

Who is Guilty of ‘Murders’ in Chicago?

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Blames the press and factory owners for inciting police violence against strikers. Relates the suffering of those beaten to Christ’s in the garden of Gethsemane. Says we are all guilty for not protesting. Includes some news from the Easton farm. (DDLW #323).

Molders of Public Opinion Guilty with Police and Employers

Day After Day

Have you ever heard a man scream as he was beaten over the head by two or four policemen with clubs and cudgels? Have you ever heard the sickening sound of blows, and seen people with their arms upraised, trying to protect their faces, stumbling blindly to get away, falling and rising again to be beaten down? Did you ever see a man, shot in the back, being dragged to his feet by policemen who tried to force him to stand, while his poor body crumbled, paralyzed by a bullet in the spine?

We are sickened by stories of brutality in Germany and Russia and Italy. A priest from Germany told me of one man who came to him whose back was ridged “like a washboard,” by the horrible beatings he had received at the hands of the German police in concentration camps. I shudder with horror at the thoughts of the tortures inflicted on Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Communists in Germany today; at the torture inflicted on Communists in Russia, and on their children and relatives.

And here in America last month there was a public exhibition of such brutality, that the motion picture film, taken by a Paramount photographer in a sound truck, was suppressed by the company for fear that it would cause riots and mass hysteria, it was so unutterably horrible.

Police Riot

I am trying to paint a picture of it for our readers because so many did not read the story of the Memorial Day “riot” in Chicago in front of the Republic Steel mills.

Try to imagine this mass of people, men, women and children, picketing, as they have a right to do, coming up to the police-line and being suddenly shot into, not by one hysterical policeman, but by many. Ten were killed and one

hundred were taken to the hospital wounded. Tear gas and clubs supplied by the Republic Steel Company were used.

I am trying to picture this scene to our readers because I have witnessed these things first hand, and I know the horror of them. I was on a picket line when the “radical” squad shot into the line and pursued the fleeing picketers down the streets knocking them down, and kicking and beating them. I too have fled down streets to escape the brutality and vicious hatred of the “law” for those whom they consider “radicals.” And to the police anyone who protests injustice, who participates in labor struggles, is considered a radical.

Two years ago I wrote an account in The Catholic Worker of two plain clothesmen beating up a demonstrator. I told of the screams and the crumbling body of the man as two men who had dragged him into a hallway, beat him up against the wall aiming well directed blows at his face, smashing it to a pulp.

We protested this to the Police Commissioner and our protest was respected and acted upon.

Whose Fault

We are repeating the protest against the Chicago massacre because the only way to stop such brutality is to arouse a storm of protest against it.

On whom shall the blame be laid for such a horrible spectacle of violence? Of course, the police and the press in many cases lay the blame on the strikers. But I have lived with these people, I have eaten with them and talked to them day after day, and they are men and women like you and me, many of them never having been in a strike before, many of them marching in the picket line as in a supplicatory procession, for the first time in their lives. They even brought children on that line in Chicago.

Shall we blame only the police? Or shall we blame just Tom Girdler of the Republic Steel Company? God knows how he can sleep comfortably in his bed at night with the cries of those strikers, of their wives and children, in his ears? He may not hear them now, in the heat of battle, but he will hear them, as there is a just God.

Or shall we blame the press, the pulpit and all those agencies who form public opinion, who have neglected to raise up their voice in protest at injustice and so have permitted it, and in some cases of the press instigated it so that it would come to pass? Inflammatory, hysterical headlines about mobs, about expected riots so much to arouse the temper of the police to prepare them for just what occurred. The calm, seemingly reasonable stories of such papers as the Herald-Tribune and the Times, emphasizing the violence, do much to prepare the public to accept such violence when it comes to pass.

We Share Guilt

In that case we all are guilty inasmuch as we have not “gone to the workingman” as the Holy Father pleads and repeats. Inasmuch as we have not inclined our hearts to him, and sought to incline his to us, so that we could work together for peace instead of war, inasmuch as we have not protested such murder as was committed in Chicago—then we are guilty.

One more sin, oh suffering Christ, worker Yourself, for you to bear. In the garden of Gethsemane you bore the sins of all the world, —you took them on yourself, the sins of those police, the sins of the Girdlers, and the Schwabs, of the Graces of this world. In committing them, whether ignorantly or of their own free will, they piled them on Your shoulders, bowed to the ground with the weight of the guilt of the world, which you assumed because You loved each of us so much. You took them on Yourself, and You died to save us all. Your precious blood was shed even for that policeman whose cudgel smashed again and again the skull of that poor striker, whose brains lay splattered on the undertaker’s slab.

And the sufferings of those strikers’ wives and children are completing Your sufferings today.

Have pity on us all, Our Lord of Gethsemane,— on Tom Girdler, those police, the souls of the strikers, as well as on all of us who have not worked enough for a “a new heaven and a new earth wherein justice dwelleth.”

Johnstown

Last month we went down to Johnstown for the special purpose of meeting Michael Sewak, Burgess of Franklin, a town which borders Johnstown and in which are four of the most important gates of the Cambria Steel plant. In Johnstown there are three. The sheriff of Cambria county is Michael Boyle, the brother of Bishop Boyle of Pittsburgh in whose diocese the priests in the Catholic Radical Alliance are doing such noble work on the labor front, in speaking, writing and aiding strikers.

Sheriff Boyle is opposed to the use of force. He does not want tear gas and guns used against the workingmen of his county. But Mayor Shields of Johnstown, a heavy jowled, sleek politician, is all for strong-arm stuff. He glories in the praise he is getting from industrialists all over the country, and he shamelessly accepts the aid of the Bethlehem Steel Company in the way of guards, police, and guns, “to keep order” at the Cambria gates in Johnstown.

Sheriff Boyle and his friend Burgess Sewak were in agreement. Burgess Sewak had nine policemen, none of them armed and at their gates there was no trouble, nor rioting. Taxis cruised the streets with armed men. He refuses to give “protection” to C.I.O. organizers, which is one way of telling them to get out of town. *Anunlawfulway.*

Sheriff Boyle was the one who telegraphed Governor Earle of Pennsylvania to declare martial law in Johnstown in order to curb the activities of Shields. It was the first time that I ever saw the state troops and the strikers cheer each other, and not behave like brothers. There is not much chance that there will be a peaceful waiting and negotiating for an agreement.

It was good to talk to Burgess Sewak. He lives in a little house up on the side of a steep hill in one of the worst slums I have ever visited. Those who talk of the high wages of steel workers should visit Franklin and see the homes of the workers.

Down in the municipal building he told me about himself. He's been in office for eight years. He's worked in the steel mills for fourteen. He is married to a Catholic,— he is a Greek Catholic, and all his children are being raised Catholics. All his brothers and sisters have married Catholics and become Catholics.

“In my household we have two sets of feast days, those of the Greek Church and those of the Catholic. My wife never forgets. It sure gives a holiday aspect to our home.”

Burgess Sewak as well as Sheriff Boyle are the kind of men we need in public life in this country. We don't hear much about them in the papers, because they see that there is law and order maintained. Because they are maintaining human rights as above property rights. Because they are trying to prevent bloodshed instead of provoke it as Mayor Shields and the newspapers which feature him are doing. They are the unsung heroes.

But labor does not forget, and the community does not forget. Theirs is an example which other officials might well follow. Sheriff Boyle is a Catholic. Mayor Shields also calls himself one. You can choose between them.

On The Farm

I am writing this month from the farming commune down in Easton and outside my windows, seven children are sliding down the hill and leaving a long streak in the yellow grass. The hill rises up over the back of the house and the old road winds around up to the farm which we own. This one at the foot of the hill we rent.

Mary, Helena, Catherine, Christina, Annie, Eleanor and Teresa are the children, and the first five of them are Giogas's, some of Julia's charges from Harlem. They don't live there any more, their new home is on Forty-third Street we believe, but Julia follows them around through the years. They have been her special friends for three years now, ever since we had quarters up in Harlem. The family have been on relief for some years, and the mother has been in the hospital for a good part of the past year. So they need lots of milk and sunlight and fresh air. The mother and the other four children are coming down later, and probably the father too.

This farm is ideal for us with its big barns, where the children are camping out. The boys have our barn,—Ray, Bill, Mike, Donald and any other company who comes along. There are five more of us besides the children sleeping in the other barn. And the two bedrooms of the farmhouse are filled too. Altogether there are about thirty-eight people down here this week-end and about thirty are here for some weeks.

Every morning a crowd of us go down to Mass in Easton and after Mass I stay in the Easton office for letters and writing until noon. The afternoon is spent in more reading and writing and the children.

The bills are all paid, we thank God and our readers, and we are starting the summer with a goodly supply of groceries from the Cooperative and a kindly grocer to extend us credit if we run short in the summer.

It is a happy place, this farm, with its bright sunny days, the heavy odor of milkweed blossoms coming in the window and the daisies studding the fields. Every night we have black raspberry shortcake, and there is all the cherry jam you can eat. Rosie doesn't give quite enough milk to go around—she's down to twelve quarts a day now, but next summer our new cow, Mollie, will be giving us more.

(Annie, the little monkey, is climbing on a ladder from the barn, so I'll cut this short and take the children up the hill to hunt for salamanders in the spring. In spite of strikes and brutality, controversy and war, this world is filled with joy and beauty and the children bring it to us anew and help us to enjoy it through their eyes.)