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The Willys-Overland Strike, 1919

(Part III)*

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6. THE LESSON OF THE OVERLAND STRIKE

The Willys Overland unions lost the strike of 1919-20 not because their demands were unreasonable nor their tactics violent. The moderates dominated union action in all its official decisions. They lost because the times were not ripe for their success. What labor could strive for in Toledo in 1919 and 1920 could not be achieved, whereas 12 years later these same objectives, as evidenced in the Auto-Lite strike, were achieved. Let us, therefore, review the Overland strike of 1919-20 with special reference to the times in which the strike occurred.

As wartime unity ended in 1918, labor felt justified in demanding its share of the victory.[1] During the war, labor had refrained from general strikes and had done its part in the war effort. The war created prosperity and the Overland was busy with war production. The hours at the Overland were reduced to 45 to improve morale. With the war's end, the Overland management wanted to return to a pre-war condition. Labor, however, during the war had been promised a share in the fruits of victory. They now demanded that they have a larger share and an increased measure of bargaining power.

The war years saw the labor movement steadily gaining in momentum and prestige. There had been hundreds of strikes, induced chiefly by the rising prices of everything that the laboring man needed in order to live, and also by his new consciousness of his power. The government, in order to keep up production and maintain industrial peace, had encouraged collective bargaining. As the war ended, employers resisted wage increases and insisted on longer hours. The government, in quest of international peace, seemed to forget the laboring man and the working man resorted to the strike to solve his problems.[2]

The wartime inflation caused prices to skyrocket, but left the worker with the same wage income. The war had prevented any strikes to raise

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wages, but had not kept prices down.[3] Labor now demanded that wages had to be adjusted to the cost of living.

A survey of the temper of the immediate post-war period of 1919 explains many of the results of this dispute. Strikes were being staged throughout the United States and many of the demands were the same as in the Overland dispute and many were violent.[4] The steel and coal workers were striking for union recognition, higher wages, and a reduction in the 12-hour day.[5] The steel and and coal workers were also defeated in trying to reach their goals, as were their counterparts at the Overland.

The steel workers were said to have wanted a closed shop, soviets, and the forcible distribution of property. An inquiry was set up by the Interchurch World Movement to investigate the strike. It could find no evidence whatsoever of the sinister intrigues the steel company alleged they had uncovered. The Interchurch World Movement stated it would be more profitable to study the workers' uprising in respect to industrial history than in the glare of baseless excitement over Bolshevism.[6]

The times did not favor labor. The prevading fear of Bolshevism that spread over the country was in part responsible. In every strike or dispute, cries of Communism would arise, bringing fear of violence. In 1919 and 1920, bomb scares terrorized the country. Many saw this as part of the Bolsheviks' plot.[7]

The Palmer raids in the 1919's aroused the public to the Communist plot and helped shape the public mind against the Red scare. The Communist party, however, remained very small (at about 60,000 members).[8]

Businessmen had developed the practice of associating labor unionism with radicalism. Employers made the most of this fear of radicalism and waged a ceaseless campaign to identify all strikes as Reds.[9] Many businessmen had shown their patriotism during the war by being liberty bond salesmen. This gave them a position of prestige in the community and their anti-radical views tended to be accepted by many people. Throughout the strike, these men hurled bad names at labor, especially its foreign element. They were called un-American and not upholding the American way. Labor, of course, was equally emotional in returning the abuse and accusations.

The leadership of the American Federation of Labor was as violently hostile to Communism as the governing board of the National Association of Manufacturers. Gompers was in the very forefront of the red baiters and in fact was partly responsible for the exaggeration of the radical threat.[10]

The times saw an increase in what was called "100 per cent Americanism." All sides charged alien influence was present in the dispute. Unions charged that the strike-breakers were aliens and thugs.[11] The Overland charged that foreigners had started the strike and had urged the use of violence.[12] Judge Killits even made reference to this as he stated, "The rioting was participated in, principally, by residents of alien birth or parentage."[13]

The public, of course, resented this seeming intrusion of foreigners into the dispute. The people could picture the Bolsheviks trying to take over the country and, with the violence in the dispute, found it support for what the workers demanded. But as violence broke out, created an unfavorable public opinion toward the side of labor in the dispute.

Before the outbreak of violence, the public seemed to show some very easy to lay the blame on alien people. The violence that broke out seemingly because workingmen provoked it, labor lost the strike. The public would not tolerate terror and violence.

The Toledo police force seemed unable to cope with the situation. Mayor Cornell Schreiber, in an effort to forstall riots, enlisted the help of liberty-bond salesmen.[14] These were ordinary citizens with no special training in police work. Their main job seemed to be to talk down any violent acts. As the riots took place, the mayor created special deputies. These were soldiers recently demobilized. These men also lacked training as policemen. The only qualifications seemed to be that since they were soldiers, they should know how to handle guns and thus be able to control violence.[15]

These soldier-police seemed to provoke the strikers. They were arrogant, young, and not the type to provide a steadying influence on a mob. The two deaths that occurred pointed up this fact. If trained policemen had been left to handle the situation, the extreme violence might not have happened. For the public to see uniformed soldiers patrolling the Overland seemed to have a disquieting affect.

The mayor, at the outset of the riots in June, immediately called on Governor James M. Cox to mobilize the national guard.[16] Schreiber seemed to believe that more men were needed, even though at this time he had 500 soldier-policemen to do his bidding.[17] The governor saw fit, however, to deny this request. The use of untrained men to prevent violence should not have been tried.

With the violence at its height, the court stepped in to assume charge. The court issued orders fixing the number of pickets to be used and also required them to be citizens of the United States.[18] This, I believe, also reflects the foreign fear at the time.

Labor also found that the government support it had acquired during the war had given way to the use of the injunction against the workers.[19]

The judge set up a special officer to see that no violence took place. The Willys Overland Company, as well as the unions, were placed under restrictions. The Overland was enabled to reopen and start production of cars.[20] The judge was not trying to settle the dispute, but in effect, he was preventing the unions from winning.

With the plant open and production starting and the picketing restricted, the union was denied its most important weapon. The few restricted pickets could not show the confidence and gain the respect that the unions felt their cause deserved. As the strike progressed and time passed, more workers returned, until finally, the employment exceeded the amount when the strike began.

The unions could do little more than try to convince workers by peaceful means to stay out. As employment rose, this argument became increasingly weak. The court did not mean to act as an arbitrator, but in the end this is what happened. With the outbreak of violence, that union leaders had warned against, the court took control. The court could not force the company to adopt any new wage scale or hours of work; therefore, it had to restrict the unions.

There were no public outcries against the court's action. Even when the court saw fit to restrict the press in the confiscation of the *New Voice,* no criticism was made.[21] Again, I think this reflects the time. With the Red scare so prevalent and violence occurring, the public viewed this radical paper as the voice of Bolshevism and violence. The public, therefore, was ready to accept any method of curtailing this menace and accepted the court as the instrument of control.

As the strike progressed and the court controlled the situation, agitation ceased and workers calmed down and tried to win through peaceful, restricted picketing. The situation was also helped by many strikers finding employment elsewhere, particularly in the automobile factories in and around Detroit. Employment training at the Overland plant itself gradually produced the needed skilled and experienced worker who was necessary in the production of cars. Thus the strike became hopeless. Public opinion, especially the Toledo booster element, favored the company whose output soon approached peak production. The public approved the court's decision that picketing would not do any constructive good, since the plant was at record production and employment. Also the company refused to consider any compromise.[22]

The liberals who had opposed the war, since it would be the end of progressivism, were right. The war had destroyed the progressives and conservatism had taken its place.[23]

The workers' main opponent was really the post-war period. Inflation caused them to seek higher wages. During the war, the workers were promised a share of the fruits of the victory that their labors had made possible. Labor now claimed this in a shorter work week. But the violence of the strike caused the public to lose track of the demands and only think of the radical foreign influence in the dispute. The people gladly accepted the court's direction and with this, the union was defeated.

Someday, perhaps, the times would be more propitious for equality in bargaining power. When the hysteria of war had declined, when the fear of Bolshevism had subsided, when depression would show that management was subject to criticism as was labor, when unemployment such as Toledo had never known before should invade the city, then perhaps there would be a new time—a new climate in which labor could seek the things it had desired and striven to achieve in 1919-1920. That time and climate came about a decade later, and because of the Auto-Lite strike, the condition for a more wholesome foundation for peaceful relations between labor and mangement came into existence.

It is important to try to understand as we close this chronicle that the issues at stake were more than a mere question of wages and hours. To be sure, that was the primary goal; wages and hours were the terms in which the practical laboring man understood his problem. But there was something else that was also at stake. This was the issue of more equality in bargaining power. This means that labor wanted to seek

its demands in an atmosphere and in the circumstances of equal power with management. Management had the power and prestige of wealth and community pride. Labor was weak and lacked the civic appeal that the employers had. Labor knew this weakness and felt the need for an adjustment.

Let us look a bit closer at labors' objectives in the Overland strike. The final statement by the union representatives said, "We will not stop working for the goals the union had fought for."[24] These goals were, of course, higher wages and a shorter work week and improved working conditions. But as the strike developed, events caused the appearance of new goals. These were: fairer and more effective police protection; relief from allegedly arbitrary and unfair court injunctions; and the denial of the company of the rights to bargain, particularly with respect to the company's policy of promoting a company union or a shop committee as a method of dealing with labor. The union believed there could never be fair bargaining so long as it could not speak free from the influence of management, indeed, so long as it could not be recognized as the agent for all the workers in the plant.

In the final analysis, the federal court had to settle the issues involved in the strike, and it settled them in favor of the company. Its decision in effect, blamed labor for resorting to violence. The public, in keeping with the anti-foreign, anti-Bolshevik temper of the times, acquiesced. Actually, the violence was the result partly of the poorly-trained police protection offered by the mayor. Nevertheless, the seeming culpability of labor in causing the violence, in some ways, justified the company in refusing to bargain with labor at all. Thus the company achieved its purposes and labor failed to gain its objectives. The whole labor movement continued to lose ground during the 1920's and, under the demoralizing influence of unemployment, was unable to command the strength to defend itself as the employers tried to revert to a pre-war situation which was reinforced by injunction law. Not until New Deal times would this be recitified. Then, and only then, would labor-management relations at the Overland be felt by labor to assure a fair settlement of grievances.

FOOTNOTES

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2. Frederick Allen, *Only Yesterday.* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1931), p. 46.
3. Mark Sullivan, *Our Times* 1900-25. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 13.

4. Preston Slosson, *The Great Crusade and After.* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1958), p. 72.
5. Arthur S. Link, *American Epoch.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 239.
6. Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America.* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1960), p. 235.
7. Arthur S. Link, *American Epoch.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 242 .
8. Harvey Wish, *Contemporary America.* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1945), p. 288.
9. Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America.* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1960), p. 229.
10. *Ibid,* p. 231.
11. *Toledo Union Leader,* June 6, 1919, p. 1.
12. *Toledo Blade,* May 8, 1919, p. 1.
13. John M. Killits, *Toledo and Lucas County, Ohio* 1623-1923. (Chicago & Toledo: S. S. Clarke Publishing Co., 1923), Vol. II, p. 446.
14. *Toledo Blade,* May 17, 1919, p. 1.
15. *Toledo Blade,* May 26, 1919, p. 1.
16. *Toledo Blade,* June 4, 1919, p. 1.
17. *Toledo Times,* May 26, 1919, p. 1.
18. John M. Killits, *Toledo and Lucas County, Ohio* 1623-1923. (Chicago & Toledo: S. S. Clarke Publishing Co., 1923), p. 446.
19. Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America.* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1960), p. 239.
20. *Federal Reporter,* (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1920), Vol. 263, p. 180.
21. *Toledo Blade,* June 21, 1919, p. 1.
22. *Federal Reporter,* (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1920), Vol. 263, p. 179.
23. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order.* (Cambridge & Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1957), p. 44.
24. *Toledo Union Leader,* February 20, 1920, p. 1.