

Works of Mercy Oppose Violence in Labor's War

By Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, April 1941, 1,4.

Summary: Involves the C.W. in strikes in order to spread Catholic social teaching and promote better living conditions. Combats the charge that the C.W. is communist and encourages spiritual weapons to fight communism. (DDLW #147).

Four men were killed in Harlan County, Kentucky, today. They are coal miners and by next week, I suppose, their deaths will be forgotten by the newspaper public. There are a great many coal miners killed every year and no matter how many times the numbers are printed in order to form public opinion, in order to enforce Congressional action on an inspection law, the number is forgotten, the law tabled, and violations go on. There are so many people being killed all over the world by aerial bombardment, by fire and flood and famine and pestilence, that only four down in Harlan County, Kentucky, doesn't make much difference.

Fathers, brothers or husbands, removed suddenly and violently from a sunny April day! And it had been such a cold ugly March, with its blizzards and icy roads and people confined to house and fireside. The houses of the miners are cheerless houses. Now the sun is shining, but four men released from winter see it no longer. We ask our Catholic readers to write down on a prayer card in their missals (together with the ten dead at the Memorial Day massacre, 1937), "Four men dead in Harlan County," bloody Harlan County. God grant them refreshment, light and peace. Light, yes, brighter than the brightness of these April days, and peace from this sad class war.

And Other Strikes

And more violence in Milwaukee where an armored car at the Allis Chalmers plant fired tear gas in a pitched battle with auto strikers who have been out since February. In Chicago and down in Indiana there was more violence with police beating pickets with three-foot riot clubs and baseball bats. Today Henry Ford's plant at River Rouge went out with representatives from many other auto locals of the union helping on the picket line, in the hastily set up soup kitchens and relief stations.

Barricades were made in the streets to keep workers from getting to the plants and service men from within the Ford plant came out into the streets for several pitched battles with the strikers today. This strike was precipitated by Ford's firing of the the representatives of the union in different shops throughout the plant.

This is the first strike at the Ford River Rouge plant. A telegram came in from our Detroit house asking me to come out, as I had rashly promised that when Ford went on strike, I would be out to visit them. But I am tired with a month of week-end trips and much speaking, and tired too with our last week at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

You scarcely see the mills from the auto road, but you can see the smoke and at night the red glow in the sky from across the Lehigh river.

To get to the workers' side of the town, you cross a bridge and the one we took was wooden. A car pays a five cent toll and a pedestrian a penny toll. There are thirteen gates at this Bethlehem plant which employs 21,000 men. During the last three days of the strike The Catholic Worker station wagon, manned by Joe Zarrella and Dwight Larrowe, served the pickets at these gates with coffee and soup and sandwiches.

There were several reasons why we were there, in addition to our interest in the struggles of the workers all over the country for better conditions and our wishing to reach them with Catholic social teaching at a time of crisis.

One was that these were our next door neighbors, and this was the first conflict of its kind at the plant. We were anxious to see the workers in this corporation organized so that they could express *themselves* corporately, so that they could better their conditions and begin to recognize that they were creatures of body and soul, temples of the Holy Ghost, so that they could begin to get a sense of their own dignity as men.

Twenty-Year Service

In my visit to Harrisburg the day before I had come upon a victim of Bethlehem greed. Old Patrick Kenny, a worker for Bethlehem for twenty years, was tossed on the ash heap—literally, he was put away in the almshouse, and had it not been for the work of Mary Frecon, who is the head of Catholic Worker activities in Harrisburg, he would be still moldering there in confinement. As it is, he is now living with his aged sister, in a little house, and both of them enjoying their old age pension.

No Communists

Of course speakers and writers, over the radio and in the public press, try to discredit the strikers by talking of Communist influence and propaganda and sabotage. But I doubt if even a Dies agent could have found a Communist in the Bethlehem strike. A sad commentary on the ignorance of Catholics as to the social teachings of the Church was evidenced in the charge against us, the

three Catholic Workers helping in the soup kitchen and distributing papers, that we were Communist. "Why else," they said, "would they be coming down from New York to help us?"

Nor Are We

Howard Curtis, sub regional director of the SWOC (Steel Workers Organizing Committee), reported to me that one of the young Catholics who had signed up with the union had accused us of being Communist and had destroyed some of our papers which were left in the union hall. The very fact that we helped in the formation of a ladies committee to help the SWOC was taken as an indication of our radical tendencies. This in spite of the fact that we are members of the Catholic Press Association and that we have printed from time to time recommendations of the Bishops for our work. During the 1936 organizing drive Bishop Boyle of Pittsburgh gave me permission to visit every parish in his diocese to further the education of the steel workers along the lines of organization, through The Catholic Worker.

Hysteria Grows

But hysteria is mounting in this country, and fear, anger, contention and lack of brotherly love are a result of the publication of best sellers such as Jan Valtin's "Out of the Night." "Sabotage, destruction, communist propaganda," are the charges made on every side. The latest article by Jan Valtin in the American Mercury helps the hysteria mount. One can trace such killings as those in Harlan today, to these incitements.

Remove the Cause!

We are not denying that Communism exists, that Communists are members of the unions, that a few of the unions are controlled by Communists. But no one can make that charge against the steel workers, a church-going, peaceable folk, hard-working family men.

And even where Communism does exist, are terrorist tactics the way to combat it? Will Christians never learn to use their spiritual weapons instead of the weapons of their enemy which they use ineffectively and half heartedly?

General Strike

As to Communists working towards a general strike—that has been the dream of radicals, and the bugbear of the public for generations. Jack London once wrote a pamphlet on the general strike, predicting the entire changing of the social order, through a peaceable general strike, peaceable because the workers were so well organized, so well disciplined and so well prepared.

We say frankly, that we wish indeed the workers would lay down their tools and refuse to make the instruments of death. We wish that they were so convinced of the immorality of modern wars that they would refuse to make the instruments of those wars.

Saboteurs?

Here is a story they tell of John Ramsay, secretary treasurer of the SWOC in Bethlehem. He used to work in the rolling mill where they were turning out steel for submarines. Some of his employers told him to mark some steel “Grade A,” which should be marked “Grade B.” He refused to do it. It would have meant endangering of the lives of men in the submarines if “Grade B” steel had been used instead of the “Grade A” which could withstand the terrific under water pressure.

There is his testimony before the NLRB. The corporation lawyers asked him if he was afraid of Bethlehem Steel. He said no. They asked him if he was terrorized or intimidated by Bethlehem Steel. He replied again, no. They asked him if he was different from other men and he replied that inasmuch as he and his wife and four children depended upon God rather than on the Steel Corporation pay envelope for their sustenance, he guessed he was.

Men Who Pray

There are other men who pray in the union field. Phil Murray prays and I’ve heard men tell of seeing him at it in time of stress. There are forty-five million workers in this country, workers in steel, in textiles, in autos, in farm equipment, in coal, on ships, on waterfronts, on truck routes and on farms. These men, inarticulate men for the most part, because they are used to using their hands rather than their tongues, have all too few leaders and all too many critics. Christ was a worker, born by choice into their class, used to hardship and poverty. Because His feet walked where theirs have trod, because His hands also were broadened and soiled by tools and sweat, because we want to be close to Him, as close to Him in this life as we can possibly get, because through love of Him we love our brothers, we were at Bethlehem (so strangely named) this past week.