

Historical Overview of the Strikes by Dave Riehle

Dave Riehle lives in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He writes and speaks widely on local labor history and is regarded as an expert on the 1934 strikes. Riehle is a locomotive engineer and has been a principal officer with UTU Local 650 for two decades. He can be reached at djrie[at]visi [dot] com.

Three successive strikes by Minneapolis truck drivers in 1934 resulted in the defeat of the Citizen's Alliance, the dominant employer organization that had broken nearly every major strike in that city since 1916. The strikes also established the industrial form of union organization through the medium of an American Federation of Labor (AFL) craft union and set the stage for the organization of over-the-road drivers throughout an 11-state area, transforming the Teamsters into a million-plus member union. The strikes were notable for their almost unequaled advance preparation, military tactics, and the degree to which they drew the active participation of union, non-union, and unemployed workers in Minneapolis alike into their struggle. Veteran union militants expelled from the American Communist Party in 1928 as Trotskyists led the strikes.

Carl Skoglund and V R. (Ray) Dunne, the central leaders, had also been expelled from the AFL Trades and Labor Assembly in Minneapolis in 1925 for their political views, along with 20 other Communists. In 1931 Skoglund obtained membership in Teamsters Local 574, a small general drivers. local. The president, William Brown, was supportive of their perspective for organizing drivers, helpers, and inside workers into an industrial union formation that could break the hold of the Citizen's Alliance.

By late 1933, working in Minneapolis coal yards, they had consolidated a volunteer organizing committee, including Grant and Miles Dunne (V.R.'s brothers), Harry DeBoer, and Farrell Dobbs. Dobbs, DeBoer, and Shaun (Jack) Maloney became key leaders of the over-the-road drivers' organizing campaign from 1935 to 1940.

On 7 February 1934, a strike was called in the coal yards, shutting down sixty-five of sixty-seven yards in three hours. Under the leadership of DeBoer, an innovative strike tactic was introduced for the first time, cruising picket squads patrolling the streets by automobile. Cold winter demand for coal brought a quick end to the strike two days later, resulting in a limited victory for the union. Local 574's membership rose to three thousand by April, as the organization drive continued.

In preparation for a general drivers' strike, 574 got agreement for active support from Minneapolis unemployed organizations and the Farm Holiday Association, allied with the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party. On 15 May, Local 574, now 6,000 members strong, voted to strike all trucking employers, demanding union recognition, the right to represent inside workers, and wage increases.

The union deployed cruising picket squads from strike headquarters, a big garage where they also installed a hospital and commissary. A strike committee of one hundred was elected, with broad representation from struck firms. A women's auxiliary was established at the suggestion of Carl Skoglund.

On Monday, 21 May, a major battle between strikers and police and special deputies took place in the central market area. At a crucial point, 600 pickets, concealed the previous evening in nearby AFL headquarters, emerged and routed the police and deputies in hand-to-hand combat. Over thirty cops went to the hospital. No pickets were arrested.

On Tuesday, 22 May, the battle began again. About 20,000 strikers, sympathizers, and spectators assembled in the central market area, and a local radio station broadcast live from the site. Again, no trucks were moved.

Two special deputies were killed, including C. Arthur Lyman, a leader of the Citizen's Alliance. No pickets were arrested. On 25 May a settlement was reached that met the union's major objectives, including representation of inside workers.

In the following weeks, it became clear the employers were not carrying out the agreement. Over 700 cases of discrimination were recorded between May and July. Another strike was called on 16 July. The union's newspaper, *The Organizer*, became the first daily ever published by a striking union. Trucking was again effectively closed down until Friday, 20 July, when police opened fire on unarmed pickets, wounding 67, two of whom, John Belor and Henry Ness, died.

The Minneapolis Labor Review reported attendance of 100,000 at Ness's funeral on 24 July. A public commission, set up later by the governor, reported: "Police took direct aim at the pickets and fired to kill. Physical safety of the police was at no time endangered. No weapons were in possession of the pickets." On 26 July, Farmer-Labor Governor Floyd B. Olson declared martial law and mobilized four thousand National Guardsmen, who began issuing operating permits to truck drivers.

On 1 August, National Guard troops seized strike headquarters and placed arrested union leaders in a stockade at the state fairgrounds in Saint Paul. The next day, the headquarters were restored to the union and the leaders released from the stockade, as the National Guard carried out a token raid on the Citizen's Alliance headquarters. The union appealed to the Central Labor Union for a general strike and the governor issued an ultimatum that he would stop all trucks by midnight, 5 August, if there was no settlement. Nevertheless, by 14 August there were thousands of trucks operating under military permits.

Although the strike was gravely weakened by martial law and economic pressure, union leaders made it clear that it would continue. On 21 August, a federal mediator got acceptance of a settlement proposal from A. W. Strong, head of the Citizen's Alliance, incorporating the union's major demands. The settlement was ratified and the back of employer resistance to unionization in Minneapolis was broken. In March 1935 International president Daniel Tobin expelled Local 574 from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT). However, in August 1936 Tobin was forced to relent and re-charter the local as 544. The leaders of 544 went on to develop the area and conference bargaining that exists today in the IBT.

Local 544 remained under socialist leadership until 1941, when eighteen leaders of the union and the Socialist Workers Party were sentenced to federal prison, the first victims of the anti-radical Smith Act, a law eventually found by the Supreme Court to be unconstitutional.