

The Lynching of Wobbly Frank Little

Film review

Don LaCoss

2005

a review of

“An Injury to One” (2002). Written and directed by Travis Wilkerson

Tensions in Butte, Montana between the Anaconda Copper Company, unions, and workers had been becoming more serious for about a decade when 164 men perished in the grisly Speculator Mine fire of June 1917.

When it became clear that the disaster was due to Anaconda’s contempt for safety regulations, 14,000 strikers took to the streets. However, the US had just entered the First World War and copper was a vital part of munitions production, so labor disputes in Butte were construed as a threat to national security. Newspapers owned by the bosses denounced the strikers as “pro-German” terrorists, and Federal troops soon arrived to quash unrest by putting Butte under martial law and forcing the miners back to work.

It was within this context that IWW agitator Frank Little was tortured and murdered by unidentified assailants. At around 3 o’clock in the morning on August 1, 1917, masked gunman dragged Little from his bed in a workers’ boardinghouse into the street where he was savagely beaten, tied him to the back of the car, and dragged to the outskirts of town where he was lynched from a railroad trestle. A handwritten note pinned to Little’s corpse threatened more vigilante killings of rebel workers.

Little’s previous activities as a Wobbly organizer included the Mesabi Iron Range mine strike in Minnesota and the free speech campaigns throughout the western US. For example, in 1909, he had been sentenced to 30 days of hard labor for reading the Declaration of Independence at a free-speech soapbox rally in Spokane, Washington. His agitation work had become so well known to the bosses that arrest warrants issued during the anti-radical dragnets of the era often included his name although he had been dead for some time.

Travis Wilkerson’s documentary “An Injury to One” centers on the killing of Frank Little, but it also extends some parts of that story in order to connect it to present-day Butte. By using innovative film techniques like split screen, masking, color saturation, jarring jump cuts, and other highly-formalized film effects, Wilkerson’s history of the events of the summer of 1917 are put together with the long-lasting effects of the industrial excesses and the murderous impunity of the Anaconda copper barons.

Wilkerson uses these unusual documentary film-making methods to fill in missing details (police and coroner reports of the episode, as well as the Pinkerton Detective Agency’s surveillance files on Little, have all mysteriously disappeared) and to draw a line of continuity from the Speculator Mine fire to the toxic living conditions, bleak environmental devastation, and bitter economic ruin that haunts Butte today.

As a result, Wilkerson’s documentary shows how the wonderfully simple Wobbly dictum of solidarity—“an injury to one is an injury to all”—was also the IWW’s prescient and urgent call for workers everywhere to recognize the sinister ecology of capitalist violence and industrialized mutilation going on all around them.

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Fifth Estate #370, Fall 2005

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