Labor’s House Divided: The Morrell Strike of 1935-1937

LYNWOOD E. OYOS

“Solidarity forever, solidarity forever, solidarity forever, for the union makes us strong.”
— New Songs for Butte Mining Camp (1916)

Significant changes took place across the nation during the 1930s as the American people struggled to meet the challenges of the worst economic depression in the country’s history. The new militancy of the American worker, a mass movement that produced basic changes in the relationship of capital and labor, must be included among the more dramatic developments of the era. Grudgingly, Americans at last accepted labor unions as an integral part of the nation’s industry. Labor’s gains occurred because of the passage of pro-labor legislation by Congress and the use of organized force by workers. Labor unrest did not leave South Dakota unscathed. It was in Sioux Falls in March 1935 that the most significant confrontation between labor and management in the state’s history began. A part of the labor force at the city’s largest employer, John Morrell & Co., a meat-packing firm, periodically closed down production during the next two years. The strike took place despite extreme divisiveness among workers at the plant and hostile opinion within the Sioux Falls community.

In 1918, nine years after the locating of the John Morrell & Co. plant in Sioux Falls, laborers went on strike, hoping to gain the right to organize a union. The company ignored their efforts, and the strike ended within three days. A similar effort fizzled in
1920. The following year, about six hundred employees left their jobs at the plant as a sign of protest against working conditions. After three weeks, the Sioux Falls strikers returned to work. No significant labor unrest occurred at the plant over the next decade.

Faced with a hostile federal government and the "big business mentality" of the 1920s, the labor union movement lost strength throughout the United States. Union membership dropped from about 5 million in 1920 to less than 3.5 million in 1929. "America is an employer's paradise," Australian H. G. Adam observed in 1928. At no other time in this century were employers so free of restraints that were normally a part of a pluralistic society. The government fostered the employer's freedom, and industry fought labor organizations with the "American Plan." Under the cloak of Americanism, industrialists used blacklists, "yellow-dog" contracts, labor injunctions, espionage, and strikebreakers in their attempts to prevent or destroy labor unions. Because the company could fire an employee without valid reason, the work force was convinced that no strike was worth the possibility of losing positions. These were the days when the union had no "strike fund" to rely on, and striking workers sought other livelihood while defying their employer.

The onset of the Great Depression in October 1929 increased the laborer's plight. By December 1931, unemployment had soared to 13.5 million—almost one-third of the American labor force. During the first four years of the depression, the labor movement continued to suffer losses in membership, income, and power in virtual silence. Working conditions worsened. At Morrell & Co., they reached their lowest point by the mid-1930s. Joe Johnson, who joined the Morrell work force in 1929, said that "it was about the poorest-paying place in town." There was no job

3. Ibid., pp. 84, 144, 149. A yellow-dog contract was a written agreement in which an employee "accepted as condition of employment that he would not become a member of a union or attempt to organize his fellow employees" (p. 149).
security. Work time was slashed, and by 1933 wages reached a low of thirty-two cents an hour. Sick leave did not exist even if a worker incurred injury on the job, and if employees reported for work one-half hour late on three different occasions, they lost their entire vacation.

Labor took heart, however, from the political change in the nation's capital following the inauguration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt on 4 March 1933, and a dramatic turnabout in union membership occurred following the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) on 16 June 1933. Section 7(a) of the NIRA guaranteed labor's right "'to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing'" and "'to be free from employer 'interference, restraint, or coercion' in designating such representatives, in self-organization, or in 'other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection.'"

In the changed political climate, formal union activities at the Morrell plant followed a series of secret meetings in the basement of William Shapiro's E & W Clothing store. Among the twelve to fifteen people present at the first meeting was Samuel A. Twedell, who became the first plant member to join the union and its first business agent. Sioux Falls Local 304 of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America, which was formally established on 4 October 1933, became a viable force at the meat packing firm in 1935.

Attempting to quash the union in its infancy, management prohibited conversations between laborers during working hours. If a foreman suspected that workers were engaging in prounion talk, he could sign the "dismissal card" that each workman kept in his back pocket. On one occasion, before the bell had rung to mark the start of the noon break, one of the men asked a col-

league for a dime to purchase a sandwich. The foreman witnessed the brief conversation and fired the worker. Management agreed to rehire the unfortunate laborer only after the shop steward and the union's grievance committee intervened. Members of the committee were docked some of their pay for the time they spent at the meeting.  

Layoffs mounted, and in the first two months of 1935, 107 men and women found themselves out of work. Workers with ten to twenty years of experience found that seniority counted for nothing. Sam Twedell recalled that it was terrible working for Morrell at that time: "They ruled with an iron fist. They would lay off a hundred people with no notice. I've gone to work at seven, and come home by eight, with no guarantee of hours or anything. All prerogatives belonged to the management and they were going to take advantage of it and break the union."
Early in March 1935, the company announced that it would discharge an additional 108 men. William H. T. Foster, the company's general manager, attributed the dismissals to decreased livestock receipts. In response, Local 304 offered to reduce the guaranteed work week from thirty-two to twenty-eight hours. Morrell's management refused to consider the union's offer. Union officials argued that people with seniority were being dismissed indiscriminately. Many laborers who received layoff notices had been with the company for twenty-five years. In addition, each side had a different interpretation of seniority. The union favored departmental seniority, which gave preference to people employed the longest in each department. The company favored plant seniority, whereby preference was given to laborers employed the longest throughout the plant.\(^\text{13}\)

Twedell and other union leaders argued that the primary motive for announcement of new layoffs was to break the union once and for all, not to save the company money. The 108 discharged laborers included many strong union advocates. Curiously, Twedell's name did not appear on the layoff list. The union rank and file voted to strike in early March 1935. Out of a work-force estimated at twelve hundred men and women, approximately six hundred belonged to the union at the time of the vote. Twedell said that the high percentage of union members alarmed company officials, and they decided that the union must be broken. He claimed that the primary reason for calling the strike was to secure recognition of Local 304 as a bargaining force, not to demand a wage increase.\(^\text{14}\) Many workers saw unionism as their only hope of improving their rapidly deteriorating economic status.

The strike began on Saturday, 9 March 1935, as a sit-down strike. At 10:00 A.M., seven to eight hundred employees ceased their labor and occupied the plant. Their action attained significance in American labor history as it was one of the first sit-down strikes in the nation. They took up a tactic used often in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s by Welsh coal miners, Italian metal workers, and Greek rubber workers who sat down at their jobs. In the United States, a three-day sit-down at the Hormel Packing Company in Austin, Minnesota, in 1933, and brief sit-downs in the

\(^{13}\) Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, 9, 10, 13 Mar. 1935.

\(^{14}\) Grebin's interview with Twedell, 16 June 1980. The company stated that the work force numbered 1,448 prior to the March 1935 layoff. Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, 10 Mar. 1935.
rubber factories of Akron, Ohio, in the same year, preceded the action at the Morrell plant. From the viewpoint of the strikers, a sit-down strike had numerous advantages over a conventional strike. Sitting by their idle machines eliminated the fear that their jobs would be taken from them or production maintained without them. Employers were reluctant to use force because they would be depicted as aggressors and machines might be damaged if altercations occurred. Removed from outside pressures, the strikers also developed a group feeling, a sense of unified purpose.\(^{15}\)

Twedell recalled that union workers at Morrell & Co. used the technique because they intended the strike to be of short duration. The strikers expected the company to accede to their demand of cutting the guaranteed work week from thirty-two to twenty-eight hours. "When we sat down," he said, "we expected it to be twenty to thirty minutes at most. It stretched into longer than that."\(^{16}\) As the day and night wore on, union members became more determined to remain in the plant. Many of the workers slept on dining tables, while others spent time talking with family and friends on the other side of the fence that enclosed the facility.

Despite the fact that there had been no property destruction or violence at the firm during the day, at 9:00 P.M. that evening, Governor Tom Berry ordered National Guard units in the area to mobilize and proceed to the Morrell plant. State law gave him the power to call up the National Guard to prevent property from being destroyed. Berry became the first governor in the state's history to call out troops during a labor dispute. The mobilization came at the request of Minnehaha County Sheriff Melvin L. Sells and Morrell officials who had argued that the strike caused the destruction of property, in this case the spoilage of meat. Approximately seventy-five hundred dollars worth of meat had been left on the work lines and tables when the strike began. Union spokesmen said that they had told Morrell officials that they would cleanup and save the meat if requested to do so. The request never came.\(^{17}\)

The 150 guardsmen, gathered from Flandreau, Madison, Mitchell, and Sioux Falls, equipped with 45-caliber service revolvers, twenty-one rounds of ammunition each, tear gas bombs, and machine guns, assembled before the plant gates. Governor Berry

talked with Twedell by phone shortly after 2:00 A.M. on Sunday morning, 10 March. He said he had had no recourse but to call out the guard and asked that the strikers abandon their efforts and return to their homes. As there had been no damage, Twedell and other union leaders assumed that Sioux Falls business interests were behind the governor's request. Local 304 officials believed that unionism was an anathema to many of the community's business leaders. Twedell informed the governor that the striking workers would not leave the building as long as the guardsmen stood at the gates. At 4:00 A.M., the guard withdrew, and an hour later the strikers, fifty of whom were women, left the plant dining room and marched out of the compound gates singing and shouting.18

Peter Houtsma, president of Local 304, immediately announced that the strike would continue. Sunday afternoon, 375 workers formed picket lines outside of the plant, and on Monday as many as seven hundred pickets surrounded the place. Because of their presence, the meat-packing firm shut down totally for two days. On Monday, 11 March, several hundred Morrell employees who wanted to work marched to city hall to meet with Mayor Adolph N. Graff. They sought his assurance that the city's law-enforcement officials would clear the street around the work place and provide them with the necessary safety for entering and leaving. These workers, in the throes of the depression, believed that the status quo must be maintained. They argued that one should not challenge an employer who provided some income when jobs were not available elsewhere. Many workers were docile and innocent of trade-union experience. Since Graff was absent, City Attorney Hugh S. Gamble accepted their request on behalf of the mayor. Fearing possible violence, he did refuse their demand for a parade permit through the Sioux Falls business district. Simultaneously, Sheriff Sells announced that he stood ready to call in the National Guard for a second time if the workers did not keep the peace.19

During the middle of the following week, Governor Berry recalled the troops and once again declared martial law. Local law-enforcement agencies had claimed that pickets were disrupting traffic and preventing nonstriking employees from working. The

governor's action broke the strike. After three hours of military presence, a truce was arranged between Local 304 and company representatives. Berry's action won him the support of the Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, but the union called for his impeachment. The governor's action reflected his conservatism. More than one historian has contended that despite Berry's role as a Democrat and a New Deal administrator, he was not as reform minded as the Progressive Republican governors of South Dakota between 1913 and 1925. Unlike Berry, several other governors during the 1930s, including Floyd Olson of Minnesota, Frank Murphy of Michigan, and George Earle of Pennsylvania, had refused to use troops in situations similar to the Morrell strike.

These chief executives had argued that such action placed the force of the state behind the employer.\textsuperscript{22}

The truce between the union and Morrell's local executives was contracted during the early morning hours of 13 March 1935. Governor Berry's representative, United States District Attorney George Philip, helped bring negotiations to a successful conclusion. Pickets dispersed, the plant reopened, and martial law was rescinded. The settlement called for the dismissal of twenty-nine union leaders, including officers Twedell and Houtsma and former president H. E. ("Gene") Sargeant.\textsuperscript{23} Employees would vote on seniority rights in a plan that the company would submit for approval within sixty days of signing the agreement. Union representatives agreed to the dismissal of the twenty-nine employees expecting that they would be returned to work once their case was acted upon by the regional National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The immediate concern was to put most of the union members back to work earning money.\textsuperscript{24}

Early the next month, the Labor Relations Board did rule that the twenty-nine men had been discriminated against according to Section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act. On 12 April, however, Morrell management formally rejected the board's findings. Fourteen days later, on 26 April, the NLRB granted the company's request for a review of the case by officials in Washington, D.C. The review was held on 2 May, with the board taking the issue under advisement. On 27 May, the Supreme Court declared the NIRA unconstitutional, which made violations of the law irrelevant.\textsuperscript{25}

Morrell executives notified employees that they would not cut wages nor increase hours as a result of the ruling on the NIRA. Union officials ignored the company's actions. Their primary concern was the fate of the twenty-nine blacklisted employees. On 8

\textsuperscript{22} O'Rourke, "South Dakota Politics," p. 257. Morrell workers celebrated Labor Day 1935 by hanging Governor Berry in effigy during an impromptu parade through the business district. The effigy was suspended from a scaffold on a truck. Union men had painted “Give us liberty or give us death; Governor Berry will get the rest” on the sides of the truck (\textit{The Strike Story}, 1935 [Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America Local 304, 1968], [p. 47]).

\textsuperscript{23} Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, 13 Mar., 13 July 1935. The original agreement called for the dismissal of thirty men, and the union publication, \textit{The Strike Story}, [p. 57], lists thirty names. By April 1935, however, the number had been reduced to twenty-nine.

\textsuperscript{24} Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, 13 Mar. 1935.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 11 Apr., 19 July 1935.
July, Local 304 made three public demands. First, they asked for reinstatement, with full rights, of the twenty-nine union members. Second, the union insisted that back pay be provided for these workers from 15 March 1935. Finally, they requested that a departmental seniority plan that employees had favored in an election on 12 May 1935 be immediately implemented.26

When the company did not meet the demands, Local 304 requested and received authorization from its international parent, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America, to resume its strike activities on Thursday night, 18 July 1935. Strikers set up pickets at both the front and back entrances to the plant. From this date to the end of the strike in 1937, a series of disagreements, fights, and general unruliness prevailed. Pickets in varying numbers remained outside of the firm, except in inclement weather, for the duration of the work stoppage. When not on the picket lines, strikers survived by doing short-term work on Works Progress Administration projects. Some left the city to find work, and others abandoned the union cause, but a hard-core group carried on the picketing.27

The events of the following day, Friday, 19 July, bore witness to the sharp divisions within labor’s house. Early that morning, about two hundred nonunion employees, members of the Morrell Employees' Association, gathered at the Cataract Hotel. Local 304 officials called this organization the “Company Association” and said that it represented management. According to union sources, management created the association as a front so that the company could argue that labor had the right to organize. Twedell stated: “The company union was great on getting lights replaced and salt on the floor and things like that. When it came to the actual settling of grievances they weren’t there at all. The leaders of the company union got their rewards by being called into sessions and getting two or three hours off those days and getting paid for that time.”28 At the hotel, the group made plans to break picket lines and get inside the packing facility. The association members marched four abreast from the hotel eastward across the Eighth Street bridge. At the intersection of Sixth Street and Weber Avenue, they received oak clubs made from stairway banister rungs. The marchers proceeded in formation.

26. Ibid., 31 May, 8 June 1935.
until they neared the Morrell plant, where the pickets stood armed with canes, sticks, and ball bats.²⁹

According to Walter A. Simmons, a reporter for the Argus-Leader and an eyewitness to what transpired, Sam Twedell left the picket line and walked toward the advancing association members, meeting them about two hundred yards south of the plant. Simmons stated that Twedell shouted something at the advancing column. At that moment, the union leader was seized and struck on the head.³⁰ Twedell provided a somewhat different and more detailed account of what occurred: “I saw them coming; I thought ‘My heavens! Most of our people are at home sleeping.’ I said to my fellows, ‘We can’t possibly stop that gang from going through our lines, so I’ll go up the hill and confront them and ask them not to go in, not to break our lines, but if they insist we’ll

offer no opposition.' So I went up the hill and held up my hand and they grabbed me and swung me around and someone hit me on the back of my head with a gas pipe and split it wide open. Then they grabbed me and forced me ahead of them down the hill. I broke away from them and got down to where our line was and I put my hand on the back of my head and held it up and it was all bloody and that started the fight.'

With blood streaming down his face and shirt, the union's business representative managed to return to his cohorts on the picket line. Shouting at one another, company association men and the pickets clashed at about 9:15 A.M. In the melee, approximately sixty nonunion men broke through picket lines and forced their way into the plant grounds. The main body of the company association retreated as pickets pelted it with bricks secured from an old broken-brick pile conveniently stockpiled near the firm. The strikers' pursuit of the routed association contingent ended when a train pulled across Weber Avenue just after the nonunion men retreated across the tracks. One eyewitness, standing on top of a nearby building, observed: "I had never seen anything like it before and hope to never again—it was terrible seeing men swing at each other with that much fury. I know that times were tough, but they turned on each other like animals. I felt pretty sad and shaken up inside afterwards, and I bet those guys with blood pouring down their heads felt even worse."

When the fray concluded, fifty-four men required hospitalization, including thirteen members of the union and the remainder belonging to the company association. Fortunately, no one was seriously injured. Another isolated, dramatic incident happened when two men, Harris S. Clausson and H. S. Thomas, tried to break through the picket line in a car. The strikers dragged both men from the automobile and severely beat them. On the other side, J. P. McCoy, international adviser of the meat cutter's union, was dragged into the plant, where he was beaten and sub-

32. Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, 17 Apr. 1978; Oyos, "Blood, Sweat, and Tears." The Employees' Association argued at the time that the pickets started the riot by refusing to grant association members the right to use the street and free access to work. Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, 21 July 1935.
jected to some gruesome threats by nonunion workmen before being rescued by the police. Unfortunately, there were only three policemen on the scene when the rioting began. The strikers had assured the authorities that peaceful picketing would prevail. The sheriff had left town and plant manager William H. T. Foster was touring Europe.  

The same day, now known as “Bloody Friday,” Twedell agreed to permit men who wanted to work to enter the plant, provided they were legitimate employees of the company and not strikebreakers. The strikers quizzed each person diligently before allowing them into the facility. In the days that followed, nonunion employees might be permitted entrance on one day and denied access the next morning. Occasionally, a police escort accompanied harassed workers into the plant. Pickets secured a boat to patrol a section of the Big Sioux River running alongside the meat-packing grounds. They feared that the company would try to ferry workers in and out by the river route. Among the printable epithets used when nonstrikers approached the gate were “You’re a yellow rat,” “You smell bad,” and “Scab.” When nonunion laborers entered, they had to follow a path cleared by the strikers. Joe Johnson, one of the pickets, said: “Some of the women had hat pins.... They’d make pretty good use of ’em when they’d [the nonstrikers] go through.” Strikers lobbed rotten eggs onto the grounds where company guards were prime targets. The warring factions slashed car tires, placed tacks on the street, and broke windshields with rocks. Following one exchange of curses, fisticuffs broke out between the opposing groups. Twenty-five strikers and thirty-three company association men landed in jail. Management claimed the strike was Communist inspired, but union leaders labeled the accusation absurd.

In the first three weeks following “Bloody Friday,” workers in the plant remained under constant siege. They stayed within the buildings to avoid confrontation while entering and leaving the gates. When the work day ended, they slept on company-provided cots in the large shipping room. Various kinds of entertainment

34. Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, 19 July 1935.
35. Ibid., 19, 20, 21 July 1935; The Strike Story, [pp. 20-29].
37. Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, 19 July 1935; Brian J. Bauer, “The Morrell’s Strike of 1936” (research paper, Augustana College, 1979), Box 1, File 1, Oyos Papers.
helped to pass the time. Management showed movies, organized baseball games, staged wiener roasts, brought in kegs of beer, held religious services, and even provided a burlesque show. Pickets, on the other hand, tried to make life miserable for the men who were inside. At night, they would bang pipes on brake drums, set off firecrackers, blow whistles, and play songs on a portable phonograph. They played the “Prisoner’s Song,” a monotonous melody, over and over again. Nearby residents complained about the noise, and police managed to restore a degree of tranquility to the neighborhood.38

Following the first violent days, negotiators tried to bring agreement between the two sides. Morrell & Co. initially offered jobs to all people on the payroll as of 18 July if they came back immediately. Once again, officials refused to rehire the twenty-nine, arguing that the company could not tolerate strikers dictating to it. Local 304 immediately rejected the proposals. Morrell officials responded with a second set of offers on 28 July. They proposed to recognize the union, to avoid discrimination in the future, and to create an office to hear employee complaints. When they repeated that they would not reemploy the twenty-nine, the union flatly rejected the offer.39

Despite the union’s adamant stand, more and more workers entered the plant each day. Eight rail cars of meat were shipped on 23 July. By the end of the month, about six hundred men and women had returned to work, and in early August, nonunion employees who remained off the job said they would enter the plant en masse. They were responding to a company ultimatum that all workers who were on the payroll on 18 July must report for work by 9 August or their jobs would be filled by former employees who had been laid off earlier in the year. From the beginning of the strike, there had been no strong sense of community among the workers. A large number of married men, concerned for the welfare of their families, had returned or attempted to return to work almost immediately. Responding to nonunion workers’ desires, Mayor Graff threatened to call in the National Guard if the pickets tried to deny nonunion people access to their jobs. Nonunion personnel began to enter without incident. By 9 August, the active labor force within the work place totalled between seven hundred to one thousand men and women.40 Die-hard union people understood the importance of a weekly paycheck to these

38. Oyos, “Blood, Sweat, and Tears.”
39. The Strike Story, [pp. 27-29].
40. Ibid., [pp. 26, 30-37].
workers but also realized that their presence prolonged the strike. One union member argued: "If the majority of workers had joined the strike, the company would have been forced to meet the union’s demands [to reinstate the discharged twenty-nine with back pay]. The company just couldn’t have afforded not to and the whole thing would have been over fast."

The union responded to the deteriorating situation in several ways. The Amalgamated Meat Cutters organized a boycott of Morrell products nation-wide, and the strikers considered it one of their most effective weapons. Across the United States, union members attempted to boycott all products carrying the Morrell label. In the western third of the country, the boycott worked effectively. Many union veterans believed that because of the boycott John Morrell & Co. agreed to a settlement in 1937. Not all local stores participated in the boycott, however. Several merchants resented any imposition on their sales and openly sold Morrell products, while others did it covertly. Some retailers who violated the boycott went to their stores in the morning and found windows broken or pickets in front of their businesses.

In southeastern South Dakota, farm organizations participated in the boycott. A significant minority of farmers continued the traditional Populist belief in solidarity between the farmer and urban laborer against the vested interests of the businessman. The regional Farmers Committee for Action called on farmers not only to boycott Morrell products but also to refuse to ship cattle to meat-processing plants. One of their leaders stated, "Action is being taken to support the strike morally and financially, as well as on the picket line." Rural progressives denounced the use of police in labor disputes, and various groups appeared at the plant site pledging their support of the strike and providing food to the pickets.

Local 304 also tried to arrange a two-day general strike of all Sioux Falls unions. The Sioux Falls Trades and Labor Assembly, which represented eighteen of the city’s unions, weighed the possibility of calling a general strike, hoping it might bring a favor-

44. Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, 24 July 1935.
45. Ibid., 29 Jan. 1937; The Strike Story, [p. 46].
able settlement. Fearing that a general strike might tie-up every union-operated service in the city, Governor Berry met with the local union leadership to urge that no action be taken. Following several days of voting, it became apparent that the two-thirds majority needed to approve a general strike did not exist since seven unions opposed the action. Support coming from other unions was primarily moral although the Trades and Labor Assembly eventually passed a voluntary measure whereby any union worker could help strikers by signing over one day’s pay per month to the strikers. Lastly, the strikers tried to bolster solidarity through mass meetings in Library Park. Imported speakers, addressing from two to three thousand supporters, attempted to motivate union members to stay on the picket lines. Regional labor leaders, such as J. P. McCoy, international union vice-president, and E. R. Evans, president of the United Workers League, often used the theme that victory was just around the corner.46

As the strike continued into the fall of 1935, enthusiasm dwindled and fewer pickets showed up at the firm’s gates. By October, as few as twelve pickets and a skeleton force of policemen remained near the plant. It may have been quiet near the work place, but isolated acts of violence persisted within the city. Beatings of union and nonunion personnel occurred away from the strike site. Rocks continued to be thrown at cars, and yellow paint was directed at several homes. A block of cement followed by a can of black paint crashed through the window of one home. In an area looking down on the plant, strikers reportedly constructed a giant slingshot from a dead tree and a tire inner tube. Fortunately, before it could be used, the police discovered and dismantled the potential weapon.47

One final major clash between the workers occurred on 11 April 1936 as Local 304 reinvigorated its picket lines. Stones hurled at nonunion personnel arriving for work caused damage to thirty-eight cars and injured three people. Using tear gas, the police dispersed the pickets and arrested Twedell and E. R. Evans after the violence ended. Twedell was charged with intimidating laborers, while Evans, a nonresident, faced vagrancy charges. Authorities soon released both men. During the eleven months following the violence of 11 April, no major breakthrough in negoti-
tations occurred. On 2 January 1937, however, John Morrell & Co. announced that an agreement had been made. Union officials quickly denied the statement, and the next day Local 304 members voted unanimously to reject a proposed settlement.48

Robert E. Mythen, commissioner of the Conciliation Service of the United States Department of Labor, commenced a series of meetings with representatives of the contesting parties. Prolonged conferences over two weeks resolved the disputed issues, and on 10 March Mythen announced that an agreement satisfactory to both sides had been reached. The public statement said: "The settlement is one that is a victory for all, because it has achieved peace and the attending benefits which accrue from it.... The settlement reflects credit without any loss of honor and dignity of all parties, the management, the union and all of the workers. Within, it contains the provisions for a better and a finer human relationship for the future between the management and the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America." Mythen concluded, "It is the spirit of the agreement that there was a victory for neither side."49

The company said the remaining strikers could return to work as soon as possible. Fifty strikers returned within two weeks, and by November 1937 everyone had reported for work. The twenty-nine blacklisted employees, the focus of the second strike, returned to work as soon as positions were available for them. Workers received a nine-cent-per-hour raise and were granted a liberalized vacation plan that included one-week's paid vacation after one year of service to the company. As the strikers returned to work, they regained their seniority rights under a plan agreed to by company representatives and workers.50

The terms of the settlement generally favored the union, and its members cited the effectiveness of the boycott of Morrell products. The company, however, pointed out that its profits had doubled during 1936. Morrell officials announced on 11 January 1937 that the consolidated net earnings of the company and its subsidiaries for fiscal 1936 were $619,489, compared to $338,595 for the previous year. The Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader acknowledged that the boycott had been effective on the West Coast. Setting aside the conflicting claims, both sides sought to reduce tension in the community and to create a positive environ-

49. Quoted in South Dakota State Forum (Sioux Falls), 12 Mar. 1937.
ment for production at the packing facility. The resolution of the strike must also be viewed in a larger context. By 1937, labor and the union movement had achieved status nationally. Strong support from the Roosevelt administration and the United States Supreme Court decision in March 1937 to uphold the constitutionality of the Wagner-Connery Labor Relations Act assured labor of its proper place in the economic and political arena.

Without a doubt, the most important concession made by management was the recognition of the union as a legitimate bargaining power. The union started to gain strength the day the settlement was announced. Although the worker's achievements between 1935 and 1937 pale in comparison to the gains achieved in later years, the first step had been taken. Forty-two years after the strike, one of the twenty-nine, Joe Johnson commented: "There's no doubt the strike was worth it. They were very tough times but definitely worth the effort. I realize it each month when my pension check comes in the mail or each time they take care of my hospitalization or prescription needs. These are things that never could have been realized before the events of 1935."

The strike made labor a viable force in Sioux Falls, a force to be reckoned with in the future. The events of 1935-1937 gave workers the right to open their mouths without fear. If the strike had failed, as all previous strikes at the Morrell plant had, the labor movement in Sioux Falls would probably not have been in a position to achieve proper recognition until after World War II. Labor unions became a permanent and significant factor in the economic life of the city.

For several years following the strike, some strife and division continued within labor's house, but the extreme bitterness engendered between members of the company association and the meat cutters union during the strike melted away quickly.

51. Ibid., 11, 14 Jan., 10 Mar. 1937.
52. The Wagner-Connery Act, or National Labor Relations Act, was approved by Congress on 5 July 1935. The act created a new National Labor Relations Board with power to determine appropriate collective bargaining units subject to elections it supervised at the request of workers, to certify the duly chosen trade union, to take testimony about unfair employer practices, and to issue cease and desist orders. Section 7 of the measure upheld the right of employees to join labor organizations and to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing. Richard B. Morris, ed., Encyclopedia of American History (New York: Harper & Bros., 1953), p. 351.
NOTICE TO ALL
MORRELL EMPLOYEES

The Strike Is Over!
Let us Forget Our Animosity. Forget the Past and
Organize for the Future. We can do this if we Co-
operate. We are on Friendly Terms with the
Morrell Company and will do our part to
Keep this Friendship.

JOIN OUR UNION AND BE ONE OF US.
Help Make Sioux Falls a Union Town
WE CORDIALLY INVITE YOU TO ATTEND OUR
MEETINGS HELD EVERY THURSDAY NIGHT
AT THE MANDSKOR HALL.

JOIN THE
A. M. C. & B. W. of N. A.
AFFILIATED WITH THE
AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR.

For Additional Information, Call
Sam Twedell
Phone 3315-W.

The strike ended on 10 March 1937. The union had received
favorable terms in the settlement, and it quickly moved
to put the disagreement behind it and consolidate its gains.
Twedell, a focus of controversy during the two years, said there was little ill-will expressed between the workers afterward. “The non-union people,” he said, “felt they should become a part of the union and if they showed no opposition to the union, they were accepted.” The former business agent said that he was treated well and that many members of the company association approached him afterward and said they had been on the wrong side. 55 Both sides can be faulted for some of the more deplorable incidents that occurred during the two years. Yet, one must take into account that two groups of human beings, enduring the anguish of the Great Depression, acted in a manner that they thought would best benefit themselves. In the final settlement, all residents of labor’s house achieved a victory.

55. Grebin’s interview with Twedell, 16 June 1980. Twedell also began working for the international union several weeks after the strike ended.
Copyright of South Dakota History is the property of South Dakota State Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.