

The Wheatland hop riot - Sam Lowry



A brief history of the riot that occurred at Wheatland in Northern California after a meeting of farm labourers of the radical union the IWW was broken up by police.

Agricultural labour in the hop fields of California was amongst the most strenuous, badly paid and time consuming labour that a worker could undertake in early 20th century America. The situation of the hop pickers who worked at the Durst Ranch, the single largest employer of agricultural workers in the state, near the Northern California town of Wheatland in 1913, was no different.

The pickers lived in dire and extremely unsanitary conditions. They were not provided by their employer with even a roof over their heads, being forced to sleep in a field about a mile from the ranch in makeshift tents or, more often than not, in the open air. Blankets were not provided and many had none, being left freezing in the often cold nights that are common of the Northern Californian climate. The drinking wells in the field were diseased and unsafe to drink from, irrigation ditches were filled with rubbish, and the only other form of drink available was a foul mixture of water and acetic acid sold to the workers at five cents a day.

The maximum pay a picker could receive was \$1.90 for a 12 hour days work, which began at 4am, a dollar of which was taken by the employer as means of a "bonus" if the worker in question stayed until the end of the harvest season.

The radical industrial union, the [Industrial Workers of the World \(IWW\)](#) recognised the need for these workers to be quickly organised so that action could be taken to improve their miserable situation and on August 3, 1913 a meeting was held in the fields near the ranch at which prominent local IWW men were to speak.

Around 2,000 hop pickers emerged from the fields to listen to the IWW speakers on the platform, amongst them Richard Ford, call of the need for the workers to organise and strike to improve their conditions. Halfway through Ford's speech, a group of sheriff's deputies, summoned by the ranch owner incensed by the IWW's presence and its calls for his employees to unionise, drove through the meeting and jumped from their cars, approaching the platform with the intention of arresting Ford and breaking up the meeting. As one of the deputies grabbed for Ford, the crowd of pickers moved forward to protect him and another deputy began to fire into the air with his shotgun.

Fighting broke out between workers and deputies and amongst the confusion some deputies began to fire into the crowd. Several workers fought back with clubs from their nearby tents, one Puerto Rican worker wielded a gun in an attempt to protect himself from the shooting deputies. The crowd dispersed in all directions, and the shooting was over within a minute, leaving a worker, a deputy, the ranch owner's lawyer (who was also the district attorney) and a young boy dead, with many others wounded.

The Governor of California, Hiram Johnson, immediately deployed 200 National Guard troops to Wheatland who arrived the next day and surrounded the camp, assisting deputies to arrest those that had been charged as "leaders" of the riot, who were still present at the camp.

Soon after, many more arrest warrants were issued for IWW men across California who, along with Richard Ford, were blamed by authorities for starting the riot. Although no violence had taken place until the first shots had been fired by the deputies, and Ford had been unarmed and had in fact been preaching non-violence to the hop pickers, he was arrested along with Herman Suhr, a prominent local IWW leader.

Although Herman Suhr had not even been present at the meeting in the fields, he and Ford were convicted of second degree murder on the basis that they had been, through membership of the IWW, indirectly responsible for the death of the district attorney. The trial heard that Ford and Suhr had to be held accountable by the court for the, "Gunshot wound inflicted by a gun in the hands of rioters incited to murderous anger by IWW leaders and agitators." Ford and Suhr were sentenced to life in California's infamous Folsom penitentiary, and it appears Ford was later acquitted on appeal, although it is unclear when exactly.

Many other IWW men across the whole of the western United States were also arrested or beaten, often by armed gangs of vigilantes, some were also charged with responsibility for the riot simply because they belonged to the IWW.

Some short-lived reforms were introduced by the state authorities after wide media attention focusing on the incident at Wheatland, as well as pressure from the IWW, such as an act creating a commission to investigate working conditions on farms and the introduction of legal standards of accommodation and sanitation that had to be provided by employers.

But just as importantly, the events that unfolded in the fields near Wheatland, while tragic, helped to highlight the dire situation of the agricultural worker, who at the time, was often ignored by the wider labour movement in favour of large scale organising of workers in industrial centres. Being amongst the first labour disputes, and first major dispute in agriculture that the still young IWW had played a leading role in, the attention that was drawn to the plight of the hop pickers at Wheatland paved the way for the later mass organising of thousands of agricultural workers and migrant farm workers into the IWW, as well as the vast improvements made in land worker's conditions obtained by the direct action of those IWW organised workers, especially in the years building up to America's joining of the First World War.