

Class Struggle in the Old West

A Review of J. Anthony Lukas' 'Big Trouble'

[From *The People*, August 1998]

The history of the American West is a history of class struggle, as virulent, vile and violent—but also as ennobling—in its unfolding as the history of the manufacturing and mining centers of the industrial East. J. Anthony Lukas' *Big Trouble*¹ was supposed to be the story of one violent episode from that history—the 1905 assassination of former governor Frank Steunenberg at Caldwell, Idaho—and the subsequent sensational trial of Charles H. Moyer, William D. Haywood and George E. Pettibone of the Western Federation of Miners (WFM).

Big Trouble has received so much attention in the capitalist media since its delayed release last October² that it may seem there is nothing to add. For all the attention it has received, however, no reviewer we know of—not even those supposed to be informed on the history of the socialist and labor movements—have recognized that the book is replete with errors and steeped in the anti-socialist prejudices of its author.

The background to the story is that during a drive by the WFM to gain recognition of their union in the silver and lead mining region of the Coeur d'Alene sector of the Idaho panhandle in April of 1899, the manager of the Bunker Hill and Sullivan mine in Wardner had rebuffed the union and announced the firing of all the mine's union employees. Several days later, the concentrator of the Bunker Hill and Sullivan mine was blown up, halting the process of crushing and washing the ore prior to smelting.

Gov. Steunenberg, a “friend of labor” Democratic politician, requested the assistance of federal troops for the Coeur d'Alene and deliberately chose the

¹ *Big Trouble*, by J. Anthony Lucas. Simon & Schuster, publishers, 1997; 875 pages.

² The delay was occasioned by Lukas' suicide in June 1997.

fiercely antiunion state auditor, Bartlett Sinclair, to go north and supervise the prosecution of the miners.

The 24th Infantry Regiment was specially chosen for the task, ostensibly so the black soldiers who made up the unit would not bond with the white miners. Sinclair, backed by the troops, proved particularly brutal not only in rounding up union miners in the various northern towns, but also any males who might sympathize with them—including the entire male population of Burke, with a doctor, a preacher, the postmaster and the school superintendent thrown in for good measure.

Nearly 1,000 men were incarcerated in an old barn and several railroad boxcars until a new wooden structure was built to house the mass of captives in especially primitive conditions, similar to those that existed at the notorious Confederate prison camp at Andersonville, Ga., during the Civil War. The men were kept incarcerated for months without formal charges being made, and some of them died from exposure and malnutrition. The holding barn came to be known in union circles as the Bull Pen. The treatment of the Coeur d'Alene miners in 1899 was a source of deep, ongoing resentment in union circles long after the event was past.

Moyer, Haywood and Pettibone were accused of masterminding Steunenberg's assassination, ostensibly as revenge for his part in the Bull Pen episode. The three men were eventually acquitted by a jury of farmers who had no knowledge of the labor and socialist movements, or of the organizations with which the three accused men were affiliated.

Haywood and Moyer were both officials of the WFM, which at the time of their trial was the biggest single component of the newly organized Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Haywood was secretary-treasurer of the WFM, a founder of the IWW and a member of the Socialist Party (SP). Moyer was president of the WFM, but was always cool toward the IWW, and after resuming his presidency following the trial, he led the WFM back into the American Federation of Labor (AFL) from which it had previously broken away. The third man accused, Pettibone, was a former WFM official who had gone into business for himself, but maintained his contacts with the union. (Pettibone's contribution to this "conspiracy" ostensibly was his expertise with explosives, though such expertise could hardly have been a rare talent among miners.)

There was a fourth figure, Harry Orchard, who confessed to killing Steunenberg under instruction from the WFM leaders. Orchard was arrested in Caldwell shortly after the murder and confessed to the crime under the prodding of Pinkerton detective James McParland, who apparently persuaded him that it would be to his advantage to turn state's evidence and name accomplices. Orchard claimed he was acting under the orders of the three union leaders.

Soon after Steunenberg's death, local and state authorities in Idaho made the decision to call in the Pinkerton Detective Agency, which was well known for its loyal service to capitalist interests and its ability to infiltrate and undermine labor unions. The Pinkerton's most notorious operative, McParland, was assigned to the Idaho case and, with the agreement of Gov. Frank R. Gooding and the prosecutor, very shortly took entire control. It was McParland who devised the strategy to kidnap Haywood, Moyer and Pettibone from Denver and bring them to Idaho for trial, for Idaho had insufficient evidence to extradite the men legally. The highest Colorado authorities eagerly went along with the scheme. For the state government officials and the mine owners, here was a splendid opportunity to smash the WFM for good.

In December of 1906, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the illegal kidnapping of the three WFM leaders as a *fait accompli*.

The lead prosecutor was James H. Hawley, dean of the Idaho bar. His primary colleague was William E. Borah, a skilled orator and polished courtroom performer who had feasted on the largesse of the mine owners for years and who had just won election as U.S. senator from Idaho.

The WFM also had a superbly competent legal team led by Edmund F. Richardson, a celebrated Western criminal lawyer, and Clarence Darrow, whose courtroom ability and oratory easily rivaled that of Borah.

The arrest and trial became the most sensational news throughout the country, revealing the bitter class divisions that existed in American society. President Theodore Roosevelt, who had a nearly apoplectic loathing for radicals, publicly labeled the union leaders "undesirable citizens." Labor and socialist groups across the country collected funds for the defense and had rallies and parades in favor of the imprisoned WFM leaders, many of the demonstrators wearing buttons declaring, in defiance of the president, "I am an undesirable citizen!"

The mining companies contributed heavily and secretly to the prosecution. Both prosecutor James Hawley and Gov. Frank Gooding openly lied to President Roosevelt about the source of these funds. The trials of Haywood and Pettibone—both tried separately—resulted in acquittal for lack of corroborating testimony. After these defeats, prosecutors dropped all charges against Moyer. Harry Orchard was the last to be tried, was convicted of murder and sentenced to death, but was reprieved by the judge’s recommendation for clemency and was sentenced instead to life imprisonment.

According to his own account, Lukas undertook to write *Big Trouble* when he discovered that class is a factor in American society. Yet, as James R. Green, a professor of “labor studies” at the University of Massachusetts and author of *Grass Roots Socialism*, correctly noted in his review for the *Boston Globe*, “In the end he [Lukas] couldn’t explain the dilemma of class.” Green is also correct when he states that, “In an enormous book about class conflicts, we learn less about working-class people and their values than about ruling-class elites and their minions—those who conspired so swiftly and effectively to kidnap Haywood and his union brothers, just as they did to suppress the labor movement as a whole.”

Green, however, misses the mark when he asserted that, “It is clear that Lukas carefully studied the labor and socialist movements: He certainly captures their spirit and the character of their colorful leaders.”

In truth, Lukas’ book is replete with errors about the two socialist parties that were in existence at the time—the SP, which was so corrupt that one of its own leaders described it as a “hissing and a byword” with the working class, but which Lukas claimed were the “genuine Socialists,” and the Socialist Labor Party (SLP), which he disdainfully dismissed as “the doctrinaire Marxist wing of the movement.” Lukas blundered by claiming that Abraham Cahan, editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, joined “[Daniel] De Leon’s Socialist Labor Party in 1886,” when De Leon himself did not join until 1890, and that Alexander Jonas, who led the German-speaking *Volkszeitung* faction that split the SLP in 1899, was “a leader of the American section of De Leon’s Socialist Labor Party” at the time of the Boise trial.

Of more significance, however, were the deep divisions that existed within the labor and socialist movements at the time of the trial. The SP

opposed the IWW and supported the procapitalist American Federation of Labor, many of whose leaders, including AFL President Samuel Gompers, also belonged to the notorious Civic Federation. The Civic Federation had been organized by the reactionary capitalist and Republican senator from Ohio, Mark Hanna, who famously referred to Gompers and other trade union bosses as his “labor lieutenants.” Gompers and his AFL also opposed the IWW, which Haywood helped organize in direct opposition to the AFL and all it represented.

The SLP actively supported the IWW, and its affiliate on the economic field, the Socialist Trade & Labor Alliance, was one of the IWW’s founding organizations.

These divisions not only affected efforts to organize support and raise funds for the defense of the three accused WFM officials, but reflected on the motives of the rival political and economic organizations. Though Lukas was clearly aware of these divisions and motivations, he seemed to be oblivious to their significance within the framework of the class divisions that supposedly prompted him to write *Big Trouble*.

Indeed, Lukas almost seems to go out of his way to make a spectacle of his ignorance of the socialist movement and to denigrate the SLP, its press, its primary correspondent at the Boise trial, Wade R. Parks (who also represented the IWW’s *Industrial Union Bulletin*), and the SLP’s efforts on behalf of Haywood, Moyer and Pettibone. He describes the *Daily People* as “a slim four-page sheet always on the brink of bankruptcy, [that] could never have afforded its own correspondent in Boise had the IWW, now run by its De Leon faction, not subsidized Park’s [sic] rail fare and hotel bill.” Lukas offers no description of the *Industrial Union Bulletin* or of the IWW’s own financial situation, however, and he forgets (though he mentions it on another page of his book) that the *Daily People* had not one, but *two* correspondents at Boise, the other being Olive M. Johnson.

The official organ of the IWW before its 1906 convention was *The Industrial Worker*. IWW President Charles O. Sherman was removed from office at that convention, but refused to relinquish control of the paper, and the IWW had to get along without one until the *Industrial Union Bulletin* was set up just two months before the Boise trial began. The new *Industrial Union Bulletin* must have been on shaky financial ground to start with. It

was printed as a four-page weekly from its first issue in March 1907 until August 1908, when it went semimonthly almost simultaneously with the IWW's ousting of De Leon and the SLP, whereas the *Daily People* was a four-page daily with an eight-page Sunday edition, i.e., the physical equivalent of a 32-page weekly. (This does not take into account the eight-page *Weekly People* published continuously throughout the *Daily People's* existence.) The *Daily People* received and printed Parks' daily telegraphed reports from May 9, the day the trial began, until it ended on July 29, 1907. The IWW certainly did not pay for these daily telegraphed dispatches, many of which filled one, two and even three full columns of the *Daily People*.

Despite his close reading of the *Daily People*, as is indicated from his end notes, Lukas inexcusably accepts as fact a wild tale about Parks, first reported briefly in the capitalist press and then embellished upon by George Shoaf of the *Appeal to Reason* and various other reporters for the press of the SP.³ The story was that Parks had walked into a Boise restaurant one day and frightened the manager by telling her that he had "Pettibone dope" (a bomb) in his satchel, that the Haywood jury had been dismissed and the governor and attorney general would be in jail by night and that he, Parks, was prepared to blow up those who were conspiring against the union. The manager, it was claimed, told Parks never to come back to the restaurant.

Lukas lends credence to this story despite his description of Shoaf as a liar "who even lied about lying." The tale was refuted by Olive M. Johnson's careful research and was printed in the *Daily People* of May 31, 1907. Johnson took the trouble to interview the restaurant manager in question, who told her: "As far as I am concerned there is absolutely nothing in the story," and that Parks was "welcome here any time." One wonders how Lukas could have missed this significant article, considering his close reading of the *Daily People*.

Lukas reported a similar tale about a strange character named Carl H. Duncan who was arrested in Boise on May 28, 1907, wearing a straw-colored beard, mustache and eyebrows strangely set off by his natural bright red hair. He was found to be carrying a dagger, a pistol with a box of cartridges,

³ Actually, the SP had no press of its own at the time. All the newspapers and magazines usually associated with the SP, including the *Appeal to Reason* and several others mentioned by Lukas, were privately owned and beyond the control of the SP rank and file.

brass knuckles, an IWW membership card and socialist pamphlets. He claimed to be a member of the SLP. Duncan's buffoonery prompted Parks in a May 30, 1907, dispatch to the *Daily People* to surmise that the man, who was known in the SLP as something of a crank, was acting as an agent provocateur, for he carried with him letters purportedly from Parks which Parks claimed to know nothing about and said were forged. Parks believed that Duncan was a "plant" aimed at undermining his researches in state Land Office files and Coeur d'Alene records to expose the shady land dealings in past years of Steunenberg and other "desirable citizens." Here again, Lukas had either not read the *Daily People* article or had given it no credit. If the latter, that is strange, for in his book he went into some detail about Steunenberg's questionable land dealings, which would certainly have been revealed had the former governor lived.

The book is more ponderous than necessary, for it is full of diversions, many of them wholly irrelevant to the story of the murder and the subsequent trial. The reader is thus led down all sorts of country paths before the author—some 500 pages into the book—finally comes back to the subject at hand. But the account of the 1906–1907 murder case and trial tends to get lost in the history of everything else.

Lukas ends his book with an epilogue in which he suggests that Haywood, Moyer and Pettibone were guilty of plotting Steunenberg's assassination. He bases that conclusion on a letter written by George Shoaf, the same liar "who lied about lying" and who sought to discredit *The People* and its primary Boise correspondent.

In 1910, several years after the Haywood-Moyer-Pettibone trial, two other union officials were convicted of having bombed the *Los Angeles Times* Building. The *Appeal to Reason* sent Shoaf to cover the trial, and he soon began writing articles in which he claimed to have irrefutable evidence that the accused were innocent. As the time approached for the *Appeal* to publish the article in which Shoaf was to offer his proof, Shoaf staged his own abduction and disappearance. The sham was uncovered and the *Appeal* tried to distance itself from Shoaf by printing articles in which all of his well-known character flaws were admitted. Miffed, Shoaf began to write letters to the *Appeal* under an assumed name.

According to Lukas, Shoaf finally wrote a letter to *Appeal* editor Fred

Warren in which “he conceded...that his attempt to ‘fasten the responsibility of the *Times* explosion on [publisher] H.G. Oates’ had been a ‘bluff’ But then he recalled a game that both he and Warren had played to the hilt: ‘Remember that the McNamara brothers [convicted of the *Times* bombing] are not one bit more guilty of the crime charged against them than were Moyer, Haywood and Pettibone of the crime of which they were acquitted. Trickery and audacity liberated the miners’ officials.’”

Shoaf wrote his letter on Oct. 26, 1911, and on the strength of it Lukas ends his book with the following:

“If, four years after the Boise trial, these prominent Socialists [sic] wrote freely to one another about the guilt of Haywood, Moyer and Pettibone, what does this tell us about who struck down the governor on that snowy night in Caldwell?”

Lukas apparently convinced himself that he had uncovered a dark secret when he unearthed Shoaf’s letter. Trouble is that Shoaf’s claim to inside knowledge about the supposed guilt of Haywood, Moyer and Pettibone was public knowledge long before he wrote that letter.

According to Olive M. Johnson, *The People’s* second correspondent during the Boise trial, Shoaf had claimed knowledge of evidence proving the guilt of Haywood, Moyer and Pettibone while still in Boise. Writing of Shoaf’s bombast and sham disappearance during the McNamara trial, Johnson said:

“Shoaf boastingly told me at Boise, before the prosecution had well started with the case: ‘These men [Moyer, Haywood and Pettibone] are guilty and the state is going to prove it. I was in Denver before I came here. When I came on the case I thought the men were innocent; but I unearthed such things as I never dreamt of, and the crimes they are now accused of are nothing to what I know about. The murder of Steunenberg was planned in Haywood’s house, and Pettibone is an amateur chemist, who furnished the boys with all sorts of hell fire. I only hope that the prosecution has not sense enough to put me on the witness stand because under oath my testimony would positively convict the prisoners. All we can do is to put up the bluff that the jury is bought, and all the witnesses perjured. I have shaped my stories to the *Appeal* that way from the very beginning of the choosing of the jury.’

“In other words,” Johnson added, “Shoaf pretended, in whispered

bombast with me and others, that he believed Orchard's confession to be true and that the prisoners would be convicted. So, then, on that occasion also Shoaf wanted to impress on the rest of us 'innocents' that he had the real goods if he only chose to deliver them." (*Daily People*, Sept. 10, 1911.)

As can be seen, Johnson's article, which was printed on the front page of the *Daily People*, was in circulation six weeks before Shoaf wrote his letter to Fred Warren, and it would appear that Lukas allowed himself to be duped by the liar who "lied about lying."

Still, Lukas' conclusion may be the fitting end to a book that has no more claim to being history than George Shoaf had to being an honest man.

—*B.G. & R.B.*