

## Blood in the streets: Henry Ness and the Teamsters strike of 1934

BY CHARLIE MAGUIRE

What does it say about a man who lays down his life for a cause? How do you measure the sacrifice of a person who puts himself in harm's way on a Minneapolis street corner, leaving behind a wife he loved and a one-year-old daughter who grew up never knowing the kind of man her father was?

It may be a worn-out thing to say, but I'll still say it — all the good fights, all the great causes come down to the individual people who believed in them. People who talked with passion about injustice, perhaps over the dinner table; people who were moved enough by a cause to at least show up.

Henry B. Ness showed up, and he along with John Belor were shot to death for doing just that in the early afternoon of July 20, 1934, while supporting the Minneapolis General Strike by Teamsters Local 574. Sixty-seven other workers were injured that same day in a time when the country was in a serious Depression (that's with a capital "D") and the struggle for a decent job at decent pay was paramount in workplaces all over the nation. Unions were seen by working people as a solution and salvation,

and by employers as a threat not only to their bottom line but also to their accustomed way of life.

I'll let you as reader of this history magazine delve into the minute details of the Strike that was started two months before by the truck drivers who brought their heavy vehicles into what was then called the Minneapolis "Market Area" — an industrial section of large warehouses and factories including International Harvester just south Washington Avenue. You'll find out that for the first time "flying pickets" were employed by the striking workers to head off any nonunion truck attempting to make a delivery or a pick up. You'll learn that union leaders established a daily newspaper, *The Organizer*, and that the workers were so methodical, so "organized," that they set up food relief to workers' families with a food commissary, held daily demonstrations at City Hall, and even ran a small hospital. All that was mostly done by the women — the wives and sweethearts of the striking truckers.

It brought commerce to a standstill. Five thousand drivers motivated another 35,000 workers from jobs that had nothing to do with truck driving, to walk out in support, and about ten days after the strike began, employers in the city accepted the worker's demands. A happy ending? Bloodshed avoided? Sadly no.

The agreements were violated, and the Teamsters went back out on July 17. The "Citizens Alliance," a conservative, antiunion group (you could call them a sort of vigilante group except that they were actually deputized by the Minneapolis Police), kept the pot boiling with their "right to work for less" idea of employment, and it was a group of those "citizens" in a truck that lured some of the flying pickets to the corner of Seventh and Third three days later.

A large group of strikers gathered at the site, which got the attention of 100 police officers, and in a report by the Police Commission that stated after the fact that "Police took direct aim at pickets and fired to kill. Physical safety of the



Minneapolis Police and Teamster Local 574 members in confrontation, probably in the "Market Area" of Minneapolis sometime during the Strike which began on May 16 and finally ended on August 21, 1934.

police was at no time endangered, and no weapons were in the hands of the pickets."

Henry Ness was there. He was a World War I army veteran, a "Wagoner" with the 311th Engineers U.S. Army 86th Division, and he was shot twice. Once while standing up, and a second time "while lying on the ground." People were "shot in the back" trying to get out of the way, and when the cordite gunpowder smell that Ness knew so well from his army service in France cleared, he and John Belor were dead, their blood soaking into the cobblestones that can still be seen poking up from the asphalt on that cross street, with the Minneapolis City Hall tower clearly seen just blocks away. Here was a city whose established citizens had gone over the edge, along with the police, who were clearly out of control — all over an idea not of "union" per se, but for just a fair shake, a chance to have a family, a good job, and a steady paycheck that valued a day's work.

One hundred thousand people attended Henry Ness's funeral. A man who was so little known that his birth date isn't even on his headstone at Crystal Lake Cemetery in Minneapolis. A man who left behind aforementioned wife Freda (1884–1986), and baby Joann Kathleen Ness (1933–1974). A man who should have been revered by both the Citizens Alliance and the police for his service to his country, but instead was shot down not once but twice that hot summer day, Bloody Friday, July 20, 1934.

To paraphrase labor historian Tom Jelán, who recently spoke at a musician's union convention about what exactly the word "union"

means, "a lot of people either don't understand the word union, or bristle every time it's mentioned." Some people see no value in the word at all anymore, and the solidarity that Henry Ness showed up for is meaningless for a lot of people in this world of the entrepreneur, but Jelán said, "If you think of unions as social justice organizations that are all about fairness, you get a lot more understanding." Perhaps too, you understand why Henry Ness put aside his own ambitions, even the dreams for his own family, and was there on that fateful street corner 84 years ago.

PUT ON YOUR FLASHERS: There's plenty of parking on the corner of North 3rd Street and North 7th Avenue, Minneapolis.

### SOURCES

- Teamsters — [teamster.org/about/teamster-history/1934](http://teamster.org/about/teamster-history/1934)
- [findagrave.com/memorial/42638543/henry-b-ness](http://findagrave.com/memorial/42638543/henry-b-ness)

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Contemporary photograph by Charlie Maguire.

