

Teddy's Stab at Unionism (October 6, 1903)

Ft. Worth, Texas [Oct. 6, 1903]

I don't know why Mr. Roosevelt ought to be a friend to the working man. His associations, his instincts and interests have always been wholly on the side of the capitalist class. As governor of New York he sent the state militia to Croton Dam to shoot down workmen for protesting against the violation of the eight-hour law.ⁱ In his decision in the Miller case in the government printing office he struck a staggering blow at organized labor, the effect of which is as yet but little understood.ⁱⁱ

Upon the surface, the open shop would seem to be a fair proposition, but as a matter of fact it is an impossibility. Twenty-five years ago, when unionism was still weak, the open shop was one of the compromises, temporarily accepted. The economic development and progressive unionism swept the movement beyond that point and toward complete organization. A printing office today is either wholly union or wholly non-union. To declare that it shall be open is to non-unionize it. This would be the effect of President Roosevelt's order.

But today the "open shop" is practically impossible.

If part of the employees are union and part non-union they are not only in ceaseless conflict, but the employer in the open shop has a right to discharge an employee for any reason, or for no reason at all. Thus it becomes an easy matter to discriminate against union men and deprive them of the protection which they have worked so long and sacrificed so much to secure through their organization.

Any contract or agreement or regulation that the union may propose would be binding on its own members only; and it is admitted that separate contracts for union and non-union men would but serve to further complicate matters, the effect of which would be to virtually deprive the union of all its power, and thus destroy what it has taken years of organized effort to accomplish.

Here is the vital point involved in this affair. Other printing offices, and other employers generally, will point to the decision of President

Roosevelt as precedent for assuming a similar attitude. The effect of this will be to non-unionize as many establishments as possible and render the union impotent as a factor in controlling wages and in determining the conditions of employment.

When a lawyer is employed by the government he must be a member of the bar; that is to say, a member of the lawyers' union. Otherwise he is not considered competent or qualified to serve. The same is true of the physician, who must be a member in good standing of the medical association to secure an appointment in the public service.

The workman alone is prohibited from making his union principles the basis of his acceptance in the government service.

I shall be mistaken if organized labor does not realize what the decision of President Roosevelt means in the Miller case and register a widespread protest that even the president of the United States may not ignore or disregard.

Published in *Social Democratic Herald*, vol. 6, no. 25, whole no. 272 (Oct. 17, 1903), p. 1.

ⁱ On April 5, 1900, about 400 Italian immigrant laborers quarry workers supplying material for a new dam near Croton-on-Hudson, New York, went on strike in a wage dispute. The project to improve the water supply of New York City was disrupted, with nearly 1,000 workers idled. On April 15 a formal call was made for the state militia to restore order, which was rapidly granted by Gov. Roosevelt. During the night of April 16 one of these militiamen was killed by an assassin, causing the insertion of more troops, who ultimately numbered 1,350. Arrest warrants were issued for strike leaders and 26 arrests made, which together with the show of military force caused the collapse of the strike at the end of the third week of April.

ⁱⁱ William A. Miller, a veteran foreman in the US Government Printing Office whose abusive management style had alienated the union book binders working there, was fired from his job on May 18, 1903. This termination was overturned by President Theodore Roosevelt on July 27, and Miller returned to the job. The incident, which simmered throughout the summer and early fall as Miller sued for back pay due to illegal termination while the union, which expelled Miller and fought for his firing for cause due to non-membership in the union and personal fitness for the job. The incident was used as a fulcrum against trade unionism in the printing industry by its opponents, a drive bolstered by Roosevelt's Sept. 29 statement after meeting with Samuel Gompers and four other labor leaders that "in the employment and dismissal of men in the government service, I can no more recognize the fact that a man does or does not belong to a union as being for or against him than can I recognize the fact that he is a Protestant or a Catholic, a Jew or a gentile, as being for or against him."