

# TWO BATTLES from OUR PAST



**THE WORKER**

25¢



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## THE WORKER

The *Worker* exists to build the struggle of the working class against the capitalist system of exploitation and oppression. It puts forward the political stand of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA on the major questions and struggles facing the workers.

The *Worker* is published in separate editions for most major industrial areas of the country. Each edition carries articles (such as the two reprinted in this pamphlet) from a *Worker* press service. The staffs of these papers are made up of members and supporters of the RCP, USA.

Copies of this reprint and subscriptions to the *Worker* can be obtained by writing directly to the local paper in your area or by writing:

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# Introduction

## *Chicago—Labor Day, 1977*

The history of past battles is a powerful source of inspiration, of bitter determination and important lessons for pushing ahead the struggle of the working class today. In years to come, one of the things that working people will remember 1977 for is the founding of a national united workers organization at a convention in Chicago on Labor Day weekend. This is an important step forward in developing the struggle of our class, the working class, and its strength and unity.

That struggle is not new. As long as workers have slaved in the factories, mills, mines, yards, stores and fields owned by the capitalists, workers have resisted in constant skirmishes—punctuated by massive upsurges and pitched battles. Year in and year out, laboring men and women have fought to win a better life for themselves and their families and to avoid being ground into the dirt by the profit drive of the rich.

1977 marks the hundredth anniversary of one such battle, the great railroad strike of 1877. This year is also the fiftieth anniversary of a vicious crime of the capitalist class, the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian born revolutionaries, framed on a murder charge despite a massive campaign waged by workers in this country and around the world to win their freedom. Just as the struggles of workers today are downplayed or ignored by the capitalist media, the battles of the past, like these, are absent from classrooms and history texts.

The working class must learn its history, not only to reclaim a proud heritage, but to sharpen its weapons for today's battles. In looking at 1877, 1927, and today, we can see advances won in struggle. At the same time, we can also see that many of the battles we face today—for a living wage, against unemployment, against repression—were fought by our grandparents and their grandparents before them. Our whole history points like an arrow to the conclusion that the gains of today will be attacked tomorrow, that the working class will continue to struggle on until our enemy, the parasite class of bankers and monopolists, is driven from the stage of history forever.

The 1877 railroad strike helped lay the basis for the mighty eight-hour day movement. The defense of Sacco and Vanzetti helped train the workers for the great battles of the 1930s. Let us make the class battles of 1977 contribute to beginning a new resurgence of struggle against those who live like kings off our sweat and blood.

# Great Strike of 1877

“MORE BLOODSHED!”

“THE GREAT STRIKE EXTENDING!”

“PITTSBURGH IN FLAMES!”

“THE RAILROAD WAR!”

“DESPERATE CONTEST BETWEEN RIOTERS AND POLICE!”

“CHICAGO IN POSSESSION OF COMMUNISTS!”

These headlines blaring from the front pages of the nation's newspapers signaled the entry of a great and powerful force onto the center stage of the American scene, the modern industrial working class. The year was 1877, the month July, one hundred years ago, and the headlines were prompted by the Great Railroad Strike, a mighty uprising of the laboring millions against misery and exploitation.

Although there had been great hoopla and celebrations the year before in honor of the country's centennial, nothing could disguise the fact that since 1873 the U.S. had been locked in a grinding depression.

This was the very dawn of monopoly capitalism—the birth of the giant trusts. The railroads played a key role in this development. They were faster and cheaper than horse or ox teams and more flexible in route, less subject to weather and swifter than canal boats. Capable of carrying much more than either, trains made possible giant industrial plants—vast iron and steel mills drawing raw materials from miles away, the transport of coal and petroleum as fuel and so on. It made possible ever larger cities, drawing their food from distant rural areas, cities which themselves produced certain goods for the whole country—Chicago the “hog butcher to the world,” steel from Pittsburgh, flour from Minneapolis.

With these great plants and cities grew great corporations and fortunes—Carnegie in iron and steel, Rockefeller in oil. And at this time the largest, richest and most powerful were the great railroad barons. Even when it was young, growing and capable of unprecedented expansion of production, the monopoly capitalist system already carried with it depression, unemployment, inflation, corruption and the other evils which are part and parcel of it now more than ever.

In the mid-1870s as now, the rich went all out to place the burden of economic crisis on the masses. With unemployment over 20%, what few unions had been built were largely destroyed when they tried to protect the wages and conditions of their workers. By 1876 there were only 50,000 union members left in the U.S.—one worker in a hundred, down from one in twenty in 1870! With a million unemployed desperate for work, many tramping the country, the corporations began forcing wage cuts and the railroads took the lead.

*IT BEGINS*

Having already reduced pay 20% over the two previous years, the major railroad lines announced another 10% cut for the summer of 1877, to where a brakeman might average \$1.58 for a twelve hour day.

At first it seemed like nothing would happen. The Engineers Brotherhood and other craft unions advised their members to take it. Protests and abortive strike attempts had no effect. A new secret union, the American Trainmen's Union, involving all railroad crafts was formed, and won many supporters because of its opposition to the cuts, but strikes it called failed, too.

One of the last major railroads to announce the cut was the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O), which scheduled its cut for Monday, July 16. A number of workers in Baltimore attempted to strike, but they were dispersed by police fire, as already hired scabs mounted the trains that took them out. Management rested easy.

But in the small town of Martinsburg, West Virginia, a key B&O junction, a cattle train was abandoned by its crew and the other workers refused to replace them. The mayor ordered strike leaders arrested but the railroadmen laughed at the police and put the yard under guard. Company officials wired for state militia and found some "loyal" workers. When they tried to move a train the next day, Tuesday, they were dragged off and it was uncoupled.

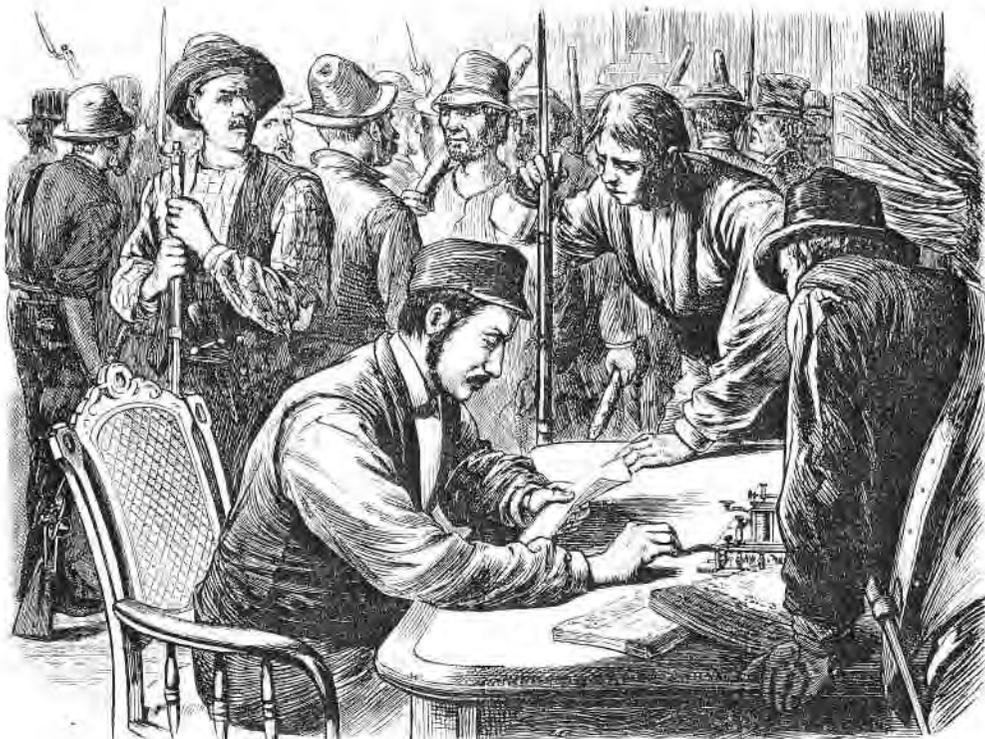
A militia company arrived and another attempt was made. A militiaman and a striker shot each other and the petrified scabs "unvolunteered" themselves. Trains continued to pile up near Martinsburg and the strike began spreading to other cities along the line. B&O officials demanded the governor call for federal troops. He did, and they arrived in Martinsburg the morning of Thursday, July 19. After a confrontation and the arrest of strike leaders, the troops helped scabs from Baltimore start moving the trains.

The strike was broken in Martinsburg, but it was too late. In Grafton and Keyser, West Virginia, the railroad strikers were joined by hundreds of coal miners; in Cumberland, Maryland by canal boatmen and workers from a closed rolling mill. Armed workers dragged scabs off the trains and by Friday few freights were moving.

*THE GREAT STRIKE*

The first big blowup came in Baltimore. On the evening of Friday, July 20, two National Guard regiments were being dispatched to Cumberland to break the strike there. Thousands of striking railroad men, workers and youths gathered in the streets and near the train depots and began stoning the military strikebreakers as they marched through the streets to the train. The militiamen turned and fired on the crowd, killing several and then desperately fought their way to safety as the enraged workers continued to bombard them. More than ten men and boys in the crowd died. Fighting continued through the night and began to die out Saturday. By Sunday, 500 federal troops had arrived and succeeded in breaking up what the panic stricken vice-president of the B&O called "the fiercest mob ever known in Baltimore."

But the strike was still spreading. It hit the Pennsylvania Railroad in Pittsburgh, where a 10% cut June 1st had been followed by a job combination plan, running "double headers," long trains pulled by two locomotives. On the morning of July 19, the men struck spontaneously. With no trains running and a crowd gathering, the trainmaster told the strikers, "You have a perfect right



*Telegraph stations were big strike centers, as workers would gather to hear the news from up the line and send their own messages out to spread the strike.*

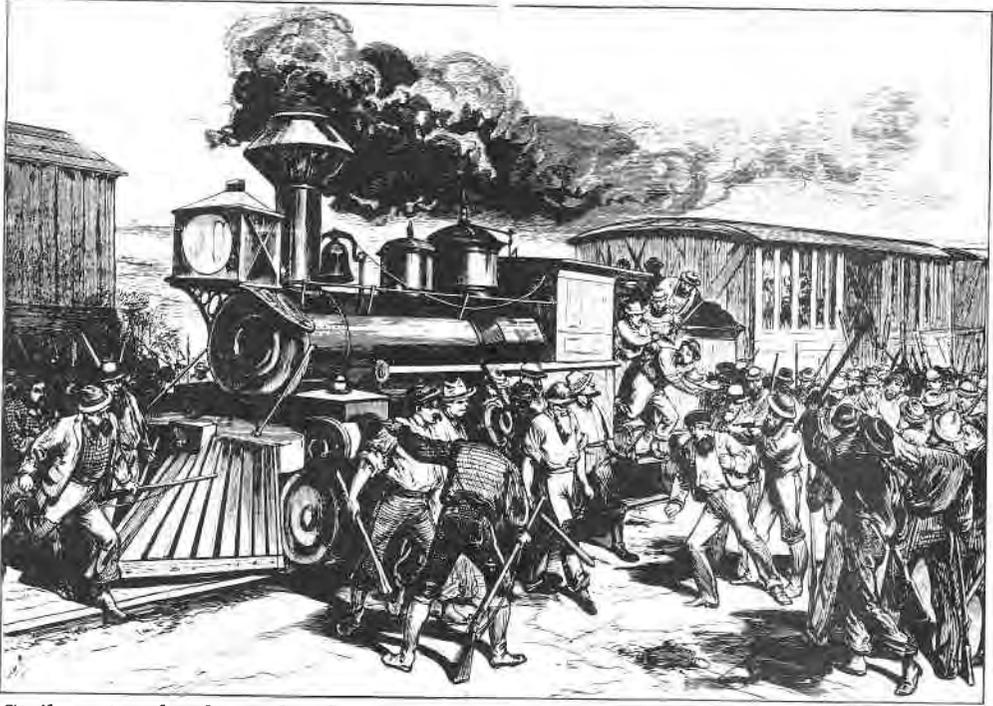
to refuse to go out, but you have no right to interfere with others.” A leader of the strikers, flagman Andrew Hice, answered, “It’s a question of bread or blood, and we’re going to resist.”

Other workers supported the strike. A rolling mill worker addressed a Trainmen’s Union strike meeting that night saying, “We’re with you. We’re in the same boat. I heard a reduction of 10% hinted at in our mill this morning. I won’t call employers despots. I won’t call them tyrants, but the term capitalists is sort of synonymous and will do as well.”

No trains moved on Friday and the Pittsburgh militia, made up of working men, sympathized with the growing crowds at the railroad yards. Told by a lawyer he might be called on to clear the tracks, a militiaman said, “They may call on me, and they may call pretty damn loud before they will clear the tracks.”

On Saturday, a militia regiment of 600 men from Philadelphia at the other end of the state arrived. 2000 cars and locomotives sat idle in the yards. Thousands of Pittsburgh workers and their families jammed the tracks and the ridge overlooking the yard. Ordered to clear a key crossing, the Philadelphia troops fixed bayonets and marched into the dense crowd. Workers grabbed their rifles to keep from getting stabbed, and a hail of rocks and coal rained from the hill onto the troops. The soldiers turned and fired into the crowd on the ridge. As many as twenty people died in the five minute fusillade. Dozens more were seriously injured; some, including a four year old girl, would later die of their wounds.

The Philadelphia troops retreated to a roundhouse where they prepared to spend the night. As the word of the massacre on the ridge spread, working-



*Strikers taught the scabs aboard this train a powerful lesson!*

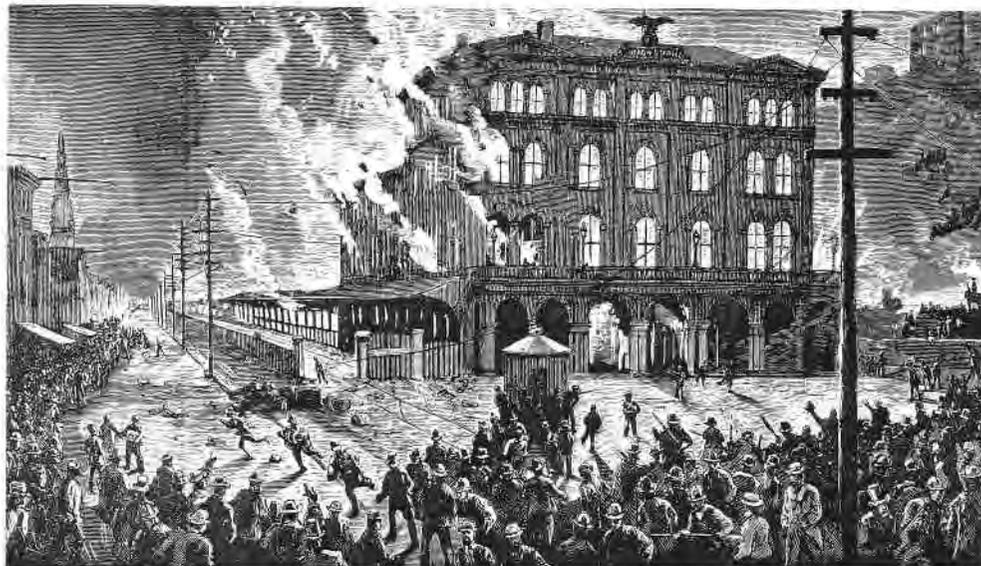
men, youths, tramps, even some businessmen formed vast crowds which raided gun stores and congregated by the train yards, stoning and firing at the roundhouse.

Around 11:00 at night, workers began setting fire to coal and oil cars and pushing them down the incline that led to the roundhouse. Soon the railroad yard was in flames and freight cars were being looted. The troops fled the roundhouse early Sunday morning, and marched out of Pittsburgh while townspeople sniped at them. The city was in the hands of the crowd. Looting continued but the concern of the bulk of the crowd was taking vengeance on the hated Pennsylvania Railroad monopoly which had called in the troops. Roundhouses, machine shops, storage sheds and the massive Union Depot building were all put to the torch.

By Monday morning, the mass uprising had ended and militia and state armed vigilantes patrolled the streets. But the railroad strike continued and workers at National Tube and other shops in McKeesport, Jones and Laughlin in south Pittsburgh and several other plants began strikes for pay raises, inspired by the great rebellion.

### *THE STRIKE SPREADS*

The next few days saw the Great Strike reach its high point—Buffalo and Hornellsburg, New York; Reading, Altoona and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Cleveland, Toledo and Newark, Ohio; Kansas City—all saw strikes, the stopping of troop trains to support strikers elsewhere or citywide rebellions. The American Trainmen's Union was basically running the Fort Wayne line. They had dug trenches outside the key depot in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, to defend against mob or militia. Robert Ammons, the union's head, used the



*Striking workers in Pittsburgh destroyed or damaged several million dollars of the capitalists' property. Above is the scene at the Union Depot.*

line's telegraph to see that passenger and mail trains ran smoothly, while strikers shunted freights onto sidetracks for the duration of the strike.

The ruling class was panicked. Some smaller lines caved in and cancelled the pay cuts. The others demanded more federal troops, like "King" Tom Scott, president of the Pennsylvania who ranted, "Give the strikers a rifle diet for a few days and see how they like that kind of bread." President Hayes was quick to respond—even cavalry units who had been fighting Indians on the western plains were called back to the cities of the Midwest. The capitalists' worst fears seemed to be coming true. Only six years before, in 1871, the workers of Paris, France had risen up and seized control of that city, setting up the Paris Commune, the world's first workers government. It had been crushed in blood and fire by the army of the French capitalists, but it lived on in the nightmares of the ruling classes which denounced the Great Strike as "communism."

### *THE WORKERS IN CONTROL*

It lived on, too, in the hearts and dreams of the workers. At many places strikers carried the Commune's red flag of rebellion, and in some cities, especially Chicago and St. Louis, American communists did play a significant role in the strike. On Sunday night, July 22, the Chicago branch of the Workingman's Party of the U.S. (WPUS) held a demonstration of 20,000 who had been eagerly following the news from Pittsburgh and the East. Banners and signs proclaimed, "We Want Work Not Charity," "Why Does Overproduction Cause Starvation?" and "Life By Work or Death By Fight." The speakers called for the workers to support the railroad strikers and to organize themselves against the capitalists.

On Tuesday, July 24, the strike began in Chicago and by day's end all railroad lines were shut down as were many plants. 60 trade union representatives met under WPUS leadership and drew up a call for a national general strike for a 20% wage increase and the eight hour day, a demand that strikers in Cleveland and other cities had also raised.

Police attacks on crowds of Chicago strikers sparked open street fighting by Wednesday night. With its leaders shot, jailed, or intimidated, and its rallies broken up by police gunfire, the Workingman's Party was unable to give leadership to the workers whose rebellion died down by Friday morning.

In St. Louis, however, the Workingman's Party, which had almost 1000 members, many of them German immigrants, led the strike throughout. The WPUS held a rally for the striking railroad workers, where cheers echoed for a speaker who proclaimed, "All you have to do, gentlemen, for you have the numbers, is to unite on one idea—that the workingmen shall rule the country. What man makes, belongs to him, and the workingmen made this country."

Even when several railroads rescinded their cuts, their workers stayed out demanding the cuts be rolled back everywhere. Plants throughout the city closed. A Black steamboat worker laid out the situation on the boats and levees to a rally: "We work in the summer for \$20 a month and in the winter can't find the men we worked for . . . Will you stand with us regardless of color?" The crowd roared, "We will!"

The mayor and city government of St. Louis fled town, leaving the city in the hands of the strikers' Executive Committee, which determined which businesses were necessary to the town's functioning. Finally, on Thursday, the local authorities and businesses pulled together about 800 police and civilian volunteers armed with bayoneted carbines who assaulted the WPUS headquarters and arrested many leaders of the Executive Committee, breaking the general strike. Across the river in East St. Louis, Illinois, it took federal troops until Saturday to restore the old government.

### *THE AFTERMATH*

Within two weeks of its first outbreak, the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 was over. In all but a few cases, the pay cuts were not beaten, and well over a hundred workers around the country were killed in spontaneous rebellions which affected no immediate change or improvements in the masses' lot.

But the strike was no defeat. It was a historic victory—a show of strength by a newborn working class just coming to be conscious of its own existence, its own potential power. The strike helped overcome divisions (within the working class itself foreign-born vs. native-born was even more important at this time than white vs. Black as relatively few Blacks were then industrial workers, though this was a crucial question in society as a whole). It showed more clearly the character of its enemy. It ended the decline of working class militance and organization—some strikes that began in late July continued through the fall and more began to break out.

Fearful of a recurrence, the railroads began rescinding the 10% wage cut as soon as a respectable amount of time after the strike had elapsed.

Out of the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 were born the Knights of Labor, a pioneering national trade union organization, and the great eight hour day movement which swept the country in the 1880s, the next big steps forward for the working class on the path of history.

# Sacco and Vanzetti

Fifty years ago, on August 22, 1927, two Italian immigrants, a worker in a shoe factory and a fish peddler, were executed by the State of Massachusetts in the electric chair. They were charged with two murders committed during a payroll holdup, but their real crime was that they were revolutionary fighters who stood up for the working class. Before they were killed, a powerful movement grew up among working people in the U.S. and worldwide, a movement which in this country helped set the stage for a great upsurge in the struggle, the organization and the consciousness of the working class during the 1930s.

The case began in 1920. The capitalist rulers of this country had just come out of World War 1 not only on the winning side, but immensely strengthened by their late entry into the war and the fact that the bulk of the fighting had taken place on the territory of their European rivals. But the war had left the high and mighty with some serious worries, too. Many Americans, especially workers, had opposed the war as a rich man's war, but a poor man's fight which they wanted no part of. And after the war, big layoffs and a depression were increasing anger at the whole system.

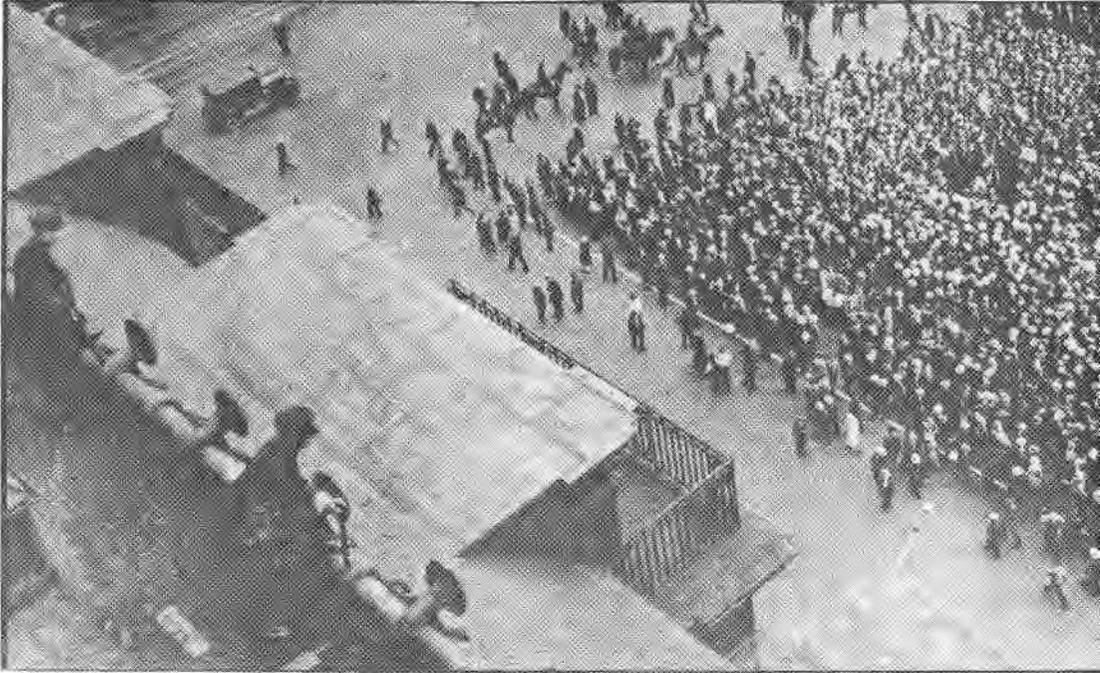
Most of all the rulers of the U.S. were haunted by the Soviet Union, born in revolution only two years earlier, which stood as proof to capitalist and worker alike that the working class could throw off those who robbed and oppressed them and run society themselves. And American workers and socialists, inspired by the Soviet example, had set up a Communist Party.

The government responded with a massive crackdown on labor and radicals, arresting thousands and deporting foreign-born activists in giant nationally coordinated raids organized by Attorney General Palmer. Among those arrested was Andrea Salsedo, an Italian anarchist leader, who was held illegally for eight weeks in Justice Department headquarters in New York, then "fell out a window" to his death fourteen flights below.

In Massachusetts, Sacco and Vanzetti organized a meeting to protest the murder of their friend and scheduled it for May 9. This was a courageous step in itself, for they too were well known to the police, having been arrested before for organizing strikes and demonstrations and for leaving the U.S. during the war rather than be drafted and kill their fellow workers for the profits of the rich.

## *THE FRAME-UP*

The meeting never came off. On May 5, 1920, Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested for "dangerous" radical activities and then charged with killing two guards in a holdup at a factory in South Braintree, Massachusetts. Their trial,



*Tens of thousands protested the night Sacco and Vanzetti were murdered.*

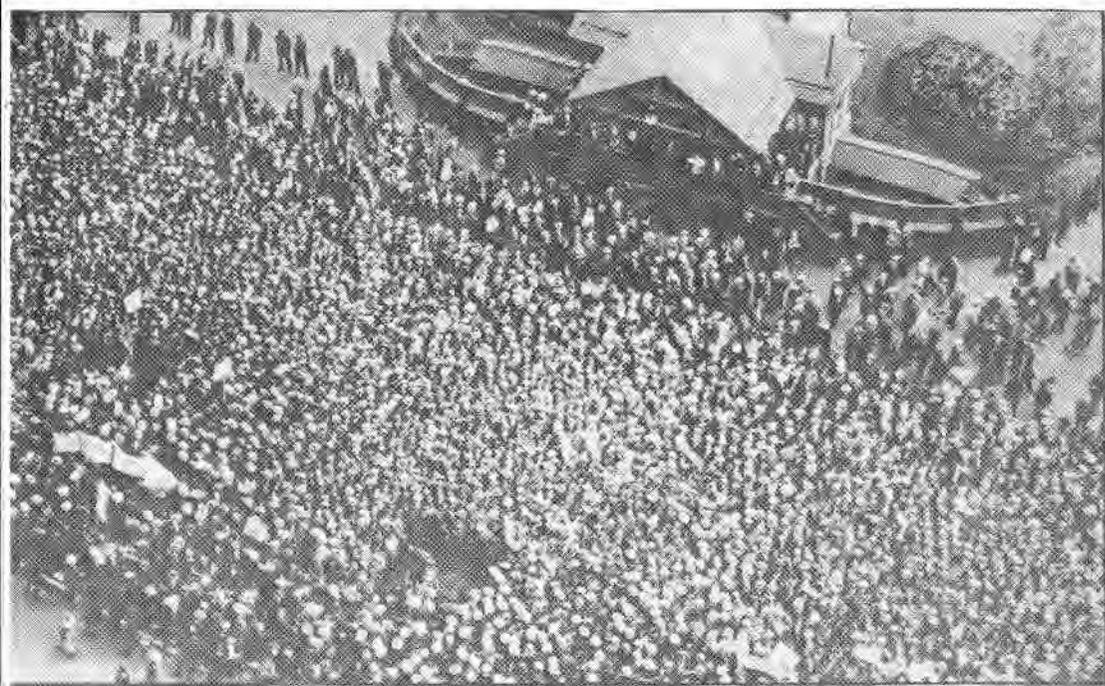
finally held in Spring, 1921, was a farce. The judge, Webster Thayer, was out to get the reds, at one point telling a jury that Vanzetti, "although he may not actually have committed the crime attributed to him, is none the less morally culpable because he is the enemy of our existing institutions."

The translator assigned to help the defendants was a friend of Judge Thayer who had named his son after the judge. The prosecution's "eyewitnesses" were paid by the government and one was a fugitive from justice in another state who testified under a false name. The jury foreman, a retired police chief, said before the trial started, "Sacco and Vanzetti should be hung." The testimony of Sacco's friends and customers of Vanzetti's fish wagon that the two men were nowhere near Braintree the day of the crime was interrupted by the judge. The guilty verdict was a foregone conclusion.

Then began the long fight to save Sacco and Vanzetti. At first the battle was waged mainly in the courts, with new evidence including a confession by a member of the Morelli gang, which had actually pulled the heist! But the courts ignored it. Prominent authors like Upton Sinclair and George Bernard Shaw, newsmen like Heywood Broun, legal experts like Felix Frankfurter, scientists like Albert Einstein and others protested the frame-up but their cries, too, went unheeded.

The fact was that the government knew full well the men were innocent. As the head of the Justice Department's office in Boston testified, since the Department never got enough evidence to deport them, "it was the opinion of Department agents here that a conviction of Sacco and Vanzetti for murder would be one way of disposing of these men. It was also the general opinion of such agents in Boston as had any knowledge of the Sacco and Vanzetti case, that Sacco and Vanzetti had nothing to do with the South Braintree crime."

The ruling class had set out to get Sacco and Vanzetti. Judge Thayer



denied all the legal motions, once commenting to a friend, "Did you see what I did to those anarchist bastards the other day?" The rich and powerful had decided they had to make an example of these men. The owner of two of Boston's biggest newspapers said, "The momentum of the established order requires the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti."

The ruling class had made the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti a battle-front in its permanent war on the workers. The working class was the key force which could answer this attack with a hope of foiling the government's plans to execute the two. But the only organizations to seriously take up the task of fighting for their lives were the new (and then revolutionary) Communist Party and an organization called the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL), in which the CP played a leading role.

### *THE TUEL*

The TUEL was an organization which pulled together active fighters and militants from across the country to take up the most important battles of the working class. It fought to organize the unorganized and to build industrial unions uniting skilled and unskilled. It was not a union itself—its members worked within American Federation of Labor unions to break the hold of sell-outs in top leadership and make them stronger weapons for the workers. It took up the fight to free Sacco and Vanzetti in a big way, especially as it became clear in 1925 and 1926 that the ruling class was determined to murder them.

The TUEL won many union locals to support the campaign and even helped pressure the AFL national convention into resolutions demanding a retrial. But the AFL bigwigs like Samuel Gompers made sure this resolution, lukewarm as it was, remained just a piece of paper and no actions were taken

to mobilize union members against the frameup.

But the TUEL continued the battle. A typical report from a national League organizer visiting a Midwestern town in 1926 told of how in two days a meeting of several scores of people was held and over \$130 collected; a local Sacco-Vanzetti Committee was set up, including a doctor, two ministers, the president of the AFL carpenters' local and six steel workers; a house to house drive begun, with the hundreds of leaflets distributed, 171 buttons sold and 189 signatures collected on the national petition to free Sacco and Vanzetti; and a story on the case and the committee placed in the local newspapers.

### *SUPPORT FROM WORKERS WORLDWIDE*

Around the world the case became a great cause for workers and others. They fought police and demonstrated in their thousands at American embassies in Poland, France, Uruguay, China, Sweden—dozens of countries. Petitions were collected, 180,000 signatures from Swiss trade union members alone. Worried governments felt the heat and telegraphed President Coolidge to commute the sentence. Even Mussolini, the fascist dictator of Italy who had jailed and executed countless Italian working class fighters, urged the U.S. to cut the two men loose or commute their sentences quickly, so the international workers movement wouldn't grow any further.

Through this all Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti kept their heroic stance, refusing to make deals, or ask for mercy, proclaiming their innocence and the fact they were being set up for fighting for the working class. Their statements in court and in letters to supporters were powerful outcries, which helped in the process of awakening the American working class.

Although the dry rot that would later lead to the collapse of the capitalist boom and the great Depression was becoming evident, the time was still the "roaring '20s" and people had many illusions that the system was working just fine. Along with this, the slanders of the media and the treachery of the top union leaders helped insure that the full strength of the entire working class could not be mobilized against the capitalists' frame-up. As it was, they were forced to go through the motions of a "review"—a coverup, appointing a commission of two college presidents and a retired judge, all from the "finest families" of the state of Massachusetts, to review the verdict. In a conclusion as foregone as the original guilty verdict, they upheld the trial and the death sentence.

### *MILLIONS PROTEST EXECUTIONS*

On the day of the execution, August 23, 1927, millions of workers demonstrated around the world. In New York, Illinois, Colorado, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, tens of thousands downed their tools in a one day general strike. 50,000 demonstrators in New York fought the police. Thousands surrounded the Boston prison weeping openly as the lights dimmed, then brightened as the extra current was no longer needed.

But the deaths of the shoemaker and the fish peddler were not the final word.

Across the country, workers had seen a firsthand lesson in ruling class justice. Tens of thousands had taken an active part for the first time in a battle that was not for their most immediate needs, but for the interests of their whole class. The fight to free Sacco and Vanzetti helped lay the foundation for the great battles that were to come in the 1930s like the drive to organize industrial



*In this country and throughout the world the cause of Sacco and Vanzetti became the cause of every class conscious worker.*

unions and the successful fights to save the Scottsboro Boys from legal execution.

Even today the ruling class fears Sacco and Vanzetti. Today they want to cover over the lessons of their crimes, just as they are doing at Kent State. The governor of Massachusetts has tried to diffuse the 50th anniversary of their execution by issuing a proclamation stating that the two men did not get a fair trial. He could not, dared not, say that they were innocent, that they were sacrificed on the altar of the great god profit, that they were framed because they fought for the interests of the working class.

That the rulers of this country have to portray their trial as a "miscarriage of justice" and "commemorate" the event as a piece of ancient history, fortunately long behind us, shows that the spirit of Sacco and Vanzetti is still fighting the rich and powerful, 50 years after their deaths.

Do what they may, the enemies of the working people cannot wipe from the pages of history the testament of these two men. In their last message, to the workers of the world, they declared:

"Only two of us will die—our ideal, you, our comrades will live by millions. We have won. We are not vanquished. Just treasure our sufferings, our sorrows, our mistakes, our defeat, our passion for future battles for the great emancipation. We embrace you all and bid you our extreme good-bye. Now and ever, long life to you all. Long live liberty!"

