

## THE LEGACY OF WHEATLAND (7/01)

It was 88 years ago this month. It was blistering hot. Dust rose in lazy, steady swirls from a barren field near the Northern California town of Wheatland where some 2,000 hop pickers had gathered tightly around a makeshift platform to hear radical organizers from the Industrial Workers of the World urge them to strike.

Within minutes, they and the IWW organizers – Wobblies, they were called – would be plunged helter-skelter into what soon became known as the Wheatland Riot, an event long forgotten, but one of the most dramatic and significant in California history.

The strike they were debating would be a bold, dangerous act, but it seemed the only way to better their truly abominable conditions on the Durst Ranch, the state's largest single employer of agricultural workers.

The workers were crowded together in a treeless, sun-baked camp a mile from the hop fields. They slept, many without even blankets, in the open or in ragged tents rented to them. There were only nine shallow, door-less privies. Garbage was tossed into nearby irrigation ditches. The wells that supplied their drinking water were contaminated.

They and their children went off at 4 a.m. to the fields where temperatures soared to more than 100 degrees by noon and heat prostration was common. There were no toilets there, and nothing to drink except a sour concoction of water and acetic acid sold them for five cents a glass. Pay varied according to how much they picked, but none ever made more than \$1.90 for the 12-hour day. And 10 cents of every \$1 was held back as a "bonus," to be paid only if the worker lasted the entire harvest season – or was allowed to.

Up on the platform, Wobbly Richard (Blackie) Ford was raising the strike call once again when the dozen members of a sheriff's posse, hastily summoned from nearby Marysville by the ranch owner and his attorney, who also happened to be the local district attorney, bounded from their cars. They rushed toward the platform, intent on arresting Ford and other IWW leaders for trespassing.

A deputy sheriff grabbed at Ford, a platform railing collapsed and the crowd surged forward. On the edge of the crowd, a deputy fired a shotgun blast into the air – "to sober the mob," he later asserted. Suddenly, there were more

gunshots – "a hideous racket," as one eyewitness described it, "that sounded as if someone had thrown a box of cartridges into the fire."

As panic-stricken workers and deputies flayed about in confusion, a young man dashed from a tent, clubbed several deputies seized a gun and began firing. Deputies returned the fire.

The shooting lasted 30 seconds, maybe a minute. When it stopped, four people were dead - the young worker, the district attorney, a deputy sheriff and a boy who had been passing by the edge of the crowd, carrying a bucket of water. Although there had been no rioting until that "sobering" shot was fired by a deputy, authorities blamed it all on the IWW, arresting hundreds of Wobblies throughout the West for allegedly being involved in the riot and other "subversive" activities.

Blackie Ford was a special target. He had been unarmed during the riot and had in fact counseled non-violence, but a coroner's jury demanded his arrest on grounds that the district attorney's death had come from a "gunshot wound inflicted by a gun in the hands of rioters incited to murderous anger by IWW leaders and agitators."

Ford and another IWW leader, Herman Suhr, who hadn't even been present at the riot, eventually were arrested. Authorities admitted that Ford and Suhr had not taken any part in the violence, but argued they were guilty through being members of an organization that had sent men to Wheatland to provoke workers into dangerous and, ultimately, fatal, action. They were convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to life imprisonment.

The trial was highly publicized throughout the country, as were attempts afterward to free Ford and Suhr, who quickly became labor martyrs. But the riot and its aftermath also drew public attention to issues far broader.

For the first time, the severe plight of farm workers was exposed to general view, through newspaper reports and government probes that led to passage of more than three dozen state laws to improve the conditions of working people. They included an act creating a commission that investigated farms statewide and, finding conditions generally not much better than those on the Durst Ranch, began enforcing regulations that set strict standards for sanitation and living accommodations.

It's true enough that the reforms were largely temporary, and that even today farm workers are in need of firm legal protections and, above all, strong unions that would enable them to improve their still generally abysmal conditions on their own.

But anything that will be done by and for those vital workers who harvest our food, just as anything that has been done by and for them in the past, must draw inspiration from the foundation laid down on a hot, dusty, terror-filled afternoon in Northern California on August 3, 1913.