

A REPORT FROM 2006 EVENT:

8-Hour day marches of 1886 linked to immigrant marches of 2006 at Bay View Massacre event

Some 200 persons attended the 120th Anniversary Commemoration of the Bay View Massacre on Sunday, May 7, at the Historical Marker site in Milwaukee. The event memorializes the events of May 5, 1886 when the State Militia fired upon workers marching in an eight-hour-day rally, killing seven persons. Here is report of that event:

Though the Bay View Massacre occurred 120 years ago, it forms the background and inspiration for the ongoing struggles of the current day, such as the campaign to protect the rights of immigrants.

That was made clear by speakers at the 120th Anniversary Commemoration of the Bay View Tragedy, held on May 7th at the Bay View Rolling Mills Historical Marker Site on Milwaukee's lakefront. The commemoration was held at the site of the May 5, 1886 massacre where the State Militia, which fired upon some 1,500 workers marching on behalf of the eight-hour day, killed seven.

This year's commemoration was held just a few days after a massive rally in Milwaukee on behalf of the rights of immigrants, and the organizer of that event, Christine Neumann-Ortiz, as keynote speaker, linked this year's marches with those of 120 years ago.

Neumann-Ortiz, executive director of Voces de la Frontera, said the commemoration ceremony highlights "the martyrdom of Wisconsin's immigrant workers who gave their lives in the struggle for the eight-hour day so that future generations could live in dignity."

She said that now, 120 years later, the immigrant labor movement is under attack as Congress considers pending legislation that would create a permanent criminalized underclass of workers and criminalizes millions of US citizens for helping an immigrant.

"Despite these attacks, the tradition of the American labor movement -- enriched by its ethnic diversity and heritage -- is a beacon of hope for future generations once again," she said.

Neumann-Ortiz said that on May 1, 2006 close to 2 million working class families and their allies marched in over 200 cities. In Milwaukee, close to 70,000 marched from S. 5th and W. Washington streets to Veteran's Park—a number twice as big as the 30,000 that marched on March 23, 2006. She said:

“They came despite potential retributions from employers, false rumors of widespread raids, and the threat of thunderstorms and rain. Old, young, and the handicapped joined thousands more in a two and a half mile long trek.

“They marched seeking immigration laws that reflect American values of family unity, worker rights, due process, and a path to citizenship.

“. . . Our hope for a better quality of life for future generations is tied to this struggle, and I have nothing but the utmost faith that we will prevail. Thank you. Solidarity.”

Doug Drake of the United Steelworkers, who emceed the event, introduced Neumann-Ortiz, calling her “a symbol of the invisible in our society.” He said that “through her work, those who are normally invisible, the hotel maids, the restaurant cooks, the dishwashers, those who toil in foundries and tanneries have become visible to everyone. Their contributions to society have become clear to all of us.”

In his introductory remarks, he noted that this year’s ceremony marked the 20th straight year in which persons have gathered to honor the seven persons killed by the State militia during a May 1886 March for the eight-hour day. Some 200 persons, including many labor and public officials, attended this year’s event. He outlined the events leading up to the May 5, 1886 tragedy, noting that the marching workers came from recent immigrant backgrounds and had joined together to begin to improve their horrendous working conditions of the day.

“And the tragic events of May 5, 1886 are something that we have to bear witness to and make sure that the world does not forget,” he said. The event, he said, “ended the bloodiest labor disturbance in Wisconsin history and this began a new chapter in an ongoing struggle for a more just and more humane workplace and economic and social justice in our society.”

Subsequently, he said, workers throughout the world have celebrated May 1st as a “workers holiday,” commemorating the struggles of U.S. workers for the eight-hour day. This struggle continues today, realizing “the quest for justice is never over.”

Always a popular speaker at the commemoration event, Former Mayor Frank Zeidler (now 93 years old) recalled the 1886 event, noting that Gov. Jeremiah Rusk had assigned Colonel Treauer to lead the militia, a man who had Civil War experience and was used to ordering troops to fire upon other troops. It was clear that Treauer wouldn’t be hesitant to issue an order to fire upon the marchers if they kept coming, he said.

The tragedy was part of a nationwide struggle of workers, beginning in the 1870s for better conditions for workers, who worked 10 hours a day, 12 hours a day six days a week and they had to walk to work and it might take them an hour each way, and there wasn’t much time to live. “Under those terrible conditions, naturally there was a concern to reduce the workday, but the resistance was great,” he said. The newspapers of the day said businesses couldn’t afford to reduce hours to eight, he added.

Even though the drive for the 8-hour day collapsed after the Massacre, workers began a movement within two years that to elect a worker friendly a Common Council and County Board. “They began a movement that brought many great benefits to the community,” he said. Zeidler mentioned workers compensation, Social Security and other things that workers enjoy today came “as a result of that group.

He praised the work of the committee of the labor history society and other groups like the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom as being the “building stones of world peace and world comity between people and also the improvements of the conditions of labor.” at the forefront of developing much peace and comity in the world.

Jean Haase, of the Older Women’s League and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, discussed the historical perspective on the role of women and their contributions to the fight for justice, focusing on Jane Addams, famed for her Hull House work, and Helen Keller, who overcame twin handicaps of being blind and deaf.

“Too much of labor history has been omitted from the history books, and this includes two women, Jane Addams and Helen Keller.

“The truth is they did a lot more than” what is popularly known, Haase said. “They fought valiantly for progressive causes; they were very concerned about the social and economic systems that were taking place in this country and they were champions of the working class.”

Addams worked toward forming unions and coops as a way to assure people have a say in controlling their lives. She assisted in forming several unions for women, including one in the garment industry, lobbied for child labor laws, the eight-hour day and workers compension, Haase said.

Helen Keller was “really a radical socialist,” this is omitted in most history books, she said. She was a lifelong supporter of the labor movement, and even supported and joined some radical groups like the Industrial Workers of the world.

“History books have simply failed to tell us about that part of their lives,” Hasse said. “Too many of these same texts have omitted facts about the labor movement and its courageous struggles. Our children need to hear these stories to better understand how their legacy came to be.”

She urged the teaching of labor history and women’s history in the schools.

Among the guests were a number of public officials, all of whom said brief remarks:

State Rep. Jon Richards, who represents the area of the site and assistant minority leader in the Assembly, said he senses “the winds of change coming upon Wisconsin in this election because we have a crowd in Madison who is a lot more interested in making backroom deals than dealing with the middle-class squeeze so many Wisconsin families are facing.” He cited the failure of the Republican-controlled Legislature to deal with the

minimum wage, comprehensive health care reform, ethics reform, and the struggle families face in sending their children to college.

St. Rep. Chris Sinicki quipped that the “good news is the Legislature is out for the summer and we can’t do any more damage and the bad news is the damage has already been done.” She said it was important that Democrats win in November.

Marina Dimitrejevic, County Supervisor, said that the County Board will not allow the County to make cuts among the workforce, and find a “creative way to keep our Milwaukee County services preserved.”

State Rep. Fred Kessler (D-Milwaukee) said the people “are now fed up” with the Republicans after they have controlled the Congress for six years and the State Legislature for ten years, and that the Democrats will be successful in November. To be successful, he said, “it requires us to work hard, but we’re going to do it.”

Alderman Tony Zielinski recalled that it is proper to honor these workers since they were “putting their own lives on the line” to fight for their rights. “Our new battlefield involves these big corporations taking these good paying jobs overseas to these sweatshops taking advantage of these workers by taking our good paying jobs out of the country.” “We can win that battle if we work hard enough,” he said.

Also present was State Rep. Josh Zepnick and Joan Kessler.