

The most important event in American Labor history happened in Minneapolis in the spring and summer of 1934. The Teamster strikes transformed Minneapolis from the bastion of the open shop to a Union town which has lasted to this day. More importantly it led to passage the next year, 1935, of the National Labor Relations Act, also called the Wagner Act. This legislation formed the foundation that guarantees the right of private sector employees to organize into trade unions.

In the depths of the Depression civil unrest was bubbling up in cities around the country. Toledo, Seattle, San Francisco all saw mass actions that brought those towns to their knees. Talk of revolution filled the air. The most successful of these independent grassroots civil actions was led by members of Teamster Local 574 of Minneapolis. Their careful planning, tenacity and organizing ability in the face of tremendous obstacles thrown in their way by the Citizens Alliance, hired thugs, scabs, bosses, the City, the cops and National Guard worked. For once the little guy won. And what a hard fought victory it was. Starting years earlier in the coal yards but peaking in the spring of '34 the Teamster rallied hundreds, then thousands of working people to fight for the right to form a Union. There were big fights in the streets near the warehouse district between hired strikebreakers, the cops and the trade unionists. The Teamsters wanted to shut down all truck traffic except milk and food for children and medical supplies until their demands were met. In one of the earlier strikes that spring the unarmed strikers were beaten with sticks and clubs by the cops and scabs. Vowing it wouldn't happen again, at the next strike, the workers, with sticks and fists of their own quietly filled nearby buildings near the site of moving trucks, waiting for the moment to surprise the boss' armed agents. When the goons attacked, out they rushed and in the ensuing melee that became known as The Battle of Deputies Run began on May 22nd., when two of the strikebreakers, one a prominent owners son, were felled and died. This resulted in a negotiated settlement that was reneged on by the owners. By July 17th the strike resumed with the whole town being locked down by the workers as a result. Nothing moved except with the consent of the strikers. Flying pickets, where carloads of strikers were sent by car to any point in the city where a loaded truck might be making a delivery, were deployed to persuade drivers to cease delivery.

Still holding some powerful cards that included all the guns, the bosses and the police planned a surprise of their own. Revenge was on their minds. On July 20th a decoy truck left a building near 3rd. Street and 6th ave. North loaded with a few packages and a caravan of police as escort. (the building is still there). By now the strikers knew they could not win an armed fight. Not against the cops. They were unarmed and the cops through informers knew it. As the truck turned a corner unarmed strikers on foot and in cars moved to stop its movement. From rooftops and from hiding places the police, armed with pistols, rifles and shotguns sprang out from their holes and began firing. The chief told his men when he was distributing the arsenal, "here 'ya go boys, you know how to use 'em." Except they didn't know how to use them. They lacked proper training. North on 3rd the workers ran fleeing for their lives, the cops right behind them shooting all the time. To be fair, if that isn't too indelicate a term, some police fired into the air. But not enough were taken by conscience. In the chaos of The Battle of Bloody Friday 67 unarmed striking workers, only trying to provide a living for their families, were shot. Many in the back. Two were killed. One was shotgunned as he lay under a car escaping the flowing carnage. His name was Henry Ness.

In the funeral several days later, 100,000 mourners lined the streets of Minneapolis. Henry is buried in Crystal Lake Cemetery in north Minneapolis. In the wake of Bloody Friday a brokered settlement was finally reached. It was far from perfect but it was a settlement. The legacy of those who came before and sacrificed so much has not been forgotten. It is being remembered on Saturday July 20th. 2019 on the corner of 3rd Street and 7th avenue north, Minneapolis, in an event that offers a few speakers, old timers, Teamster brothers and sisters, friends, family and the interested passersby. Hot dogs and refreshments will be served by the members of Teamster Local 120. It should be a real good time. Join in.