

Minneapolis Labor Review:

The Labor Review's fourth decade: fighting fascism at home and abroad

By Steve Share, Labor Review editor
"Vigilantes Aimed at Unions" blared the page one *Labor Review* headline April 9, 1937. The accompanying news story detailed Farmer-Labor Governor Elmer Benson's on-the-scene intervention in a strike in Albert Lea by the Independent Union of All Workers at the American Gas Machine Company. There strikers had been attacked by an army of "some two hundred special deputy sheriffs, recruited from non-union company employees and from nearby towns — some from Iowa..."

As the *Labor Review* reported, the army of special deputies, armed with clubs, attacked picket lines and next besieged the union headquarters, firing hundreds of tear gas bombs and then arresting and jailing dozens of strikers.

Word spread to nearby Austin, where union workers left their jobs and rushed to Albert Lea. By noon, "several thousand" gathering workers faced the clubs and machine guns of the special deputies. "Physical violence and bloodshed on a large scale was certain to follow," the *Labor Review* reported.

Benson arrived in town, summoning company officials, union leaders, the county sheriff, county attorney and chief local judge to his hotel room. "He insisted that negotiations start at once and

said: 'I will not leave here until a settlement has been reached,'" the *Labor Review* account continued.

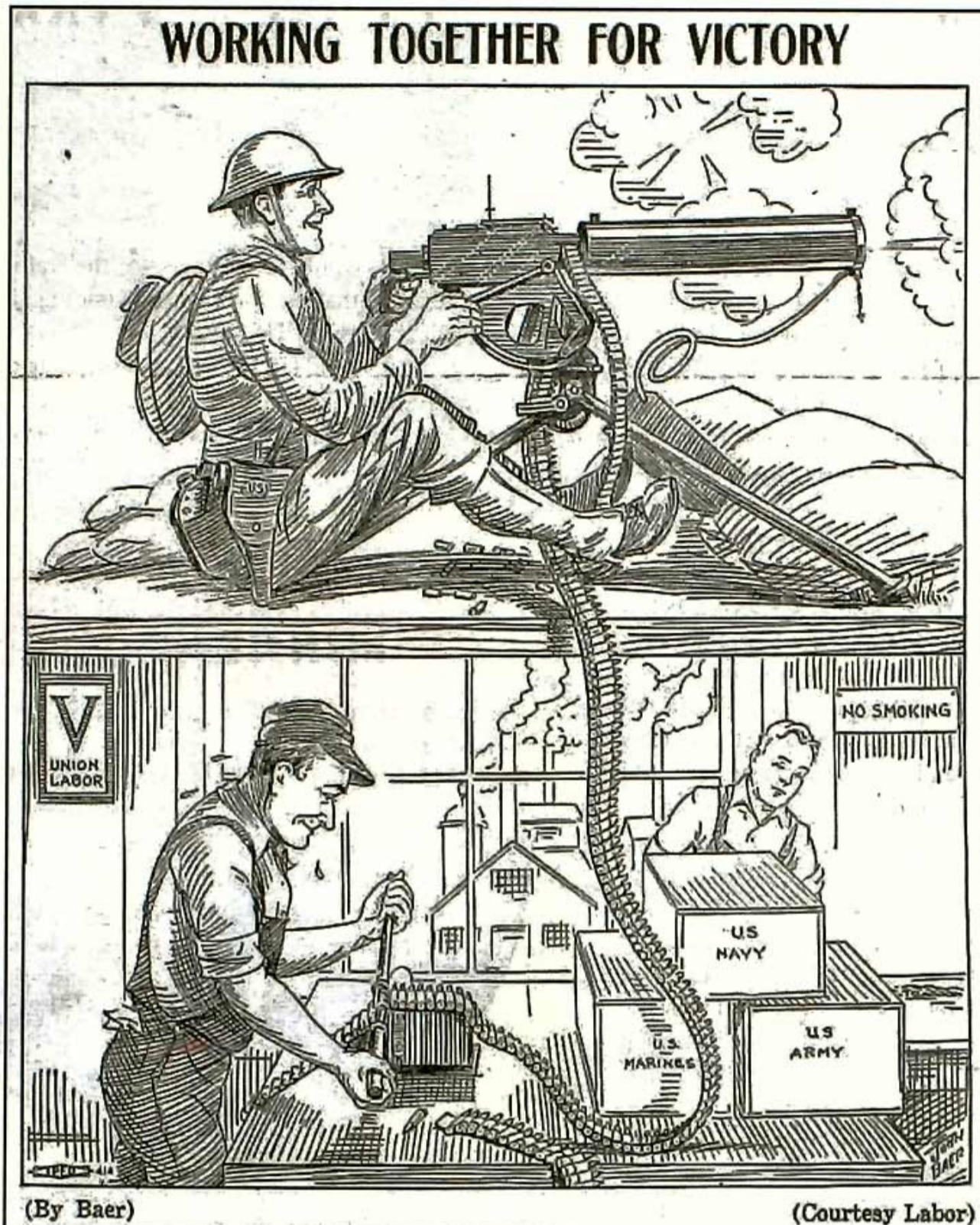
Negotiations continued until past 4 a.m. when an agreement was reached. "Peace to Albert Lea was restored," the *Labor Review* wrote.

The story added: "Workers charge that the county is unable to meet its relief load, unable to feed its hungry population, but is able to find sufficient money to pay special deputies and purchase for them tear gas bombs to destroy the union."

Even today, the story makes dramatic reading. (For the full story, visit www.minneapolisunions.org.) As the story illustrates, the enactment of the federal Wagner Act of 1935 had advanced workers' right to organize — on paper. Unions still faced violent resistance from employers supported by local police.

That April 9, 1937 *Labor Review* marked the weekly newspaper's 30th anniversary. In that edition and the ten years to follow, the *Labor Review* editor Robley Cramer sounded alarms about creeping fascism in the state and nation. Come the United States' entry into World War II, Cramer championed the fight against fascism in Europe and against Imperial Japan.

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(By Baer)

(Courtesy Labor)

Page 1 cartoon, *Minneapolis Labor Review*, May 1, 1942. The entire front page of that issue was devoted to promoting a "Labor Arms for Victory" rally May 3.

Minneapolis Smiles Through Tears at News of Surrender

Labor Review, May 10, 1945

Unconditional surrender of the Nazis and Fascists brought satisfaction to the people of Minneapolis, but there was not much of hilarious celebrating. There is too big a job remaining to be done in the Pacific... for Minneapolis to do much but smile a little through its tears...

President Truman touched a responsive chord in announcing the unconditional surrender of the foe when he expressed his deep sorrow that the beloved Franklin D. Roosevelt could not be present with us at the occasion of the surrender of the fiends of Nazism and Fascism.

The destruction of Hitler and Mussolini recalled that both of these murderers and gangsters had commenced their careers as strike breakers and union smashers. It was declared that their defeat and destruction should be a warning to those who seek to wreck the unions of organized labor.

Their end also recalls that there is a terrific struggle being planned against the unions here and should impress that it was through the democracy and production of free trade unions that it was possible to make available to the G.I.s superior war materials for the conflict...

Now the tears must be wiped away. The conflict goes on in the Pacific. The diplomats wrangle at Frisco. But there is confidence in the ultimate justice of the people, the justice that despite the golden calf, the preening of diplomats, the efforts to set us at war with our good friend Russia, eventually the people of the world themselves will bring that eternal peace for which our Boys, the Boys of our Allies, and our Great President gave their lives.

www.minneapolisunions.org

Fighting fascism, 1937-1946

To counter annual celebration of 1934 Teamsters victory, business leaders conceived the Minneapolis Aquatennial

By Kelly Ahern

New union victories in Minneapolis followed the victorious Teamster strikes in 1934. Annual memorials and parades remembered strikers killed by police on "Bloody Friday," July 20, 1934.

And then there were the picnics. The union's newspaper, the *Northwest Organizer*, reported in 1937 that "between 15 and 20 thousand local members and public supporters gathered at Webb's Place on Bass Lake in the early part of August for a day of feast and frolic."

The festivities started around 10 a.m. with contests and games, ending at 1:00 a.m. (or later) with music and dancing by Dick Atherton and his 544 band.

The *Northwest Organizer* described some exciting events: "On the program are races for boys and girls... Hundred yard dashes for men and women; races for fat ladies and fat men; relay kissing races; balloon-blowing contests. Men will vie with one another in the ludicrous cracker-eating and whistling game. There will be a mighty tug-o-war between the Transfer Drivers and the Independent Truck Owners."

Unionized Yellow Cabs provided a free shuttle service from downtown Minneapolis. The picnics were the largest outdoor labor event in the Northwest.

Employers plan to 'focus all minds' on 'pleasant event'

In 1939, Robley Cramer, editor of the *Minneapolis Labor Review*, obtained a document from a confidential source proposing a response by the employers to these successful worker celebrations and the perceived "threat of Local 544" progress in unionizing the city:

"A joint stand [against 544] would have tremendous force:

"It would do 5 things.

"Stimulate those already fighting this menace in Minneapolis.

"It would give loyal citizens a rallying point they now lack.

"It would announce to the radical enemy, that the forces arrayed (sic) against them are now UNITED.

"It would tell the rest of Minnesota that we are finally awake and ready to act.

"It would take from the shoulders of

"capitalistic system of Government to the voters of Hennepin County" and would "assist all interested groups in perpetuating the original spirit of America."

"The special emergency Citizens Committee should have as its third major project some special plan to offset the bad publicity the city has received during the past three years. An activity which would serve to take the minds of Minneapolis citizens off past troubles and focus all minds throughout the state on some pleasant event occurring in Minneapolis."

The event proposed can be none other than the first Minneapolis Aquatennial.

**The third week in July:
Only a coincidence?**

One Aquatennial historian wrote, "old timers remember when a small delegation of businessmen in the Civic and Commerce Association took a trip to Winnipeg... But the rains came, and the group ran for cover... As they huddled together, the conversation turned to Minneapolis, and the bad image of the labor strife and the gangland '30s. The idea of a summer festival was born and grew."

From the start in 1940 with Gene Autry as the first "Aquatennial Guest," and 10 days of over 200 events, the Aquatennial sought to focus the citizens' minds on a new classless Minneapolis. Attendees watched grand parades (both day and night) with floats provided by local businesses. They traveled to upscale neighborhoods surrounding city lakes to watch boat races, regattas, and water shows. Subtly, the employers were reclaiming control of the streets.

The Aquatennial has been touted as the "Ten Best Days of Summer." Since 1940, the festival has been held in the third week in July. Is it only coincidence that 1934's "Bloody Friday" massacre happened at the end of the third week in July?

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Button courtesy of Dave Riehle

1941 Aquatennial Button (bearing union bug).

'The special emergency Citizens Committee should have... some special plan to offset the bad publicity the city has received during the past three years. An activity which would serve to take the minds of Minneapolis citizens off past troubles and focus all minds throughout the state on some pleasant event occurring in Minneapolis.'

— 1939 memo obtained by Robley Cramer, *Labor Review* editor

Citizens Alliance the burden they have been bearing alone — and give them, in this fight against these labor racketeers, the allies they need so badly."

A secret committee would take on the additional responsibility of reselling the

Back Pages

April 9, 1937

Fascists and Nazis pose usually as protectors of the workers and the upholders of liberty when they are seeking to gain a foothold. They declare they are organizing to put down crime. Workers of Minneapolis should realize that many symptoms of a Fascist drive against the trade union movement are present here.

November 18, 1938

If American workers defeat Hitler will they in turn have fastened on them an American fascism through the government declaring an emergency and abolishing civil liberties and rights on the claim the struggle makes this necessary?

October 13, 1939

CINCINNATI — Unanimous opposition to our entry into European war in any manner was voted by the A.F. of L. convention today.

April 26, 1940

All the arts and devices to make folks happy have been resorted to by the committee making the arrangements for the Spring Frolic and Dance to be held Saturday evening... under the auspices of Building Service Employees Local union No. 26. Anyone who can attend this spring frolic and dance and not have a good time should get a prize for being the saddest and most dejected people in the world...

December 12, 1941

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Responding to the war emergency, leaders of American Federation of Labor unions throughout the nation pledged their organizations and members to refrain from striking for any cause... Assurances came pouring into AFL headquarters from every section of the country that the five million members of the AFL will stand by the President and give full support to the Government.

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DO NOT DELAY

Labor Review, November 11, 1938

[Note: The editorial below followed the 1938 defeat of Farmer-Labor Governor Elmer Benson in his bid for re-election. Republican Harold Stassen was elected Governor. The *Labor Review* warned earlier that "organized labor will be faced with bayonets and machine guns at every turn under a Republican state administration." The *Labor Review* attributed Benson's loss to "the lies" of the state's daily newspapers, warning "they fasten Fascism on America."

Unions that are not affiliated with the Hennepin County Central committee of the Farmer-Labor association are urged to do so immediately.

The next two years of Minnesota history may very probably decide whether democracy shall continue or Fascism with its ugly fangs, its concentration camps and abject slavery and poverty be riveted on Minnesota and the state.

One of the lessons that should be learned from the election is that the Hennepin County Central committee should just as nearly as possible reflect the sentiment of the majority of the trade union movement.

Government in the future will play a greater part in the affairs of unions than in the past. Be a loyal, consistent member of your union, but do not neglect the importance of using your political action.

Labor must fight intelligently and effectively with both the political and economic hands or be enslaved. Labor must have the best it can give and develop in both the economic and political field.

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April 3, 1942

The Regional Conference held in Minneapolis March 27 at the call of the War Production Board went through with evidence of a fine spirit of cooperation on the part of both Labor and Management... [R]epresentatives of the AFL... [pledged] an all powerful effort to increase production to the highest possible point.

January 7, 1943

Thoughts of all Minneapolis trade unionists are turning toward what will be the greatest night in the history of Minneapolis organized labor, Saturday, January 16. On that occasion the Floyd B. Olson Memorial Labor Temple, 117 Fourth street S.E., will be thrown open to the public and dedicated to the service of humanity and the honoring of the memory of Minnesota's most famous son.

July 13, 1944

Monday morning the Minneapolis News Trust dished up the plan of the Twin City tycoons for so kindly permitting the working people to shoulder an unfair part of the burden of paying for the war. And of course working people includes those now fighting and dying on democracy's many fronts...

June 14, 1945

Hubert H. Humphrey, elected Mayor of Minneapolis Monday by a record-breaking majority of more than 31,000, led a great campaign backed by Veterans and Labor to triumph... Humphrey's magic oratory, his diligence, his persuasiveness was an outstanding factor in bringing home the political bacon, but after all without the unity of Labor that was achieved there would have been no victory...

April 25, 1946

The 39th anniversary of Minneapolis Labor Review signals the opening of the effort of the Minneapolis Central Labor Union to make its official organ a daily publication to present the principles and policies and activities of the American Federation of Labor every day instead of every week.

Labor Review

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Today, we often refer to the 1934 Teamsters strike as a struggle that broke the power of the anti-union Citizens Alliance and made Minneapolis a union town. But, in the *Labor Review* of the late 1930s, workers faced continuing threats.

The *Labor Review* repeatedly urged readers to support Farmer-Labor Party candidates or suffer dire consequences.

"When the night sticks are being pounded on your heads and the Citizens Alliance thugs and gunmen are shooting you down... it will be just a little bit too late to realize that the city election of 1937 was a very important event," read "Emergency," a front-page editorial running May 28, 1937.

"Citizens Alliance ready for the guns," warned a July 23, 1937 headline.

The newspaper campaigned against a series of business-backed Minneapolis charter amendments that would make the police more independent of elected leaders and allow the police to enlist special deputies to quash strikes.

Cramer's sharp prose attacked business policies conceived at "the usual loafing places at the Minnikahda Club, Minneapolis Club and Athletic Club."

For years following the 1936 death of Farmer-Labor Governor Floyd B. Olson — Labor's hero — page one of the newspaper marked the anniversary of Olson's death

with his photo and continuing tributes.

The newspaper labeled business and political opponents as Fascists and Nazis.

The Minneapolis daily newspapers, according to the *Labor Review*, were "Public Enemy No. 1," full of lies and deceit.

Following the defeat of Farmer-Labor Governor Olson in 1938, the *Labor Review* warned about a new Minnesota Labor Relations Act passed by the legislature and signed by the new Republican Governor, Harold Stassen: "Stassen calls it a bill to promote industrial peace. This is as hypocritical as most everything he says. It is a measure intended to provoke industrial warfare, to obstruct the right of collective bargaining, and enslave the workers."

Franklin D. Roosevelt — whose 1932 election as President was viewed warily by the *Labor Review* — was heralded as labor's champion in each subsequent election.

Labor Day issues began featuring equal-sized photos of Roosevelt and Floyd B. Olson side by side on the same page.

1941: War and change

Up through 1941, the newspaper continued to report tens of thousands of people attending annual Labor Day picnics at Powderhorn Park.

Documents at the Minnesota Historical Society provide a snapshot of the *Labor Review* in 1941. The newspaper reported an average circulation of 15,191 copies per week. Yearly income included advertising revenues of \$19,787.44 and subscription income of \$14,233.18. Expenses totaled \$33,693.41. The annual mailing cost was

\$725.50. (Circulation today: 68,000-plus copies monthly).

With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor December 7, 1941, the *Labor Review* and the labor movement abandoned an anti-war stance. "In democracy there is an honor that makes men ready to die for freedom and liberty," read the December 12, 1941 issue.

Union members enlisted in the U.S. military and served with distinction.

Through the war years, the *Labor Review* promoted victory rallies and — with banner headlines atop page one — urged readers to buy war bonds. "Buy Defense Bonds and You Buy Defeat for Dictator Adolf Hitler" read one example.

The newspaper also documented Labor's support for the war effort: increasing production, refraining from strikes, raising funds for military ambulances and the U.S.O.

Cramer's rhetoric quieted for a time but he then resumed his advocacy: "Labor expects to make sacrifices, to make every sacrifice necessary to win this war. It does not number among those sacrifices being chained so that some masters of industry and finance can fleece it of its rights."

In 1943, the *Labor Review* celebrated a new champion for Labor: Hubert Humphrey. Humphrey ran for Minneapolis mayor that year — but lost. Nonetheless, wrote the *Labor Review*, "there is a new name emblazoned on the political skies of Minneapolis and Minnesota that is destined to cast a lustre over the future of the state." Humphrey ran again for mayor in 1945 — and won. Labor entered a new era in Minnesota.

Aquatennial: A spectacle to shift focus from workers' July celebration

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The Aquatennial typically includes neighborhood festivals, air and water shows, big name entertainers, a tennis invitational, parades, sailing regattas, and milk carton boat races. The Aquatennial's frolics compare favorably with other big city celebrations, and put Minneapolis on the map.

Businesses always have run the Aquatennial. In fact, the Aquatennial is a business. Corporations sponsor nearly all of the events and even create new ones. For example, in 1971, to increase sales of milk, ad agency executives looked at the Aquatennial and came up with the first milk carton boat race.

After the great 1877 railroad strike, a group of prominent St. Louis businessmen formed an organization they called The Veiled Prophet, modeled on the New Orleans Carnival society of the Mystick Krewe of Comus.

"They formed the organization largely in response to a general strike by workers the summer before, when workers had both symbolically and physically gained

control of the streets," historian Thomas Spencer writes.

The annual celebration usually includes the Veiled Prophet Parade. Spencer notes that the "parade's primary function from the beginning was to be a show of physical power. Parading by on the tops of floats, the members laid claim to the streets. Portraying themselves as royalty set above their social inferiors, the members tried to reinforce the social hierarchy."

1941 marked the end of radical leadership of Local 544 and the end of the celebratory Teamsters' picnics. The minds of Minneapolis citizens were re-focused away from the successes of labor's struggles by a mammoth competing spectacle, the Minneapolis Aquatennial.

The Teamster picnics represented a

movement of the people, universal and equally inclusive of all participants — there were no spectators. The Aquatennial, in contrast, remains as a manufactured event "focusing all minds" to the fact that a worker's place is on the sidelines in an employer-run social hierarchy.

Kelly Ahern is a clerical worker at the University of Minnesota and chief steward of AFSCME Local 3800. This article is adapted from a paper she wrote for a class at the University of Minnesota. She wants to acknowledge the assistance of Dave Riehle in editing her paper for publication here.

For the complete text of Ahern's much longer paper about the Aquatennial's roots, visit www.minneapolisunions.org.

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