



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

‘Give us a decent standard of living’



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Athlone-born John Fitzpatrick, pictured with the Cork-born labour activist, Mother Jones

In September 1919, hundreds of thousands of steel workers in the United States began a strike in pursuit of better working conditions.

Among the strike’s leaders was John Fitzpatrick, an Athlone-born immigrant, president of the Chicago Federation of Labour (CFL) and one of the most famous union organisers in America.

Born in the early 1870s, Fitzpatrick emigrated to Chicago in 1882, following the death of both his parents. He found work in the city’s stockyards and slaughterhouses, where he remained for the next three or four years. During this time, he joined the International Union of Journeymen Horseshoers and, later, the Blacksmiths, Drop Forgers and Helpers Union. He held a number of high-ranking positions within these organisations, becoming one of Chicago’s most prominent trade unionists.

Reform and revenge

Fitzpatrick was elected as CFL president in 1900, holding the role for a year. He was elected again in 1906 and remained as president until his death in 1946. Under his leadership, the CFL pushed a progressive policy, seeking to eliminate corruption, overseeing massive organising drives, advocating on behalf of female teachers and supporting the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, which would be the first union with African-American leadership to gain membership of the nationwide American Federation of Labor.

Fitzpatrick was instrumental to two major campaigns, the drive to unionize Chicago stockyards in 1917 and the national steel campaign of 1918 and 1919. Although the 1917 campaign did not result in union recognition, it forced the stockyard owners to accept a system of arbitration. Buoyed by that success, in 1918 Fitzpatrick and colleague William Foster formed the National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers in an attempt to end the mistreatment of workers in the steel industry.

The end of 1918 marked the beginning of an explosive period of labor unrest. During the First World War, the US government had taken a conciliatory approach toward unions.

In return for a moratorium on strikes, unions obtained shorter work-days, greater collective bargaining rights and representation in agencies such as the National War Labor Board, which mediated labour disputes. The war’s end, however, brought an abrupt halt to this period of conciliation.

The government disbanded the National War Labor Board and American businesses saw an opportunity to regain power over the unions. At the centre of this struggle was the steel industry, primarily US Steel, a massive corporation founded in 1901 by leading industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie and J.P. Morgan.

Rotten apple, rotten barrel

By 1919, US Steel controlled a vast share of the steel market but that success was built on work practices that were dangerous and demeaning. Workers in US Steel, which refused to recognise unions, faced twelve-hour days, seven-day working weeks and often unsafe conditions. John Fitzpatrick was particularly perturbed by the conditions facing workers in US Steel because its sheer size meant that it acted as a role model. If US Steel was allowed to continue the mistreatment of its workers, then other industries would seek to enact similar policies and undo progress that workers had made elsewhere. As Fitzpatrick put it: ‘one rotten apple will contaminate the entire barrel’.

Fitzpatrick’s and Foster’s National Committee attempted to negotiate with US

Steel but its chairman, Elbert Gary, refused to meet them, making a strike inevitable. It began on 22 September 1919 when over 350,000 steel workers, across six states, walked off the job. Their demands were clear and reasonable: an eight-hour day, a six-day working week and the right to organise unions without being harassed. Yet they were met by a vast campaign of intimidation, violence and propaganda. Local police and state troopers mobilised against the strikers, breaking up meetings through a combination of arrests and beatings.

Mary Harris, the renowned Cork-born labour activist more popularly known as Mother Jones, later claimed that gunmen shadowed Fitzpatrick during the strike and it is likely that his life was in danger. At that time, and for many decades previously, large industrial corporations employed private militias to break up strikes and to intimidate workers. A few weeks before the steel strike, union organiser Fannie Sellins had been murdered in Pennsylvania by members of a militia working for a coal company. She had intervened to protect a striking worker, who was also killed by the militia. The perpetrators avoided punishment.

Cheap labour, high price

Apart from violence, the strikers faced a hostile media, which played on anti-immigrant sentiments and widespread fears of communism. During 1919, there had been many major

strikes in the US, leading to a ‘Red Scare’ in which much of the media, and, perhaps, a majority of the public were fearful of communist plots. In that atmosphere, even the relatively limited demands of the steel workers could be portrayed as a danger to the United States. Strike-breaking was another tactic used by US Steel, whose agents sought to inflame animosities between different immigrant nationalities and between white and black workers.

In the face of such challenges, the strike lost momentum during October and November 1919, with many strikers returning to work. By December, it was apparent that the strike had failed, although it was January 1920 before it was formally brought to an end. US Steel, which had made no concessions to the strikers, had won what appeared to be a total victory. Yet, while the strike may have ended, the campaign to reduce US Steel’s twelve-hour working day gained new adherents, particularly among religious groups such as the Inter-church World Movement, which released a high-profile report that chastised US Steel: ‘The 12-hour day is the most iniquitous of the by-products of the corporation’s labor policy which is to get cheap labor and keep it cheap.’

The United States Senate likewise took an interest. While the strike was ongoing, the Senate’s Committee on Education and Labor convened hearings to investigate its cause. Fitzpatrick was one of the key figures to appear before the committee. He framed the issue as one that was vital to both the workers and to the United States as whole, telling the committee that: ‘The home life of the entire family is destroyed where a 12-hour day obtains.’ Fitzpatrick also interviewed the wives of steel workers and their common response when questioned, he said, was ‘give us a decent standard of living; that is what we want’. An eight-hour day, he told the committee, would free those workers and their families to contribute to society and to the economy. They would, he said, seek ‘better homes, better food, greater opportunity to try and develop their children’.

Fitzpatrick’s efforts, alongside those of others, meant that US Steel remained under public and political pressure to end the twelve-hour day. In 1923, the company finally responded to that pressure and announced the introduction of an eight-hour working-day. In a later article, we will look again at Fitzgerald’s remarkable career. A firm supporter of Irish independence, Fitzpatrick guided the CFL through two world wars and the Great Depression, as well as countless reforming campaigns.

