

Carlo Tresca & the First Antifa

Book review

Jeff Stein

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a review of Nunzio Pernicone, *Carlo Tresca: Portrait of a Rebel*. AK Press, 2010. 380 pages, \$19.95, paper.

Carlo Tresca is well known in the U.S. as one of the early leaders of the IWW. Born in Italy in 1879, Tresca was forced to migrate to the United States in 1904, due to his socialist and labor activism. After emigrating, Tresca quickly became disillusioned with American “democracy” and the class collaboration of the electoral socialists and the business unionism of the American Federation of Labor. Drawing upon his speech-making skills and journalistic talents, Tresca organized for the Industrial Workers of the World, the United Mine Workers of America, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union and the Progressive Mine Workers, and helped lead strikes by Italian immigrants working in textile mills in New England and the coal mines of Pennsylvania. Tresca never formally joined the IWW, but worked more as a freelance troubleshooter, often called in by local strike committees instead of by IWW General Headquarters. His formal association, as such, was with the FSI, the Italian Socialist Federation, the syndicalist-oriented wing of the socialists in Italy and Italian socialists in America.

Carlo Tresca was involved with a number of important strikes by the IWW, including the Lawrence and Paterson textile strikes, and the Mesabi Range iron ore strike. It was during the Mesabi Range strike that Tresca fell out of favor with Bill Haywood and the IWW. Haywood decided that the strike was lost and wanted to end it, but Tresca and his companion, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, felt the IWW should continue to support the strikers as long as they were trying to hold out. The strike ended, but Haywood did not trust Tresca or Flynn after that, even going so far as to hold them responsible for a group of strikers pleading guilty to manslaughter for the death of a violent sheriff’s deputy.

When the First World War began and President Wilson began his persecution of the IWW (seeing it as an opportunity to rid the American labor movement of radicals), Tresca and Flynn also disagreed with Haywood that IWW leaders should surrender themselves to authorities. Haywood was under the misguided belief that the courts would find them within their rights and let them go. Hundreds of IWW organizers went to prison. Bill Haywood fled to Russia. Tresca and Flynn were vindicated in their decision not to turn themselves in and managed to stay out of prison.

After the war, Democrat Wilson and his Republican successors launched a Red Scare. Immigrant radicals were deported, regardless of how long they had lived in the United States. Russian Jews and Italians were persecuted, in particular. Carlo Tresca narrowly escaped many attempts to deport him, because the Bureau of Investigation (later FBI) could not prove Tresca was not an American citizen, or that he ever advocated the violent overthrow of the government. Tresca's days as a strike leader, however, were over. The IWW was in turmoil, due to the repression, and AFL leaders considered Tresca a pariah. To invite Tresca to be involved in strikes was considered a surefire way to increase resistance by employers and repression by the police. Tresca returned to radical journalism, not only as a means to support himself and his children, but to continue to agitate against capitalism, the church, and the Italian monarchy, as well as the rise of fascism. Tresca purchased the Italian-language newspaper *Il Martello* (The Hammer) in 1917.

Tresca used *Il Martello* to organize opposition to Mussolini and the Italian fascists, and their supporters in the United States. Tresca had met Mussolini when they were both socialist exiles in Switzerland in 1904, prior to Tresca going to the United States. Mussolini told Tresca that he was "not revolutionary enough." Tresca thought Mussolini was a narcissistic faker. During the war, Mussolini proved Tresca right and "Il Duce" supported Italy's entry on the side of Britain and France, and embraced the Catholic Church and the monarchy. In 1919 Mussolini founded the first Fascio di Combattimento (Combat Legion) in Milan and began a violent campaign to fight and suppress striking workers who were occupying factories throughout Italy.

Although, at first, Tresca dismissed Mussolini and his followers as bully boys for the bourgeoisie, he began to take them more seriously as the Fascist movement gained power beyond what the capitalists expected of them. In a strategy which was later copied by Hitler and the Nazis in Germany, the Fascists ran for elected office while intimidating their opponents in the street, and promised capitalists, both in Italy and abroad, to hold the Left in check. King Vittorio Emanuele made Mussolini his prime minister in 1922.

Fighting Fascism became the great crusade of Tresca's life, the struggle in which he achieved unrivalled preeminence among Italian-American radicals and reached the pinnacle of his career...No compromise with the enemy was possible; no quarter given and none expected. Tresca's war against Fascism was a fight to the death. (Pernicone, 135)

Mussolini and the fascists in Italy depended on economic support from friendly capitalists in the United States (and Britain), and donations from Italian-Americans. In spite of friendly portrayals of the Mussolini regime in the American press, the Italian economy was in shambles and Mussolini was making it worse. The Fascists needed to keep up the masquerade. Mussolini's main allies were the Catholic Church, Italian-American street thugs, or "Blackshirts", the American philo-fascists (powerful American businessmen who wanted help from fascists to suppress anarchists and communists), the Mafia, and pro-fascist Italian-American businessmen, the "prominenti." The most powerful of these pro-fascist prominenti was Generoso Pope, the publisher of a chain of Italian newspapers, who controlled what information Italian readers got about Mussolini and what was happening back in Italy.

Tresca fought the Fascists in three ways. First, as a journalist, he used *Il Martello* to investigate and publish stories about what conditions were actually like under fascism in Italy, but also who was aiding Mussolini in the United States. Tresca opened the pages of his newspaper to all the anti-fascists in Italy, who were unable to have their voices heard due to censorship. Copies of *Il Martello* were smuggled back and circulated in Italy. When representatives of the regime visited the United States, Tresca printed articles exposing what they had done. The Italian government

complained and tried to shut down *Il Martello* numerous times, but Tresca's friends and contacts from his labor organizing days rallied to his defense and stopped Mussolini's attempts to silence his critics in America. Even J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, was frustrated in his own efforts to work with Mussolini and help send Tresca back to Italy for what would surely have been a death sentence.

Second, besides his work as a journalist, Tresca organized an anti-Fascist opposition movement, a united front of socialists, anarchists, IWWs, communists, liberal progressives and trade unionists, and tried to include all who were sincerely opposed to fascism in whatever country. As always, getting the various factions of the left to work together was a challenge. Anarchists were still suspicious of the communists for the bloody suppression of their movement in the Russian revolution by the Bolsheviks (aka Communist Party), later made worse by their betrayal of the Spanish Revolution. The socialists and the communists were fighting for control of the textile unions. The trade unionists and liberals were suspicious of radicals in general. Much of the early organizational work ended up falling on the shoulders of the Italian anarchists. Pernicone mentions that this was one of the few times Tresca was actually able to work with the followers of Luigi Galleani, who considered Tresca an opportunist.

Third, Tresca was not above putting himself in harm's way by confronting the Blackshirts and Mafia thugs in the street. In the 1920s, the Blackshirts tried to intimidate their opponents by roaming the Italian-American neighborhoods and physically confronting them. When Tresca heard they were appearing in a street somewhere, he would gather friends and supporters to make a show of opposition, walking up to their leaders and calling them out by name for their bully tactics and cowardice. Most often, the thugs would back down to avoid a beating. If the Fascists held a rally, Tresca would help organize a counter-rally, where his experience at speaking before crowds of striking workers put to shame the arguments of the Fascists.

Things changed in 1941, when, in obedience to Hitler, Mussolini declared war on the United States. Fascism suddenly went out of style and many Italian-Americans who had supported Mussolini made an about-face and became "anti-fascists" too. Tresca called out these late-comers to the cause of democracy. Had they not supported Mussolini and the fascists from the beginning, the atrocities and war that followed may have been prevented. This included the newspaper magnate, Generoso Pope, who had ties to Mafia leader Frank Garofalo. With the aid of government authorities, an effort was made to scrub Pope of his pro-fascist past. The US and the British were intent on creating "Victory Councils" of ex-fascists to take over government functions after Italy was defeated that would keep power out of communist hands. Tresca was tricked into attending a banquet where Pope was given an award for opposing Mussolini. Tresca rose and denounced Pope and walked out.

Shortly afterwards, on January 11, 1943, Tresca was murdered.

He had stayed late at the *Il Martello* office to meet with several members of the Mazzini society, only one of whom, Giuseppe Calabi, showed up. When Tresca and Calabi left the building, a heavy-set man emerged from the shadows and fired four gunshots into Tresca. Calabi did not recognize the assassin, who ran off into the night and disappeared. Several theories were investigated, but instead of picking the most obvious, the FBI and New York Police made every effort to pin the murder on the communists. While there was no love lost between the communists and Carlo Tresca for a number of reasons, including Tresca's support for anti-Stalinist dissidents, the most likely culprit was the mobster Frank Garofalo, who may or may not have been acting on the orders of Generoso Pope. The crime was never officially solved, and there are indications of

what may have been a police cover-up. Pernicone looked into the evidence provided by Dorothy Gallagher's biography of Tresca, *All the Right Enemies*. While he criticizes Gallagher for not understanding enough Italian to give a background into Tresca's thinking and early life, he credits her detective work in exposing Garofalo as responsible for the murder.

Reading this book helped me get a clearer picture of Carlo Tresca and the first Antifa. Anarchists and others active in today's anti-fascist movement will be inspired by what this man did. Pernicone was a good historian, certainly on par with Paul Avrich. It is unfortunate he died shortly after this biography was published. A volume of English translations of Carlo Tresca's many writings would certainly be welcome.

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