reels of news to theaters across the country each week. The distribution lasted until 1957 when television made it obsolete.

Picket Line: A union strategy to stand outside a place of employment to protest some anti-worker action of the employer. During the 1930s, mass picketing brought large numbers of strikers to factory gates to keep strike breakers from entering the factory.

Republic Steel: Republic Steel was one of the country's leading producers of steel coil and bar and one of the companies that made up Little Steel. At the time of the Memorial Day massacre, Thomas Girdler led Republic Steel and was chosen as Little Steel's spokesperson, giving Republic Steel a large profile in the 1937 conflict.

Restraint of Trade: Restraint of trade is an activity that prevents a business from engaging in economic activity. Employers historically used the argument that union activity prevented free competition in business and therefore represented a restraint of trade. Even though the 1914 Clayton Act stated that

labor unions were not “illegal combinations or conspiracies in restraint of trade,” anti-union employers continued to make the claim that they were.

Sam’s Place: Sam’s Place was a diner used by SWOC as an informal union meeting space. It was where the Memorial Day march began and where injured workers were given first aid and triaged in the aftermath of the violence.

Scab (aka strikebreaker): A person who works for an employer during a labor strike.

SWOC: The Steel Workers’ Organizing Committee was the organization created by the CIO, and bankrolled by the United Mine Workers, to lead the effort to unionize workers in the country’s steel mills.

United Mine Workers: The United Mine Workers was an industrial union led by John L. Lewis that initiated the break with the AFL and the formation of the CIO. The UMW financed the earliest stages of CIO organizing campaigns and volunteered some of its most effective union organizers to assist in the drive to establish industrial unions across the country.

Union Recognition: Union recognition happens when an employer accepts its workers’ request to be represented by a union in negotiations over the terms and conditions of their employment. In the period before the Wagner Act, workers expressed their desire for union representation through parleys with their employer and, if refused, through strikes and pickets. The workers “won” when employers agreed to meet with union representatives chosen by the workers to bargain their employment contract. After the Wagner Act and the creation of the National Labor Relations Board, workers generally engaged in a card drive campaign. Signed cards indicated workers’ desire to have union representation. When enough cards were signed, the federal NLRB held a union representation election. In all cases, union recognition signified an employer’s formal acceptance of their workers’ demand to be represented by a union in contract negotiations.

QUESTIONS -- DISCUSSION POINT

Source Specific

- What does the newsreel and oral interview clip reveal about how the police prepared for the marchers? What does the police preparation suggest about their intentions? What does the clip reveal about the marchers’ preparation and intentions?
- What does the clip reveal about the nature of police violence against the workers and their supporters? How did the police treat injured workers in the aftermath of the violence?
- How did the marchers respond to the police shooting tear gas and guns and using billie clubs?
- Why are images (still and moving) important tools in exposing violence?

Historical Era

- How important was New Deal legislation to securing union rights for industrial workers?
- The Memorial Day Massacre attracted national attention, as well as congressional hearings, because of the violence and deaths. Were there other instances of violence during union organizing drives in the 1930s? And if so, in what ways were they similar to or different from the Memorial Day Massacre?

Labor & Working Class History

- How did industrial workers win union rights? What obstacles did they face in achieving their goals of organizing unions and bargaining collectively?
- Why is it not surprising that the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) was supported by the newly established CIO, rather than the longer-established AFL?
- Why was the ability to mass picket so important to workers trying to gain union recognition?

CITATION & FAIR USE

“Chicago Memorial Day Massacre, 1937,” Part 1. Illinois Labor History Society and Columbia College Film Department, 1974, 17 minutes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Q3RUGLffv0>

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Michael Dennis, *The Memorial Day Massacre and the Movement for Industrial Democracy*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010.

Carol Quicke, “Reframing Chicago’s Memorial Day Massacre, May 30, 1937,” *American Quarterly* v.60, no.1. (March 2008): 129-57.

Ahmed White, *The Last Great Strike: Little Steel, The CIO, and the Struggle for Labor Rights in New Deal America*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016.

Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935-55*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.

Media and Web-Based Sources

The Zinn Education Project: <https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/memorial-day-massacre/>

Excerpts from historian Daniel J. Leab’s research on the event:

<https://libcom.org/history/memorial-day-massacre>

“Chicago Memorial Day Massacre, 1937, Part 2.” Illinois Labor History Society and Columbia College Film Department, 1974, 7 minutes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ew2R2tQi6Mc>

The Chicago Memorial Day Incident, June 30, July 1 and 2, 1937, Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, United States Senate. https://books.google.com/books?id=vra2oI0an0C&pg=PA4723&dq=violations+la+follette+hearings+on+chicago+memorial+day+1937&hl=en&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjK-KD97dDtAhWqF1kFHQr3A-8Q6AEwAXoECAAQA#v=snippet&q=hearings&f=false (4635-5157).

Mean Things Happening PBS Great Depression Series (1993): #5 Producer: WGBH, Boston. Narrator: Joe Morton. 51 minutes.

CURRICULAR & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONNECTIONS

Curricular Connections:

[NCHS US Era 8 Standard 2B](#): How the New Deal addressed the Great Depression, transformed American federalism, and initiated the welfare state; the impact of the New Deal on workers and the labor movement.

This document opens a window on the relationship between New Deal labor legislation and the impact and enforcement of that legislation. It invites consideration of the role of workers and the labor movement versus the role of the state in creating and enforcing the New Deal.

Common Core Standards:

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1](#) Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3](#) Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5](#) Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6](#) Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7](#) Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8](#) Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9](#) Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.