The Bay View Tragedy:
Wisconsin’s Fight for the Eight-Hour Workday

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Introduction

On May 5, 1886, Wisconsin state militia fired on protesters marching in support of the eight-hour work day in Bay View, Wisconsin, ultimately leading to the death of seven people. 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 people were killed. 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 the dire circumstances they endured in their native country and to lead a better life. 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. 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 workers’ wages were five dollars a day which equates to about seven dollars per hour today.

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Tensions Escalate

In 1884, the Federation of Organized Trade and Labor Unions (a group that worked for Americans’ rights in the workforce) announced 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. 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. The goal of the Knights of Labor, which was founded in 1869, was to be a nonviolent labor union bringing about improvements in workers’ rights. The Master Workman, Terence V. Powderly of the Knights of Labor, did not want to be part of the eight-hour workday strikes. He believed 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 a fight for the eight-hour workday was greatly needed. He knew 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.

When May 1, 1886 arrived, the eight-hour workday movement gained momentum, but most employers had not yet adopted the eight-hour workday. However, the city of Milwaukee

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gave all of its workers shorter hours which resulted in several private employers following suit.⁸ 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. As he would later find out, there was no stopping the protestors. He arrived the next day.

On May 2, approximately 15,000 striking blue-collar workers held a parade to educate the public on the importance of an eight-hour workday. They wanted to make sure 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."⁹ Approximately 25,000 people watched the parade.

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 carried clubs and some carried knives. No violence or 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 because of the strikes except for one, the North Chicago Rolling Mills (a steel company, shown in Appendix B¹⁰). The North Chicago Rolling Mills stayed open because it had

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many skilled workers who were paid a reasonable salary and worked decent hours.\textsuperscript{11} 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 prepared to shut down the Rolling Mills.\textsuperscript{12} The governor realized 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 the Milwaukee area lacked a large enough force to stop the protesters, so he called in forces from all over the state. He stationed most of the troops at the North Chicago Rolling Mills to stop the protesters from entering (Appendix C\textsuperscript{13}).

Governor Rusk wanted to protect the property of the local businesses from the protesters. He feared the protesters may use violence to enter the North Chicago Rolling Mills as they were so determined and focused on their cause. 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.

\textbf{“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 (Appendix D).\textsuperscript{15} Their marching could be heard

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Nesbit, The History of Wisconsin: Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1893, pg. 392
\item Nesbit The History of Wisconsin: Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1893, pg. 398
\end{enumerate}
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throughout the town. Many families stepped onto their lawns to get a better view of the strikers marching through the streets. The strikers held many signs with different slogans and sayings. A popular slogan at the time stood out and summed up the entire movement. It read, “Eight Hours for Work, Eight Hours for Rest, Eight Hours for What We Will.”¹⁶ This sign explained the whole eight-hour workday campaign in one sentence. It demonstrated how workers wanted fair hours so they could balance their home and work lives.

The protesters moved quickly through the streets and soon arrived at the North Chicago Rolling Mills¹⁷ (Appendix E), 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 protestors 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.”¹⁸

When the distance between the Rolling Mills and the protesters closed to approximately 200 yards, the militia once again yelled to the protesters to stop. The protesters weren’t able to hear them yell over their own noise.¹⁹ 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 ended, 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

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¹⁸ Nesbit, The History of Wisconsin: Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1893, pg. 380
were injured, while none of the militia were injured. The protesters helped the injured men limp away from the scene while the militia continued to stand guard in front of the Rolling Mills. During the shooting, some of the militia’s bullets missed their marks and hit innocent citizens. This included a twelve year old boy who was on his way to school and a retired Rolling Mills worker watching the action from his front yard. This slowed down the eight-hour workday protests in Bay View. However, positive change quietly continued in a non-violent manner with employers and employees agreeing to more reasonable working hours.

**Opinions**

People thought many different things about the shootings. The newspapers on May 5, 1886 included 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. Critics of the movement thought the shootings were justified and that Governor Rusk just did his job and as a result his political career was not tarnished. These people believed Governor Rusk was protecting the property of the Rolling Mills. In a speech a few days after the event (later known as the Bay View Tragedy), Governor Rusk said, “I seen my duty and I done it.” In addition, The Journal Times (Racine, Wisconsin) called the shootings “energetic.” This illustrates how at least some people thought the use of deadly force was a great way to stop the protests. In an

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20 Gurda, John. "Bay View Tragedy."
interview, Major George Traeumer, whose troops shot at the crowd of protesters said, “killing was necessary.” This illustrates how he justified the murder. 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 strikers. The militia were treated similar to celebrities. These people believed 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 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 F). They believed the eight-hour workday movement was a just cause and 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.

27 Nesbit, The History of Wisconsin: Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1893, pg. 408
29 Gurda, John. "Bay View Tragedy."
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.

The Bay View Tragedy 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.” The citizens of Wisconsin proved him right using their votes to let their voices be heard (Appendix G). 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, the master workman of the Knights of Labor, won a congressional seat. 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 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

30 Gurda, John. "Bay View Tragedy."
31 "The Bay View Tragedy." Milwaukee Notebook
32 Nesbit The History of Wisconsin: Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1893, pg. 408
33 Nesbit The History of Wisconsin: Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1893, pg. 410
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 Shilling was the manager of the People’s Party.³⁶

Although the Bay View Tragedy brought significant attention to the eight-hour workday movement and caused numerous local companies to change their practices, no federal laws were passed to directly address the demands of the Bay View protesters until near the end of the Great Depression in 1938. On June 25, 1938, Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the long overdue Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (Appendix H) 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.”³⁷

This law established a 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 H) also banned oppressive child labor.³⁸ 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 that helped shape how labor is viewed by companies, governments, and society today. On May 5, 1886 the state

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³⁶ Nesbit The History of Wisconsin: Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1893, pg. 411
militia shot into a group of 1,500 protesters marching in support of the eight-hour workday leading to the death of seven individuals. 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 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 I). Additionally, every year there is a reenactment of the shooting sponsored by The Wisconsin Labor History Society to help remind us 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 was one of approximately 1,600 protests in the same week in America in support of the eight-hour workday, helping bring about great changes to Wisconsin and the United States. The loss of life in the Bay View Tragedy, along with the Haymarket Bombing (Chicago’s fight for the eight-hour workday) where 11 people lost their lives on May 4, 1886, were not in vain as it was these types of tragic events that ultimately led to the passage of stronger labor laws that significantly improved working conditions in the United States.

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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. After serving as Wisconsin Governor he later became the first Secretary of Agriculture of the United States of America.
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.

This is a map of Bay View drawn in 1901. It illustrates how close the Bay View Rolling Mills was to lake Michigan.
Appendix E


This is a drawing of the Rolling Mills from 1882. It showcases the large Bay View Rolling Mills cutting the horizon.
Appendix F


news.google.com/newspapers?nid=jvrRlaHg2sAC&dat=18860505&printsec=frontpage&hl=en.


This is the Milwaukee Journal front page from May 5, 1886. A featured subtitle is “Various Opinions as to the Necessity of Shooting.” The Milwaukee Journal viewed the shooting as unnecessary.
This newspaper article shows Newell Daniels’ and Henry Smith’s nominations from the Labor Party (later known as the People’s Party). They were both elected to their positions of choice.
This is the Fair Labor Standards act of 1938 signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt. It set the minimum wage at twenty five cents per hour, set the maximum work week at forty four hours, and banned oppressive child labor.

This picture illustrates how the Bay View Tragedy is still remembered today. The monument is in the place where the historic Bay View Rolling Mills used to stand.
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the election results from 1886. This showed the results in which Newell Daniels and Henry Smith won. This is a primary source because it is election statistics.


the shots to be fired on the protesters. He was Wisconsin’s governor at the time of the Bay View Tragedy.


Pearce, Anna Elise, and Pearce, Aaron James. Bay View Tragedy Monument. 2019. This picture shows the monument for the Bay View Tragedy which is at the location where the Bay View Rolling Mills used to stand. This source helped develop my understanding of how the event is remembered and where the Rolling Mills used to stand.


*ProQuest Historical Newspapers - Graphical,*


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