

Bay View Tragedy Event

121st Anniversary of Massacre Brings Forth Memories of 8-Hour Day Fight and Frank Zeidler

For the 21st consecutive year, hundreds of persons gathered in early May on a bluff overlooking Lake Michigan in Bay View to commemorate one of Wisconsin's most bloody events – the Bay View Tragedy.



Sheila Cochran, of Milwaukee County Labor Council, opens the event

Among the 200 or more present on the unusually mild Sunday (May 6) were labor union leaders, members and activists, residents of Bay View, historians and others, gathered for the 121st Anniversary Commemoration of the killing of seven persons on May 5, 1886 during a march of workers on behalf of the 8-hour day.

Missing this year from the event was a principal participant, former Milwaukee Mayor **Frank P. Zeidler**, longtime speaker at the event and committee member. He died last July 7 at age of 93, and one of his last public appearances was at the 2006 event on May 7.

Yet, Zeidler was present in the minds of those attending, and his contributions to the event were noted by the speakers. His widow, Agnes, a daughter, Anita, and a son, Michael, were also present for the occasion, which they had stated was always close to the former Mayor's heart.

Sheila Cochran, chief officer of the Milwaukee County Labor Council, opened the session with a moment of silence for Mr. Zeidler. She said that the event commemorates

the 1886 tragedy that began when 1,500 workers marched to the Bay View Rolling Mills – located near the historical marker at the intersection of

S. Superior St.

and

E. Russell Ave.

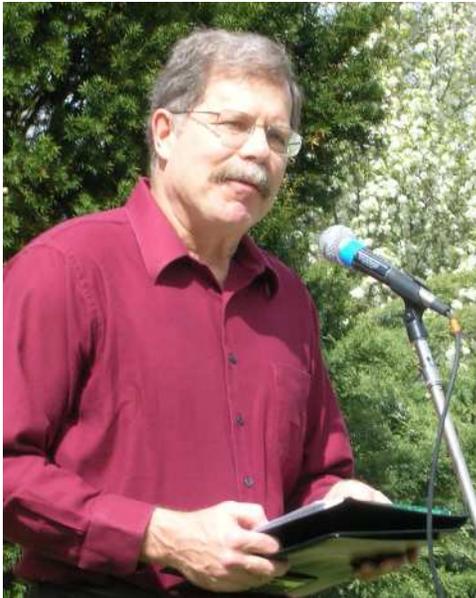
They were marching as part of a nationwide campaign to bring about the 8-hour workday.

She noted that the State militia had been called out by Wis. Gov. Jeremiah Rusk, and the militia fired into the marchers, killing seven, including a 12 year old boy and a man tending getting water for his chickens.

“Thus began a new chapter in the ongoing struggle for a more humane workplace and a just society,” she said. “The struggle continues to this day, realizing that the struggle for justice is ongoing and never ending.”

Larry Penn, introduced as a “beloved folksinger in Milwaukee” and a retired Teamster, sang two songs, including his own compositions, “Ghosts of Bay View,” commemorating the tragedy, and “Trickle Down,” which discussed President Reagan’s economic policies that cheated the workers.

REMARKS OF JOHN GURDA



John Gurda, Bay View resident and Milwaukee historian, called Frank Zeidler a “civic saint.” He said the former Mayor would be missed at the event since he annually read the names of the deceased, told of the importance of the event, and “passed the fedora” for donations to support labor history activities.

Gurda described the working conditions of the 1880s, the period that led up to the 8-hour day marches and the Bay View Tragedy, as “nothing less than criminal.” He said the highest paid workers in the Bay View Rolling Mill at the time were the puddlers who made \$5 a day, worked 12 hours a day and six days a week. Translated to today’s wages, that’s about \$8 an hour, without any benefits at all, he said. Those at the bottom of the pay scale got \$1.15 a day, which translates to about \$2 an hour today.

The workers in the blast furnace area faced heat regularly of about 165 degrees, he said.

“Not surprisingly in Milwaukee there were efforts to strike a balance between capital and labor,” he said, noting that the first union in Milwaukee was formed in 1842. The Knights of Labor appeared in the 1880s, and the eight-hour day became the “cut-through issue: eight hours a day without cut in pay.”

He said that “labor was not intimidated” after the shootings. Less than three weeks after the shootings, the Knights of Labor held a parade that drew 5,000 workers, marching through 5 miles of city streets, showing “they were not going to be intimidated and they were not going away.”

Labor’s response, Gurda said, was not to respond in violence, but as a “call to action.” He quoted one of the 1886 leaders, Robert Schilling: “The intelligent citizens have a mightier weapon than the bullet: the ballot.” The result was the forming of the People’s Party which in 1886 won a majority of the County offices, a majority of the Milwaukee seats in the State Assembly and a place in Congress (Henry Smith, a millwright by trade, went to Washington). They were beaten in the following election by a fusion party composed of Democrats and Republicans, but, he said, “a seed had been planted.”

Less than a decade later, the Socialist Party emerged under the leadership of Victor Berger who believed in working with the Unions. Berger called it “the Milwaukee idea.”



Larry Penn sings "Ghosts of Bay View" at event.

A small group, the Social Democrats, was elected to the Common Council where they demonstrated “creativity, diligence and absolute incorruptibility,” and Milwaukeeans began to trust them eventually electing the first Socialist Mayor, Emil Seidel, in 1910, and also gaining control of the Common Council, composed mainly of people who “worked with their hands.” Milwaukee continued with mainly Socialist mayors, including Dan Hoan from 1916 to 1940 and Zeidler from 1948 to 1960. All of them were prolabor, he said.

Gurda said that the combination of the Socialists and organized labor transformed the city from being “a boss-ridden, staggeringly corrupt city to one of the best governed cities in America. Despite some recent lapses, we still enjoy some good government. We still have high expectations of our public servants and in most cases, they still deliver.”

He continued: “The very notion of public service, the idea of our common wealth, is a legacy of the Socialist period in Milwaukee politics. In some very important ways that legacy began here in Bay View and it began with the tragic event that we commemorate today.

“It was in response to the Bay View Tragedy that a spirit was born, a spirit of solidarity, a spirit of cooperation, a spirit of hope. Today, as we mark the 121st Anniversary of that event we also honor the memory of a person who embodied those ideals better than anyone, Frank P. Zeidler.”

REMARKS OF STEPHEN HAUSER:



Reading the names of the deceased was **Professor Stephen Hauser**, a longtime friend of the late Frank Zeidler and a participant in the Public Enterprise Committee (founded by Zeidler).

Following the tradition of Zeidler, he reflected that the victims of 1886 died not only to help their own families, but those of generations to come. He remembered Zeidler as “cherishing workers” and a “man who loved history.” Zeidler recognized, Hauser said, that history is not just about prime ministers and kings and presidents and generals but is about “average people who build communities, who sacrificed and did the work that was placed before them and turned around at the end of their lives and had seen that they created something that was worth preserving. History is created by all, and no one understood that better than Frank Zeidler.”

Stephen Hauser Hauser said that Zeidler recognized, even as a prominent Lutheran, that man’s works had to continue after their death “here on earth.” Zeidler’s good works, he would have expected, will continue with others doing the tasks he once did, he added.

Hauser noted that labor’s mission for the 8-hour day began in 1868, and in Milwaukee it began with socialist Paul Grottkau.

“History has a way of calling things to attention,” he said. “They died demanding what was on the banners here, eight hours for work, eight hours for rest and eight hours for what we will. It seems like such a simple demand today, and yet it was met with cries of ‘radical’ and ‘agitator’ and these men put their lives on the line and their lives were forfeited that day in May.”

Aggie Schwartz of Stagehands Local 18 lays memorial wreath.

He noted that two non-marchers were killed, a 13-year-old boy and an older man getting water. “That is to remind us that there are no bystanders in history,” he said.



Aggie Schwartz of IATSE Local 18 lays memorial wreath

The finding of two additional bodies – likely victims of the shootings -- several days after the event provides a “lesson that not everyone who makes history is remembered by name,” he added. “Anonymity sometimes shrouds those who also are heroes.”

He read off the names of the seven who died that day. “May their struggle and their sacrifice never be forgotten,” he concluded.

After the May 2007 event, Anita Zeidler, one of the daughters a letter to the Bay

View Planning Committee. We think the letter is worth sharing. (See Below)

Dear Mr. Ken Germanson, and, members of the Wisconsin Labor History Society:

My family and I are grateful that you honored my father, Frank P. Zeidler, on Sunday, May 6, 2007 at the commemoration of the Bay View tragedy. Your ceremony was always a not-to-be-missed event on my father's appointments calendar. He had a strong sense of historic place (as anyone who ever gave him a ride knows). I think he felt history was more understandable, and the impact was greater and more real if you could see where it happened.

When we were children (long before the monument was erected on Superior and Russell) any time the family journeyed to Bay View, my father always pointed out the place and told us the story. After repeated telling, it became impossible for me to see the place, or be near it without thinking about the almost incomprehensible tragedy that occurred there. As a child I was horrified that a governor, an elected public servant like my father, could order citizens to shoot other citizens who just wanted a better life (an eight-hour work day to spend more time with their families). My father explained that the people we elect are not always wise, just or fair, and that sometimes people in power will protect

their own interests with excessive force. It was a lesson that later would help me understand why the National Guard fired on anti-war demonstrators at Kent State, and even what happened two weeks ago in Los Angeles when police used excessive force at a rally for immigration reform. The struggle for a fair and just society is ongoing, and it can be threatening to the people who -do not want to share the wealth or power they hold.

But the lesson does not end with the tragic outcome. My father always pointed out that workers eventually won the eight-hour day. And I can point out that my father's own time in office demonstrates that it is possible to elect a fair and wise leader. The message my father related to us over and over was that achieving a more fair, just society takes persistent effort. Democracy works when we have the courage not only to speak up for what is right, but also to allow all voices to be heard. With the Bay View historical marker and the ceremony each year, the Wisconsin Labor History Society is giving a platform to voices that might otherwise be forgotten voices; voices that encourage us all to persist in the pursuit of what is right and fair. I think that is why this ceremony was so important to my father and why, to me, the monument and the ceremony are reminders to try to be more like my Dad.

Sincerely,

/s/ Anita Zeidler