The Bay View Tragedy:

Wisconsin’s Fight for the Eight-Hour Workday

Anna Pearce

Historical Paper

Junior Division

Paper Length: 2,499 words
Introduction

On May 5, 1886, seven protesters were killed by state militia while marching in support of the eight-hour workday in Bay View, Wisconsin. This event shed light on the inhumane treatment of workers and led to the election of public officials in Wisconsin who were supporters of the eight-hour workday. The Bay View Tragedy is also known as The Bay View Massacre and was Wisconsin’s Bloodiest Labor Event. Over 1,500 people marched with the goal of improving working conditions and instilling an eight-hour workday. However, instead of coming to the peaceful conclusion they were hoping for, they were shot at and seven protesters were killed.¹ This tragic event in Wisconsin history ultimately led to the workers’ triumph over adversity resulting in fair hours, wages, and working conditions.

A Cause to Unite

Immigrants often came to America to escape dire circumstances that they had to endure in their native country. However, in the 1880s, immigrants arrived in America only to find poor working conditions with long hours and extremely low salaries. These workers worked ten to fourteen hours per day and six days per week.² They did all this work for approximately one dollar per day. After adjusting for inflation over the years, this is the equivalent of approximately two dollars per hour today. Skilled worker salaries were five dollars a day which equates to about seven dollars per hour today.³

Tensions Escalate

In 1884, Organized Trade and Labor Unions (a group that worked for Americans’ rights in the workforce) announced that the eight-hour workday should be enacted by May 1, 1886. Robert Schilling, a leader of the Knights of Labor, organized the first eight-hour workday league in Milwaukee. 4 Robert Schilling had significant power because the Knights of Labor was the largest labor union in America at that time. In 1885, they reportedly had 700,000 members. 5 The goal of the Knights of Labor, which was founded in 1869, 6 was to be a nonviolent labor union bringing about improvements in workers’ rights. The Master Workman (leader) of the Knights of Labor did not want to be part of the eight-hour workday strikes. He believed that these strikes and protests were too extreme for the respective issue, and he petitioned to not be part of the strikes. However, Robert Schilling thought that a fight for the eight-hour workday was greatly needed. He knew that the eight-hour workday was an important cause, and he advocated to the Knights of Labor in Milwaukee to actively join the strikes. Schilling ultimately united a total of 1,500 people in Milwaukee who participated in the strikes over the next several days and helped shut down numerous businesses in Bay View. 7

When May 1, 1886 arrived, the eight-hour workday movement was gaining momentum, but most employers had not yet adopted the eight-hour workday. However, the city of Milwaukee did give all of its workers shorter hours which resulted in several private employers

following suit. Some industrial workers were furious with the working conditions and the working hours at the companies where they worked. These workers began to strike and aggressively tried to organize other workers to strike as well. After Wisconsin’s governor, Jeremiah Rusk (Appendix A), received news of these demonstrations he decided to travel to Milwaukee in case he was needed to diffuse the situation. He arrived the next day.

On May 2, approximately 1,500 blue-collar workers held a parade to educate the public on the importance of an eight-hour workday. They wanted to make sure that everyone knew that working long hard days with little pay was unacceptable, and that significant change was needed. Some of their slogans included, “Eight hours is our battle cry” and "The workmen do not beg, they demand." This parade was watched by nearly 25,000 people.

On May 3, at around 11:00 am, a group of approximately 300 Polish immigrant workers began to go from company to company in Bay View shutting them down. They threatened to use force to push employees into striking. These Polish immigrants were carrying clubs and some were carrying knives, but there was no violence and no injuries were reported. These protests in support of the eight-hour workday were wildly successful and by nightfall all of the businesses in Bay View were closed except for one, the North Chicago Rolling Mills (a steel company, shown in Appendix B). The North Chicago Rolling Mills stayed open because they had many skilled workers who were being paid a reasonable salary and were working decently.

hours. The employees of the North Chicago Rolling Mills didn’t see a reason to stop working to strike for something they had already been given.

By May 4, the parade of protesting blue-collar workers swelled to approximately 1,500, and they were ready to shut down the Rolling Mills. The governor realized that this disturbance would not be easily quelled so he called in the state militia to calm the situation and protect the North Chicago Rolling Mills. He believed that the Milwaukee area lacked a large enough force to stop the protesters, so he called in forces from all over the state. These forces came from: Janesville, Delavan, Madison, Beloit, Monroe, Darlington, Whitewater, and Racine. He stationed most of the troops at the North Chicago Rolling Mills to stop the protesters from entering (Appendix C). Governor Rusk wanted to protect the property of the local businesses from the protesters. He feared that they may use violence to enter the North Chicago Rolling Mills. When the protesters attempted to enter the North Chicago Rolling Mills the militia shot in their direction. None of the protesters were injured, but spirits began to run low. However, the protesters continued to fight for their eight-hour workday.

“It was Cowardly Premeditated Murder”

One day later, on May 5, 1886, the group of 1,500 protesters reorganized and headed back toward the Rolling Mills in Bay View. Their marching could be heard throughout the town. Many families stepped onto their lawns to get a better view of the strikers marching

---

11 Nesbit, The History of Wisconsin: Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1893, pg. 392
14 Nesbit The History of Wisconsin: Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1893, pg. 398
through the streets. The strikers were holding many signs with different slogans and sayings. One of those slogans stood out and summed up the entire movement. It read, “Eight Hours for Work, Eight Hours for Rest, Eight Hours for What We Will.” This sign explained the whole eight-hour workday campaign in one sentence. It demonstrated how workers wanted fair hours so that they could balance their home and work lives.

The protesters moved quickly through the streets. Soon they arrived at the North Chicago Rolling Mills (Appendix D), which was still protected by the militia. The militia yelled to the protesters to turn back, but they did not seem to hear the militia’s orders. When the protesters failed to stop walking towards the entrance of the North Chicago Rolling Mills, the militia called Governor Rusk. Over the phone, Governor Rusk gave the order to the militia of, “Very well sir. Fire on them.”

When the distance between the Rolling Mills and the protesters had closed to approximately 200 yards, the militia once again yelled to the protesters to stop. The protesters again seemed not to hear them. The protesters continued to move forward, and the militia began to shoot. As soon as the first bullet left the first gun, the protesters flew to the ground creating the illusion that many were killed or injured. When the volley of whizzing bullets was over, most of the protesters who were unharmed jumped up and hurried away from the scene. However, when the smoke cleared, seven protesters were dead and approximately 10 to 12 others were injured, while none of the militia were injured. The protesters then helped the injured men limp away from the scene while the militia continued to stand guard in front of the Rolling Mills.

---

17 Nesbit, The History of Wisconsin: Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1893, pg. 380
During the shooting, a few people who were unrelated to the protests were also shot and killed as some of the militia’s bullets missed their marks and hit innocent citizens. This included a twelve year old boy who was wounded and eventually died on his way to school. Another person who died was a retired Rolling Mills worker who was watching the action from his front yard.\(^\text{19}\) This ended the eight-hour workday protests in Bay View for awhile.\(^\text{20}\) These protests in Milwaukee may have stopped because of the deadly end to The Bay View Tragedy, but the eight-hour workday movement was not over.

**Opinions**

People had mixed reactions to the shootings. The newspapers on May 5, 1886 also had different views on the necessity of the shootings. Most newspapers took the side of the governor. They did not want to contradict or challenge the government. Many people thought that the shootings were justified and that Governor Rusk was just doing his job. In a speech a few days after the Bay View Tragedy, Governor Rusk said, “I seen my duty and I done it.”\(^\text{21}\) In addition, The Journal Times (Racine, Wisconsin) called the shootings “energetic.”\(^\text{22}\) This illustrates how at least some people thought that the use of deadly force was a good means to stop the protests. In an interview, Major Traeumer, whose troops shot at the crowd of protesters said, “killing was necessary.”\(^\text{23}\) In addition, the soldiers who shot at the strikers were showered with gifts and fed expensive and luxurious meals as a thank you for saving property from the

---

\(^\text{19}\) Gurda, John. "Bay View Tragedy."
\(^\text{21}\) Nesbit, The History of Wisconsin: Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1893, pg. 406
\(^\text{23}\) Nesbit, The History of Wisconsin: Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1893, pg. 406
The militia was treated similar to celebrities. These people believed that the strikers were going to damage the property, buildings, and possessions of the businesses that did not comply with their demands. Because of these beliefs, 25 protesters were taken to court on charges of riot and many more were taken to court on charges of conspiracy.  

On the other hand, The Milwaukee Journal believed that the shootings were unjustified and that “the innocent suffer.” They stated that these protesters should not be blamed for the shooting. Most civilians at the time of the shooting took the side of the protestors and The Milwaukee Journal (Appendix E). They believed that the eight-hour workday movement was a just cause and that the bloodshed was a cruel and unnecessary measure to stop the protesters. Some people at the time took this shooting as evidence that industrial property was valued more than the lives of the industrial workers. Although there were mixed reactions to this shooting, one thing was for certain; the eight-hour workday movement and the fight for industrial workers’ rights was not over. 

### A Different Life

The shooting, although violent and malicious, ultimately had a positive impact on workers’ rights. Almost immediately following the shooting, more than 20 Milwaukee-area companies gave their workers eight-hour workdays. Some of these companies even gave their employees an eight-hour workday without decreasing their salaries. Other companies gave their employees eight-hour workdays with nine hours of pay. All of these businesses came up with unique arrangements with their employees for fair salaries and humane hours.

---

24 Nesbit, The History of Wisconsin: Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1893, pg. 408
26 Gurda, John. "Bay View Tragedy."
27 Gurda, John. "Bay View Tragedy."
Another positive effect of the Bay View Tragedy was that it shed light on the inhumane treatment of the working class. Robert Shilling, an eight-hour workday leader and a leader of the Knights of Labor said, “the intelligent citizens have a weapon mightier than the ball or the bayonet - the ballot.” He was proven right as the citizens of Wisconsin used their votes to let their voices be heard (Appendix F). Before the fall election Robert Schilling again said, “Our grand jury meets at the polls. Let this be the beginning of the war.” In the elections of 1886, Henry Smith was elected to a congressional seat. He was a master workman of The Knights of Labor, a labor union which helped with the eight-hour workday movement in Bay View. Another political triumph was the election of Newell Daniels to the position of sheriff. Newell Daniels created the Knights of Saint Crispin and organized the first assembly of the Knights of Labor in Milwaukee. He believed that the eight-hour workday was an important cause and that we needed more equality in the workforce. Other political victories for the eight-hour workday seekers included wins in six of the twelve assembly seats for Milwaukee county and a senate seat being won by members of the People’s Party, a group that helped strengthen labor laws. Robert Schilling was the manager of the People’s Party and was clearly a major supporter of the eight-hour workday movement.

Although the Bay View Tragedy brought significant attention to the eight-hour workday movement and caused numerous companies to change their practices, no federal laws were passed to directly address the demands of the Bay View protesters until 1938. 

28 Nesbit The History of Wisconsin: Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1893, pg. 408
29 Nesbit The History of Wisconsin: Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1893, pg. 410
Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (Appendix F) into law. The goal of this law was, “to provide for the establishment of fair labor standards in employments in and affecting interstate commerce, and for other purposes.”

This law established the minimum wage of 25 cents per hour and set the maximum work week at 44 hours. This was a significant and momentous victory for the eight-hour workday seekers. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (Appendix F) also banned oppressive child labor. In summary, this law significantly strengthened the United States’ labor laws and was a major triumph for organized labor.

Conclusion

The Bay View Tragedy was a major labor event in Wisconsin’s history and helped shape how labor is viewed by companies, governments, and society today. On May 5, 1886, seven protesters were killed by state militia while marching in support of the eight-hour workday in Bay View, Wisconsin. This event shed light on the inhumane treatment of workers and led to the election of public officials in Wisconsin, who were supporters of the eight-hour workday. The horrible killing of seven individuals fighting for the eight-hour workday on May 5, 1886 is still remembered today. Although the North Chicago Rolling Mills Company no longer exists in Bay View, there is a marker at this historic site to help us remember the heroic protesters who died in the Bay View Tragedy (Appendix G). Additionally, every year there is a reenactment of the shooting sponsored by The Wisconsin Labor History Society to help us remember how seven


valiant individuals gave their lives to advance the eight-hour workday movement. Some years, The Wisconsin Labor History Society uses puppets to show everyone who impacted the Bay View Tragedy. They do this to depict the event in a manner that everyone can understand. The Bay View Tragedy brought great changes to Wisconsin and advocated for an important cause in Wisconsin History. The loss of life in the Bay View Tragedy, along with the loss of life in other events including the Haymarket Bombing (Chicago’s fight for the eight-hour workday) where 11 people lost their lives, were ultimately not in vain as it was these types of tragic events that led to the passage of labor laws in the United States that have significantly improved working conditions for the nation.

This picture showcases Governor Jeremiah Rusk, the governor in Wisconsin during the time of the Bay View Tragedy. He gave the order to shoot the protesters.
Appendix B

Bay View Rolling Mill. 1800s. Wisconsin Historical Society,

This is a picture of the Bay View Rolling Mills in the 1800s.
Appendix C


This picture shows one of the groups of state militia that shot at the eight-hour workday protesters.
Appendix D


This is a drawing of the Rolling Mills from 1882.
Appendix E


This is the Milwaukee Journal front page from May 5, 1886. A featured subtitle is “Various Opinions as to the Necessity of Shooting.”
Appendix F


This newspaper article shows Newell Daniels’ and Henry Smith’s nominations from the Labor Party (also known as the People’s Party).
This is the Fair Labor Standards act of 1938. It set the minimum wage at twenty five cents per hour, set the maximum work week at forty four hours, and banned child labor.

This picture illustrates how the Bay View Tragedy is still remembered today.
Annotated Bibliography:

**Primary Sources**


Rolling Mills in the 1800s. This picture helped me show what the mill looked like at the time.

"By Telegraph Peace Reigns." *Wisconsin State Journal* [Madison], 7 May 1886, p. 1. ProQuest National Newspapers,


*Jeremiah Rusk. Wisconsin Historical Society,*


news.google.com/newspapers?nid=jvrRlaHg2sAC&dat=18860501&printsec=frontpage&hl=en. Accessed 21 Nov. 2018. This Milwaukee Journal article titled, "Labor of the Lope" explains the events that took place on May 1, 1886.

Militia in Bay View shows the militia who protected the North Chicago Rolling Mills.


This picture shows the monument for the Bay View Tragedy. This source helped develop my understanding of how the event is remembered.


Secondary Sources


"Daniels, Newell 1828 - 1904." *Wisconsin Historical Society*,


"The Early Labor Movement." *PBS*,


"Event marks 131st anniversary of Bay View Tragedy." *WISN12*, ABC News, 7 May 2018,


www.wisconsinlaborhistory.org/resources/bay-view/. Accessed 22 Oct. 2018. This Wisconsin Labor History article titled "The Bay View Tragedy" explains where and when the Bay View tragedy took place and what is done to remember it.


"The Knights of Labor." *Digital History*, 2016,


"May 5 Bay View Massacre." *I Am District 8*, International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, iamdistrict8.org/2017/05/may-5-bay-view-massacre/. Accessed 5 May 2017. I Am District 8 explains that some companies gave their workers eight hour workdays and that there were labor unions involved in The Bay View Tragedy.

