
Pittsburgh — Is It Revolution?

by Charles Merz †

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Revolution is what more than one editor thinks it to be. Leaders alien to the tradition of American labor — mobs so threatening as to call out the state constabulary — above all, the sinister influence of the “foreign element” — these are three principal points on which that editor dwells, who wants the steel strike to be taken as the first act in an overt class warfare.

No observer looking with his own eyes would, on the day this is written, have found much in Pittsburgh and the towns of the iron valley to assure him that a social revolution was in progress. Police records for the last 24 hours say there have been “disturbances” in but one center of the Pittsburgh district (Clairton) — and this despite the fact that it is the 5th day of a strike involving, in the Pittsburgh district alone, more than 100,000 active strikers. That creditable and extraordinary record may be upset tomorrow. Much depends upon the action of the state troops in respect to the holding of public meetings. Today, on the streets of Donora and Monessen and Homestead, the observer would of course have found the inevitable loiterers — idle men, wearing their “Sunday” clothes, most of them, and gathered on the curb in front of the moving picture house or the pool room. Had he stopped to speak with these men he would have found, I think, neither the aim of upsetting the government in Washington, nor a belief that this strike was to settle the ownership of the steel plants. Instead he might have

found a point of view that would have been rare indeed in the days before the war. Why, many of these men would have asked him, has the government sent no one to help us? We are on strike. No one goes on strike if he is contented with his working day. We are on strike for certain simple principles which the government itself has been sponsoring. We are on strike for the right of collective bargaining, the 8-hour day, one day’s rest in seven, abolition of the 24 hour shift. These things the government officially championed during the war — they are points it regarded as minimum in every case of federal arbitration — the newspapers say they are in that international labor treaty which Mr. Wilson brought back from France. If the government believes in these things, if it is inviting Italians and Belgians and Czecho-Slovaks all the way from Europe to endorse them, then why hasn’t it sent Congress or the Cabinet or someone else here to fix them up for us? Then we would get back to earning pay again.

If the steel strike in the Pittsburgh district is essentially different from any of the great industrial conflicts which have preceded it, I believe that for more than any other reason it is because the workers have a new confidence that on their side “the government” will take its stand, when issues fundamental to industrial democracy (like the 8-hour day and collective bargaining) are at stake. It is the tragedy of the first week of this strike that so large a part of the public should have

†- Charles Merz was an editor of *The New Republic* who travelled to Pittsburgh to better cover the steel strike.

been led by propagandists to believe that the strikers aimed against the government, when in fact so large a part of these same workers believed that they could win only if the government redeemed what seemed to them its solemn promises.

In the misrepresentation of motives it is perhaps the “foreign element” that has suffered most. Who was it brought the “foreign element” to Pittsburgh if not the United States Steel Corporation itself? It is not hard to remember days when the Steel Corporation advertised “Men Wanted. *Foreigners Only Need Apply.*” Foreign labor was plentiful then. Why did the Steel Corporation want it? Because it was cheap; because, with religious and racial differences it was thought that the “foreigners” would not easily unite; and because, therefore, they would serve as a bulwark against unionization. Today, fighting off standards accepted in every civilized community, the companies turn on these men for whose wholesale importation they are themselves so largely responsible — and insult them with insinuation not once, so far, substantiated by the fact.

It is not the “foreigners” but the duly constituted authorities of western Pennsylvania who have furnished for an observer in the Pittsburgh district a sample of “un-American” tactics during the first week of the strike. What occupies leaders like [John] Fitzpatrick is simply the plain task of trying to test their case by democratic discussion. In McKeesport orderly union meetings are constantly dispersed. On the first day of the strike

mounted troops broke up a gathering of that sort by riding into it. Union organizers have been arrested, charged with disorderly conduct, because it was “suspected” that they “intended holding a mass meeting.” To what pass has democracy come if the right to assemble honorably for the free discussion of important questions can be classed as disorderly conduct? McKeesport, it is fair to say, seems the worst of all the towns in the iron valley. But the same sort of thing is happening in Clairton and Glassport, Farrell and Homestead. It is easy, with the Steel Corporation towering behind, to snap one’s fingers in the face of American tradition. It is not only to American labor or to American liberals, but to Americans as a people, that the phrase in which the Mayor of McKeesport suppresses free speech should serve as a warning: “It *became necessary* for me to exercise executive authority and prohibit public assemblage.” It is the *ukase* of the dictator.

To the reporters in New York Mr. Gary declared that something was at stake in Pittsburgh “higher than the United States Steel Corporation.” With that description of the issue there are many observers in Pittsburgh who will be satisfied. Fundamental issues are at stake. And one of them is the privilege of democratic discussion unmolested by the club.

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