

Los Angeles Times Building Bombing

Just after 1 am on October 1, 1910, the headquarters and printing building of the *Los Angeles Times* stood engulfed in flames, an inferno triggered by an explosion. Twenty people died and seventeen were injured as a result of the explosion and ensuing fire. The conflagration was the result of sixteen sticks of 80% dynamite detonating in an alley containing highly flammable newspaper ink. An industrial saboteur had set the bomb, targeting the heart of Los Angeles's anti-union movement.

The bombing occurred in the midst of pitched battle between the unions and large employers. San Francisco labor leaders, intent on extending their influence at the state level, were backing a unionization effort in Los Angeles. In doing so, they were directly challenging the Merchants and Manufacturer Association. Known as the M&M, the group had been organized by *Times* owner Harrison Gray Otis to promote "industrial freedom" in Los Angeles. On July 1, 1910, the stakes were raised when members of metal trades unions walked off their jobs at the *Times*, only to be replaced by temporary workers. When sympathy strikes erupted throughout the city, Los Angeles's city council rushed through an ordinance banning picketing. As workers continued protesting, the police sought to enforce the new ordinance by force and Los Angeles settled into a violent stalemate.

The deadly incident occurred when events in the city intersected with a national labor dispute. That dispute, between the International Association of Bridge and Structural Iron Workers (a trade union) and the National Erectors' Association (an employers' group) stretched back to 1905. In 1908, the leaders of the Iron Workers began coordinating a pattern of industrial terrorism and sabotage against non-union building projects. From February 1908 to April 1911, they carried out seventy job-site bombings, resulting in tens of thousands of dollars in property damage but no loss of life, except in the *Times* bombing.

Believing that targeted property damage was necessary to break the impasse in Los Angeles and force members of the M&M to recognize the unions, San Francisco union leaders contacted the Iron Workers to arrange for a bombing in Los Angeles. John Joseph (J.J.) McNamara, charismatic treasurer of the Iron Workers, sent his brother, James

(Jim) McNamara to do the job. With assistance from contacts in the state, Jim McNamara was able to procure the necessary explosives in northern California and transport them to Los Angeles. In addition to the *Times* building, he or his associates also planted explosive devices at Otis's Los Angeles mansion ("the Bivouac") and at the home of the M&M secretary, Feliz Zeehandelaar. Neither of these bombs detonated but were instead discovered by police in the aftermath of the *Times* bombing.

Immediately following the *Times* bombing, accusations flew between the unions and employers. Though Otis was out of town, his son-in-law, Harry Chandler, ensured that the *Los Angeles Times* released a short edition the morning the bombing. Without any direct evidence, that October 1 issue blamed the unions for the explosions. The unions, both locally and nationally, responded by suggesting that poor conditions at the *Times* building caused the explosion, with some arguing that it was ignited by a gas leak rather than dynamite. Seeking to resolve the matter, Los Angeles Mayor George Alexander enlisted the services of William J. Burns, a nationally famous detective regarded in some circles as the American Sherlock Holmes. Burns had been the chief investigator for the prosecution in the San Francisco graft trials, thereby securing friends in California's reform circles and enemies among Otis and his allies. Nevertheless, the members of the M&M hesitantly supported Burns' efforts. In April 1911, those efforts bore fruit when detectives working for Burns' agency secured the arrests of Ortie McManigal and Jim McNamara in Detroit and J.J. McNamara in Indianapolis. McManigal had worked with the brothers on the bombing of the Llewellyn Iron Works in Los Angeles on Christmas Day, 1910. By the time the men reached Los Angeles, McManigal had confessed his role in the later bombing and begun cooperating with the prosecution in building a case against the McNamara brothers.

Organized labor rallied around the McNamara brothers, charging Burns, Otis, and others involved with the case of administering a frame-up to denigrate the unions. Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) became a staunch advocate for the McNamaras, securing Clarence Darrow as lead council for the defense and raising funds through the AHF to pay for his expenses.

Job Harriman, a Socialist Party politician, union sympathizer, and member of the defense team, ran a vigorous campaign for mayor of Los Angeles based on the idea that the forces of capital were framing the McNamara brothers. Rallying the support of unionists and socialists, Harriman received enough votes in the primary election to force Mayor Alexander into a runoff at the December election. By late November it appeared that the sentiment in favor of Jim and J.J. McNamara might be enough to tip the scales in favor of Harriman and give Los Angeles its first Socialist mayor.

Then, on December 1, 1911, four days before the election, the McNamara brothers shocked the nation by pleading guilty. Negotiations had been going on for days, facilitated by famed muckraker journalist Lincoln Steffens. Los Angeles's business leaders were concerned about the possibilities of Harriman's election and the defense was concerned that the evidence gathered by Burns would sink their clients and lead at least Jim McNamara to the gallows. Only days earlier an investigator for the defense had been caught bribing a juror, with Darrow mysteriously showing up on the scene of the bust. With the defense crumbling and the election approaching, the parties agreed to a deal that would end the trial, deflate Harriman's campaign, and spare the McNamaras the death penalty. Jim was sentenced to life in jail and J.J. received a term of 10 years.

The fallout from the confessions was immediate. As predicted, Harriman's campaign was sunk, with Mayor Alexander winning reelection by twenty thousand votes. The confessions did not stop federal and state prosecutors from using the evidence generated by the trial to prosecute those involved in the larger string of bombings. Nor did the confessions prevent two trials against Darrow for bribing two jurors. In the first trial Darrow was found not guilty and the second trial resulted in a hung jury. Darrow left Los Angeles with a badly damaged reputation that would take a decade to redeem.

Overall, the incident proved most embarrassing for Gompers, the AFL, and organized labor. Not only had he proclaimed the innocence of the McNamara brothers, he had accused Burns and his backers of a massive frame-up and conspiracy to undermine the labor movement locally and nationally. The AFL and affiliated unions had bankrolled

the McNamara defense and provided the money allegedly used in the bribery attempts. The twin blows of lost faith among the membership and lost reputation caused damage that would last until the New Deal.

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