

The women's day massacre, 1937



A short account of the 19 June killing of 16 people and wounding of 283 by police during a demonstration of women and children in support of a steel workers' strike.

Despite the extreme rhetorical battles between the SWOC [Steel Workers Organising Committee] leadership and Little Steel management, the strike in Ohio remained remarkably uneventful. In fact, to relieve the monotony of picket duty and demonstrate the continued support of the steelworkers' wives for the union, SWOC's women's auxiliary in Youngstown organized a "Women's Day" on the picket line. The event was not unusual in the steel communities, but marked a significant change from the past steel-union practice of hiring women. At least part of the reason for this change in attitude was a product of the defeat of the 1919 national steel strike. In that strike, management had some success in appealing to steelworkers' wives to put pressure on their husbands to return to work. This time around, veteran steel unionists wanted to preempt any management sponsored back-to-work movement among steelworkers' wives.

However, SWOC's progressive attitude toward women did not sit well with Charley Richmond, a hard-nosed Youngstown city police captain who took command of that afternoon's picket detail. One SWOC member later recalled that shortly after coming on duty, Richmond stormed into SWOC's Republic office demanding, "I want them women off that picket line down there." Unable to locate any union leaders, Richmond returned to the mill gate with a small contingent of police and ordered the women pickets to stop sitting on chairs and start moving in a circle. Richmond apparently peppered his command with comments to the effect that the picket line was no place for women and that they should stay home where they belonged. Richmond's attitude did not go over well with the women pickets, who began arguing with the police captain. Richmond later claimed that the women refused to move and began "cursing at me, spitting at me, and screaming at me in their foreign tongue." In response, the police captain took the dangerous action of using tear gas on the pickets, including children, and at least one infant in his mother's arms. As the gas grenades exploded, the crowd of pickets scattered to escape the fumes.

In the ensuing melee, a growing crowd of angry union supporters gathered to confront the police. Outraged by the attack on the women and children, the crowd proceeded to beat a policeman who had become isolated from his fellow officers. Panicked by the crowd's violence, the main force of policeman opened fire from Republic's main gate. Immediately, several union supporters fell wounded, but surprisingly, the crowd did not flee the scene. It regrouped to re-engage the police. From that point on, the confrontation escalated into an all-out battle, apparently fueled by a false

rumor that the police had killed a pregnant steelworker's wife. As one union organizer later recalled, "When I got there I thought the Great War had started over again. Gas was flying all over the place and shots flying and flares going up and it was the first time I had ever seen anything like it in my life..." Captain Richmond later described the scene in these words, "Things would be quiet for a few minutes, and then spasmodic firing of pistols and revolvers and rifles would start up. The crowd would start for us, and we were forced to use gas to drive them back again."

As the battle continued through the night, local SWOC leaders risked their lives in an attempt to restore order and protect union supporters, many of whom arrived on the scene. As SWOC organizer John Steuben later recounted, "We made a series of attempts there — myself and others — to take the crowds up that hill on Powersdale, because it was a very dangerous situation; in fact, it just looked like civil war." In addition, SWOC organizers frantically tried to get the authorities to call a cease-fire. However, their efforts met with no success, and the conflict continued to spiral out of control. As one SWOC member later recounted, "The shooting was going on, and I was standing right in front with bullets whizzing by my ears ... They were shooting the real stuff — bullets. ...I said: 'Boys, we're all crippled up. Let's retreat.' Just then I saw a fellow reaching down for his handkerchief; the gas was bad. A bullet hit him. I heard him gurgle." Two young strikers then came to the aid of the wounded John Bogovich as blood poured from his neck. As they attempted to get him to safety, the men carrying Bogovich were forced to the ground three times to avoid new volleys of police gunfire. Unfortunately, their efforts were in vain. Bogovich died on the way to the hospital.

As word of the shooting of Bogovich spread through the neighborhoods surrounding Youngstown's steel mills, the battle intensified. In fact, according to a police radio log, the strikers began returning police gunfire about a half-hour after Bogovich was rushed from the scene. By dawn, John Steuben was able to negotiate a peaceful withdrawal of the law enforcement forces. As the last officers left the scene, SWOC organizers gathered the remaining 200 union supporters for a debriefing. Addressing the assembled crowd, John Steuben declared, "Although we were completely unarmed, we stood our ground. Girdler can add one more to his bloody list. We are pledging ourselves to fight to the last drop of blood until we win this strike." The group of exhausted union activists then paused for a moment of silence for their dead.

Taken from <http://academic.csuohio.edu/clevelandhistory/Issue3/articles/steelpage6content.htm>