

The *Los Angeles Times* Bombing — Who Committed That Crime? (October 15, 1910)

The blowing up of the *Los Angeles Times* and the snuffing out of twenty human lives is another of the atrocious crimes committed in the heat and passion of the class war.¹ Who committed that crime? Harrison Gray Otis,² proprietor of the *Times*, and the capitalist press of the Pacific coast in general, charge it directly and specifically upon organized labor. The shock of the explosion was followed by the charge that union labor was guilty of the crime as swiftly as the capitalist press could telegraph the indictment to the country.

It appears well settled in Mr. Otis's statement and the *Times* account that the *Times* building was blown up by dynamite, and equally well settled that the crime was committed by labor unionists. As one who knows the *Los Angeles Times* by personal experience with that vicious, lying, and criminal sheet, I want to express it as *my deliberate opinion that the Times and its crowd of union-haters are themselves the instigators, if not the actual perpetrators, of that crime and the murderers of the twenty human beings who perished as its victims.*

First of all, let me relate my own experience with General Harrison Gray Otis and the *Los Angeles Times*. At the time of the railroad strike of 1894 the *Los Angeles Times* lied about me outrageously, charged me with every conceivable crime, editorially stated that I deserved the gallows, and did all in its power to send me there. Shortly after the strike I went to Los Angeles after filling my immediate engagements to make answer to this outrageous indictment; and here let me say that any man who would make such false and fiendish charges against another to glut his insane hatred of organized labor would commit any other crime to serve the same base end.

A few days later I returned to Los Angeles to find the old Hazard's Pavilion packed to the doors, every inch of standing room occupied, and thousands turned away, to hear my answer to Otis and the *Times*.³ It so happened that I had in my grip the documentary evidence, including government reports, to prove my innocence of the most vicious of these charges. In one hand I held up the *Los Angeles Times* and in the other the positive proof of its criminal mendacity. I went through the thirteen charges

seriatim and literally tore them to tatters. I had not proceeded far until someone in the audience shouted, "Otis is in the house," and this proved to be true. I at once challenged General Otis to come forward and face me, whom he had so outrageously maligned, before his own people. It is needless to say that, although the crowd yelled "Otis, Otis, Otis," he did not dare to come and he would gladly have disappeared if the packed and jammed condition of the hall had not barred his escape.

But from that day to this, although the monstrous lies have long since found them out, General Otis and his leprous sheet have never uttered one word of retraction, and it is not their fault that I was not lynched or hanged for crimes of which I was as innocent as are the union men of Los Angeles upon whom General Otis is now seeking to fasten his atrocious calamities as he did upon me and my fellow unionists fifteen years ago.

Now let us examine some of the facts in regard to the blowing up of the times and some of the circumstantial evidence, and let us see if it is not impossible to escape at least the inference, if not the positive conclusion, that Otis and his gang are themselves the conspirators and criminals.

The theory that he who is benefited by a crime is most apt to have a hand in its commission is peculiarly applicable to this case. Financially and morally Otis and the Times have everything to gain as certainly as organized labor has everything to lose in bearing the crushing odium of the crime. Let it be remembered that General Otis was perfectly certain that the outrage, almost before it was committed, was the dastardly act of union labor. He personally was at a safe distance, and all the victims were wage slaves, and what do Otis and his crowd of exploiting plutocrats care about the lives of slaves? Now for a few of the facts:

First, The class war on the Pacific coast had reached its acutest stage and was rapidly approaching a grave crisis at the time of the explosion. It was in striking analogy to the blowing up of the Independence platform in the class war in Colorado five years ago, and we now know beyond the shadow of a doubt what side committed that revolting crime and what was its object.⁴

Second, The tide of organized labor in California was steadily rising, the Socialist campaign was in full swing, and there was to be a culminating demonstration of labor forces at Los Angeles but a few days after the *Times* was blown up. The demonstration was promptly called off by the leaders of the unions, a grievous blunder on their part, which places them in a defensive and apologetic attitude utterly unwarranted by the

circumstances of the situation. Instead of pleading not guilty to the criminal charge preferred against the workers without a scintilla of proof, they should have immediately accused Otis and his gang of union-haters and called upon them to prove that their own hands were not red with the crime.

Third, The *Los Angeles Times* is the most venomous foe of organized labor in the united states and its own record proves that there is no crime too abhorrent for it to commit to wreak its vengeance on the labor movement.

Fourth, The statement is made by the *Times* itself and confirmed by press dispatches from Chicago that General Otis, "having anticipated such an eventuality," had a duplicate printing plant and a duplicate working force in reserve, all in readiness to leap into the breach and rescue the paper when the expected bomb exploded. This admission proves too much. It is fatal to Otis and the *Times*. what cause had Otis to anticipate the explosion and prepare for it? suppose a labor unionist had made such an admission, or even intimated that he knew the explosion would occur, would he not promptly be arrested on suspicion and lodged in jail?

Yes, we are only too ready to believe that Otis and his pals expected the explosion and were entirely prepared for it when it came.

Fifth, The united league of newspapers, which embraces a chain of daily papers scattered over the country, and friendly in their attitude towards organized labor, recently sent a special correspondent to California to investigate conditions growing out of the war between labor and capital on the Pacific coast, and his series of articles is now running in those papers. These articles describe a situation and a desperation on the part of the capitalists that has a fitting climax in the blowing up of the *Times*, as the same war had in the blowing up of the Independence platform in Colorado.

In the second article of this series — and let it be remembered that these are capitalist papers and not labor papers — the capitalists composing the manufacturers' association are described as in a state bordering on frenzy in their determination to utterly annihilate "*at any cost and at all hazards*" organized labor on the Pacific coast. The chairman is personally quoted as saying to the correspondent representing these capitalist newspapers: "*We will never cease until the last vestige of union labor has been wiped off the Pacific coast.*"

This vehement and bloodthirsty declaration was made only a short time before the *Times* was blown up and the united workers, a few days later, were to have their mammoth demonstration.

Sixth, The discovery of the bombs is the one farcical feature of this gruesome tragedy, which every human being not utterly void of feeling must deplore with all his heart. To prove that it was the fiendish plot of the unionists, other bombs, accessories to the crime, and pointing to the identity of its perpetrators, must be located and unearthed. Of course it was known instantaneously where to look for the bombs, and of course they were all found according to specifications. In each case they were located at the palatial homes of the proprietors and managers of the *Times* and the manufacturers' association, *but in no case did one of these bombs explode.*

The bomb that did explode blew up the wage slaves of the *Times* only; the bombs that did not explode did not blow up any of the aristocratic owners and managers. There is a peculiar bomb-consciousness in evidence here that clearly draws the line between capitalists and wage workers.

In Chicago following the Haymarket riot a regular crop of bombs was harvested in plutocratic reservations until finally the thing was over-worked by the army of detectives who were discovering bombs and holding up the plutocrats at so much per bomb, and then the pay was stopped and no more bombs were discovered.

It is not a little strange, to put it very mildly, that of all the bombs located upon the premises of the owners and managers of the *Times* and other aristocrats not one did its deadly work? That all of them proved to be flat failures? And that all of them were discovered just in the nick of time?

According to the *Times* one of the bombs was in a suitcase. Upon its discovery a policeman was sent for. The "cop" took out his knife, cut a whole in the grip, smoke issued from the orifice, whereupon he picked up the grip and threw it from him to see it blown into atoms when it struck the ground. If it is excusable to jest at all in connection with such a shocking affair, it may be in order to suggest that this suitcase episode is peculiarly fitted for the sleuth series of dime novels and that on the vaudeville platform it would evoke roars of merriment.

And suppose it is not a bomb that blew up the *Times*. Evidence seems to be that gas, which was carelessly permitted to escape for days preceding the explosion, may have caused the disaster, in which case Otis and the *Times* would be responsible for it. Yet, with the offer of \$10,000 or more

for the conviction of any person of the crime, there is a bribe for conscienceless detectives to railroad some worker to the gallows, though innocent, by manufacturing evidence against him.

There are other circumstantial evidences and more or less corroborative details that might be added, but enough has been given to warrant the conclusion that the finger of guilt points steadily in the direction of General Harrison Gray Otis and his union-destroying allies and confederates.

What do they and their kind care for the loss of a few thousand dollars, or the sacrifice of a score of working class lives? Absolutely nothing. The lives of thousands of wage slaves and their wives and babes are wantonly sacrificed every day of the year on the alter of mammon to satisfy the insatiate greed, the mercenary rapacity of these pirates and freebooters, who know no law, human or divine, except the law of survival of beak and fang, hoof and claw, in the subjugation, exploitation, and degradation of the toiling millions.

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¹ Just after 1 a.m. on the morning of October 1, 1910, a bomb detonated outside the printing plant of the anti-union *Los Angeles Times*, destroying much of the structure and igniting a massive blaze that killed 20 people. Secretary-Treasurer of the International Association of Bridge and Structural Iron Workers Union John J. McNamara and his brother James B. McNamara were implicated in the crime. After initially denying responsibility and going to trial, the pair pled guilty to avoid the death penalty in 1911, with James McNamara receiving a life sentence for placing the timer-detonated bomb and John McNamara sentenced to 15 years in prison for conspiracy.

² Harrison Gray Otis (1837-1917) was the president of the Times-Mirror Company, publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*, assuming that position in 1882. Otis was a conservative big business Republican and outspoken opponent of the trade union movement. A Civil War veteran, Otis was appointed brigadier general during the Spanish-American War, serving in the Philippines.

³ Debs delivered his Hazard’s Pavilion speech on March 31, 1896.

⁴ On the evening of June 6, 1904, a railroad platform at Independence, Colorado occupied by strikebreaking miners returning home from a day at work in the mines was destroyed by a bomb, with the blast killing 13 and wounding 6 others. The Western Federation of Miners was immediately blamed for the crime, with the blast used as a pretext for raids on miners union headquarters and mass arrests and deportation of striking miners who refused to denounce their union. Responsibility for the bombing was later claimed in the Haywood-Moyer trial by Harry Orchard, who asserted the terrorism was conducted by order of the WFM. No definitive proof of responsibility was ever made. For Debs’s perspective at the time, see:

"The Independence Depot Bombing: A Case of Capitalist Infernalism," *Selected Works of Eugene V. Debs*, vol. 3, pp. XX.