

Big Trouble: A moralizing view of a labor frame-up

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Big Trouble, by the late J. Anthony Lukas, treats an important episode in the class struggle in the United States that, like so many other experiences of the American working class, is little written about or remembered today.

Lukas, a former correspondent for the *New York Times* and a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, committed suicide in June of 1997. He was reportedly despondent because, among other things, he felt his book was in some way inadequate.

The book details the events surrounding the attempted frame-up of Bill Haywood, Charles Moyer and George Pettibone, leaders of the Western Federation of Miners, at that time affiliated to the revolutionary-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World. Haywood, WFM secretary-treasurer, was a renowned fighter for the interests of the working class, a socialist and a bitter opponent of the craft union-dominated American Federation of Labor. He was the prosecution's primary target.

The trial took place against the background of bitter industrial conflict in Colorado. By one account, between January 1, 1902 and June 30, 1904, 40 men were killed and 112 injured in battles between the owners and the miners in the state. Hundreds of miners and supporters were rounded up by the authorities and deported to Kansas and New Mexico. Another contemporary event which no doubt provided inspiration to the more conscious workers and frightened the ruling class was the Russian Revolution of 1905.

The WFM leaders were charged with the December 30, 1905 murder of former Idaho governor Frank Steunenberg, who was blown up by a bomb attached to the front gate of his house. The entire prosecution case rested on the testimony of Harry Orchard, a drifter picked up in Caldwell, Idaho shortly after the murder.

After prolonged coaching by James McParland, head of the western branch of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, Orchard announced his conversion to Christianity and named Haywood, Moyer and Pettibone as the instigators of a plot to kill Steunenberg. Orchard admitted to killing Steunenberg and claimed responsibility for no less than 18

murders, including the bombing of a railroad depot that killed 13 men.

State and federal officials in Idaho and Colorado collaborated secretly to abduct the three miners leaders in Denver, the site of WFM headquarters, and transfer them to Idaho. They were seized by authorities and whisked out of Colorado aboard a special train to stand trial.

The kidnapping of Haywood, Moyer and Pettibone aroused enormous anger in the working class. Socialist Party leader Eugene V. Debs articulated the feelings of many when, in the March 10, 1906 issue of the *Appeal to Reason*, distributed in a special edition of 4 million copies, he warned that should the capitalists try to hang the men, a million revolutionists "would meet them with guns."

The successful defense campaign led by Debs and the Socialist Party was one of the most inspirational chapters in the history of the American labor movement, drawing international attention to the frame-up. The legal defense was headed by famed attorney Clarence Darrow. His impassioned closing speech lasted 11 hours and concluded with a powerful class appeal to the jury. He declared that a "not guilty" verdict would be a rebuke to the "spiders of Wall Street" who backed the frame-up. When the jury acquitted Haywood celebrations broke out in mining camps throughout the West.

At its strongest the book reveals the raw class hatred motivating the prosecution. The author makes clear the intimate links between the Pinkertons, the Colorado mineowners and Idaho state officials. He estimates that from April 1906 to August 1907 Colorado mineowners donated between \$75,000 and \$100,000 to the prosecution.

Lukas writes, "By exporting their problem to Idaho, then financing the trial on a capital offense that carried the death penalty, Colorado's mine owners hoped to rid themselves forever of these apostles of disorder. Their message to their counterparts in Idaho was blunt: Here are the bodies, here is the money, please kill them for us."

Big Trouble portrays President Theodore Roosevelt as a ruthless defender of big business. On the eve of the trial he

pronounced Debs, Haywood and Moyer “undesirable citizens.” Lukas describes Roosevelt’s morbid fear of the working class and social upheaval. At the time of the 1894 Pullman strike led by Debs, Roosevelt declared, “I like to see a mob handled by regulars, or by good State-Guards not overly scrupulous about bloodshed.” In private letters to Governor Frank Gooding of Idaho, Roosevelt repeatedly referred to Haywood, Moyer and Pettibone as “thugs and murders,” “infamous creatures” and “infamous scoundrels.”

Yet, whatever the intentions of the author, Lukas’s book contributes little to an understanding of the events 90 years ago and, in fact distorts them. In reading *Big Trouble*, this reviewer concluded that Lukas found himself ill-prepared to deal with the subject about which he had decided to write.

In the preface to the book Lukas declares that he became interested in the issue of social classes while he was writing *Common Ground*, published in 1985, which won a Pulitzer Prize. That book examined the school busing controversy in Boston by following the experiences of individuals, black and white, who lived through that period. The book was in essence a plea for tolerance and understanding.

Apparently with a similar attitude toward class differences, Lukas set out to write about the period when, as he says, the United States came closest to open class warfare. However, the book lacks any fundamental insight into the class struggle.

Big Trouble approaches social struggles from the standpoint of middle class moralism. Lukas is unable to draw a distinction between the violence of the mineowners and the defensive reaction of the workers. His narrow conception of historical development is expressed sharply in his attitude toward Bill Haywood, to whom he is openly hostile. Haywood, Lukas tells us, had a “penchant for violence.” He drank to excess and cheated on his wife. We are provided with lurid details about Haywood’s alleged infidelities.

How much of this material is true, there is no way of knowing, but it should be noted that Lukas relies for a good deal of his information on the accounts of Pinkerton detectives, hardly an unbiased source.

The figure of Haywood evidently disturbed Lukas. He was confronted here with a social type unknown in his own circles; an individual who sacrificed everything—family, personal comfort and almost his life—for the sake of his ideals. Even if he didn’t agree with Haywood’s politics, Lukas could have at least made an effort to understand how the IWW leaders’ harsh life experiences—Haywood left home at 15 to work in the mines—helped shape his character, including those features of which Lukas did not approve.

The wide support that the campaign to defend Haywood received and its ultimate success did not inspire Lukas.

Quite the opposite, he concluded his book on a note of cynicism and pessimism. In the final chapter, summing up the experience, he wrote, “Finally, the opposing camps in this nasty class war sputtered along the icy ridges of the Rocky Mountains had just about canceled each other out. Operative for operative, hired gun for hired gun, bought juror for bought juror, perjured witness for perjured witness, conniving lawyer for conniving lawyer, partisan reporter for partisan reporter, these cockeyed armies had fought themselves to an exhausted standoff.”

The book ends with an epilogue that suggests, quite out of the blue, that the WFM leaders may well have been guilty. The evidence Lukas cites makes a mockery of his pretensions to objectivity: it is a letter from socialist reporter George Shoaf to Socialist Party leader Fred Warren in 1911, comparing Haywood and Moyer to the McNamara brothers, union officials who were at that time on trial for bombing the *Los Angeles Times* building and who later pleaded guilty. Shoaf was a minor figure in the Socialist Party whose integrity was questioned by many of his comrades. Why he would have been in a position to even know if Haywood was guilty or innocent is not explained.

In its own way, *Big Trouble* demonstrates the inability of contemporary liberalism to deal in a serious way with questions of social inequality, and its evolution in a direction increasingly hostile to the interests of the working class. One wonders to what extent Lukas’s perplexed and hostile reaction to this historical example of class-conscious labor militancy was bound up with his personal demoralization and his ultimate decision to commit suicide.

Historical works that examine the experiences of the class struggle are clearly needed. However such works require individuals who are able to pursue historical truth in the face of the present reactionary political climate.



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