

# SIGNS AS DIRECT ACTION:

## The Howling Mob Society and the Art of Visualizing Radical Labor History

by Nicolas Lampert

The type of signs, billboards, historical markers and monuments that dominate public space inform us greatly about the culture and the politics that we live under. While corporate advertisements and logos dominate the urban landscape (and in many cases, the rural landscape) it is important to notice the signs and the messages that are not given prominence.

For instance, organized labor has had a profound impact upon the history of the United States, but rarely are these struggles given much importance in the visual landscape. Perhaps a statue, monument, or a plaque might describe a labor event that was paramount to a specific location. But these markers are often minimal, and so uninspired in their form and content that they reside in the shadows of the rash of billboards and signage that collectively ask us to consume. Lost in the margins is the history of the campaigns against child labor, the struggles for collective bargaining, higher pay, benefits, and a shorter workweek that includes the weekend. Of course, all of these struggles continue today, but the work is made far more difficult when labor history is erased, when the public does not see contemporary struggles as part of a continuous legacy. For how many Americans are well informed about the Knights of Labor, the I.W.W., the Socialist Labor Party, Eugene Debs, the Pullman Strike, the

Homestead Strike, Haymarket, the Flint Michigan Sit-Down Strike, the United Farm Workers Union, or other examples of labor history?

One radical art collective, the Howling Mob Society (HMS), has made the repossession and visualization of radical labor history the focus of their work. The HMS was formed in Pittsburgh in the late fall of 2006, and consists of a core group of six anonymous artists-activists. For their inaugural project, the HMS set out to create a series of historical signs that would draw attention to the Railroad Strike of 1877, one of the most significant and violent labor strikes in US history. Specifically, the HMS wanted to direct attention to the central role that Pittsburgh played in the strike's activity and final outcome.

A vital aspect of the HMS approach was to forgo any type of official permission from the city. Instead of working through bureaucratic channels or a historical society, they simply created the signs on their own terms and placed them in various locations around Pittsburgh in the early hours of a winter morning. Yet upon examining their work, a question arises: should they have? This question emerged within the collective itself, and their eventual decision – to create a guerilla project – is as intriguing as the signs themselves.

Process-wise, the HMS chose to research and to visualize the history of how the Railroad Strike of 1877 unfolded within Pittsburgh. Despite the significance of the history (the nation's first-large scale strike - one that spread from Baltimore to St. Louis) the event is rarely taught or known about, even within Pittsburgh. This is surprising, considering the extent of what took place in 1877.

The strike began in Martinsburg, West Virginia, when railroad workers on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad (B&O) refused to accept a ten percent cut in their wages (the second such cut within eight months) and went on strike. In short order, the strike spread to other cities, where railroad workers refused to allow trains to leave the depots. It was in Pittsburgh that the strike reached a fever pitch.

On July 21st, 600 troops were sent in by the state government from Philadelphia to stop the blockade, since the local Pittsburgh militia refused to aim their guns at their own people. As a crowd of 6,000 striking workers, family members and supporters gathered in protest, the militia opened fire into the crowd with Gatlin guns, killing twenty people within a five-minute span. During the aftermath of the slaughter, workers and the public took revenge and burned over 80 buildings, 104 locomotives, and 2,000 freight cars to the ground. Yet and to this day, despite this enormous amount of chaos and loss of life, this history remains largely obscure.

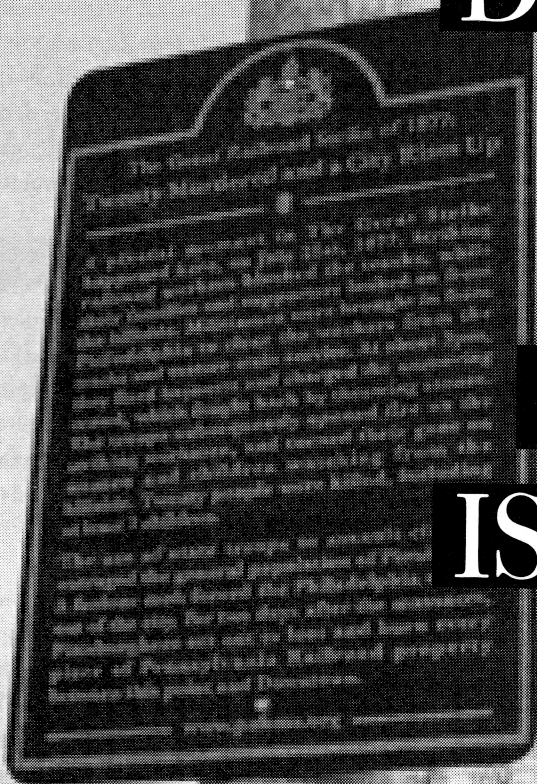
To counter this general amnesia, the Howling Mob Society decided to create historical markers that would inform the public about the events that had transpired within their own city. The name of the collective itself came from a headline found in Harper's Weekly, an illustrated newspaper that had reported on the events in 1877. The paper derided the strikers as a "howling mob" – a depiction meant to turn its readers against the actions of those who had confronted the militia.

The HMS decided to name their collective after the "mob" in affinity with those who had chosen to rise up and created ten historical markers, mounting them to city-owned street poles at, or close to, the locations around Pittsburgh where the events had unfolded. These sites included the present-day regions of the Strip District, Downtown, Polish Hill and Lawrenceville. As one might expect, the text of each sign was sympathetic to the actions of the strikers and the public who supported them.

The first decision the collective had to make was whether or not to go through the city and seek permission and funding to put up the signs. This question became a point of disagreement within the collective, for one of the key goals of the action was for it to be informative – to serve as an education tool that would reach a broad cross-section of the public. Some in the collective suggested that if the signs received permission, they would be apt to stay up longer, and the group could do extensive press and promotions around the project.



# THE WORK IS MADE FAR MORE DIFFICULT WHEN LABOR HISTORY IS ERASED.



Yet ultimately, the collective decided against this route for a number of reasons. One overriding factor was that the HMS did not trust city officials. Many of the collective members came from street art backgrounds, where asking for permission to put up work is nearly nonexistent. More so, the HMS was not optimistic that city officials, or a historical society in charge of public signage, would ever approve of their project. One member notes:

We wanted to tell a story here, and we didn't have time [to go through their] process just to get turned down. I also think we really wanted to try to do more than what a lot of official signs tend to do, in terms of language. We wanted to tell a lot of different parts of the same story, give background, choose locations, and not worry about being told why we couldn't do it.

Viewing other historical signs within Pittsburgh gave the HMS little confidence that a project with radical content would ever be approved. For instance, there was already one officially-sanctioned sign in the city (located in the Strip District), discussing the Railroad Strike of 1877, but its language was so vague and cautious that it did little to inspire or inform the public about the labor movement.

Another important factor in their decision was momentum – making sure that the energy for the newly-formed collective remained strong. Another member, whose position on gaining permission shifted in the course of discussions, remarks: From past work in public art, I also know how slowly the city moves in granting any kind of arts commission approval, even for something as simple and straight-forward as signage. And the political slant of these signs would certainly make the project less than straightforward for the city. It seemed like interest and energy for the project would quickly fizzle if we got caught up in that bureaucracy. I ultimately backed off from the permission issue, because I was concerned foremost with seeing the project happen.

Plus, what if the city flat out rejected the idea? Would this prevent the option for doing a guerilla project? One collective member stated:

There was also concern that if we asked for permission and were denied, we would forfeit the project. City officials would

know we'd made the request, and if the signs appeared in spite of their ruling, they'd know exactly whose doors to come knocking on. So for these various reasons, we executed the project without permission from the city.

For these reasons, the HMS decided finally upon a guerilla project. However, a person viewing the signs would have a difficult time telling that they were not official. This is because the HMS mimicked the design of the official Pennsylvania historical markers, both in terms of the color of the signs (blue and yellow), the font, and the central logo. On closer inspection, one notices that the State crest is changed from two horses to two wildcats – a symbol connected to the history of radical labor (specifically to the IWW artist Ralph Chaplin) and representing wildcat strikes, work slowdowns, or sabotage. Additionally, a burning train and fists are inserted, and the motto "People Before Capital" is added. But from a distance, the HMS logo look almost identical to the state logo.

To physically create the sign, some ingenuity was in order. The HMS ordered aluminum sign blanks online, and then painted them with a blue enamel paint that matched the color of "official" state sign markers. Next, they designed the signs in Illustrator and used a vinyl plotter to cut out the letters that were then adhered to the signs. This process was relatively the same one that is used for most municipal signs. In fact, they ordered all of the sign hardware from a specialty company called Municipal Sign Supply.

Once the signs were completed, the process of putting them up also mimicked the procedure of a project sanctioned by the city. One of the collective members owned a pick-up truck, and he outfitted it with a flashing yellow light and on the side, a decal that referenced a phony contractor name. The two installers wore yellow vests and hard hats. They even had a prepared excuse, in case they were questioned. Their alibi: they were hired city contractors, and they were simply fulfilling a work order they had received.

On the morning of the installation, the HMS set out at 5:30am with the pick-up truck, and another car that followed

a block behind to document the process. To install the signs on wooden poles, they set up a ladder and bolted them in with a cordless drill. For the metal poles, the process required a strapping tool and mounting hardware. As one member describes:

We would just pull the truck up, plug the yellow light in and set it spinning, put on the four-ways, hop out, put big orange cones out around the truck and behind it where appropriate, and pop a ladder up wherever we were going to mount a sign. One or the other of us would hop up and start working, while the other handed up tools . . . The whole thing took, I think, two hours.

All ten signs went up without a hitch, underscoring the notion that if you look like you are doing something illegal, you'll probably get caught. And if you don't, you'll blend in with the everyday routine of the city and go unquestioned. As one collective member noted, "The key is urban camouflage. How often have you ever questioned the actions of the man with the orange vest?"

people you probably would not want to spend ten seconds with, let alone months in conversation, making compromises and concessions.

Significantly, this was part of the politics behind the work: to explore the notion of who decides what is allowed to take place in public space. Do you play by the power structure's rules, or do you create your own? One HMS member notes: It was important not to ask permission from a governing body we do not support. It was important as a movement towards greater ownership of our urban spaces, what we see and what we read, and a questioning of the presupposition that city property is private property and not ours to do with as we please.

Yet one has to return to one of the original goals of the project: to be informative. The HMS was not putting up a counter-monument to challenge other existent markers about the Railroad Strike of 1877; they were essentially putting up the only signs that highlighted this vital history from the

## **"THE KEY IS URBAN CAMOUFLAGE. HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU EVER QUESTIONED THE ACTIONS OF THE MAN WITH THE ORANGE VEST?"**

Additionally, how often does creating public artwork become an adventure? In this case, the process of putting up the signs underscores one of the key aspects of the project: to create mischief. For isn't one of the key aspects of doing public interventions and street art – the thrill of doing something that is not allowed and the act of challenging laws and regulations that help to preserve the status quo?

Undeniably, the act of creating the signs and putting them up autonomously was more enjoyable than going through a lengthy bureaucratic process – asking permission from

perspective of labor. In this regard, the tactical decision to be elusive raised questions, most notably within the collective itself. One member explains:

We wanted the project to act as an educational tool for everyone in this city. The problem with our approach – not jumping through the official hoops so as to gain city sanction for the project – is that it would seem to place limitations on our ability to reach a lot of people from a lot of different walks of life, and I'm not completely certain that we've managed to address this problem as best we could.

Considering that their action was illegal, the HMS had to be

selective in terms of how to broadcast the work. Sending out press and email announcements was not an ideal option, given that it might attract attention towards individual members and could alarm city officials who might then have the signs removed. To circumvent this problem, the HMS put up flyers instead, and created a website that acted as an additional place for people to learn more about the history of the strike. We attempted in various ways – [via] the inclusion of the website on each sign for instance or the deliberate attempt to put our fliers in different neighborhoods and locations... But a newspaper article can reach so many people, and a ribbon-cutting ceremony makes the nightly news.

Another collective member notes:

*We've released information about the signs on a very considered, cautious basis with the hope of the signs staying up for awhile before attracting too much notice. I think it does detract from the overall effectiveness of the project on some level.... But, ideally, by staying up long term, the signs will be encountered on an individual basis by many people and have their effect that way.*

While it is easy to question one approach over the other, the final decision was a wise choice, for it provides the HMS with a number of future options. For one, the non-permission route allowed the collective to have full creative control and to dictate the wording of the signs. One collective member notes, "You would never see a city-sanctioned sign that reads, 'With corporate donors bankrolling academic institutions as well as media outlets, many historians also find it convenient to reinforce erroneous representations in order to maintain the dominant power structure.'" Yet on the other hand, had the HMS gone through the permission process, it might not have been censored by city officials anyway.

However, the HMS assumed that they would, and it was vital to the collective that the Railroad Strike of 1877 was presented from a position that was sympathetic to labor and the community that supported the uprising. As a worst-case scenario, imagine a situation in which the HMS was forced to

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compromise the wording of the signs, to the point where the history became banal. Would this inspire the public to learn more about the history? In such a compromised form, the signs might still inform the public about the Railroad Strike, but without taking a strong stance, it is less likely that the public would either pay close attention to or actively engage with the history.

As conditions stand, if the signs do in fact come down one day, the HMS can then consider approaching the city to propose permanent historical markers. In this manner, they would not even have to mention or take ownership for the current guerilla sign project.

Arguably, the non-permission route becomes so empowering because it encourages other people to take ownership of their city, and suggests that the telling of history resides in the community's hand, rather than in the hands of historical societies and government officials. Echoing this very concern, a HMS member remarks:

*In an ideal world, we'd all share in the telling and recording of our collective narrative. There would be a tacit agreement that anyone is capable of publicly marking significant events and figures. Unfortunately, our public spaces are coded and regulated in ways that generally disallow this kind of active engagement or a call and response relationship to space. Interjecting elements of radical history, representing the stories that are left out of mainstream accounts, is a way of demanding the right to participate in the making and marking of history.*

The fact that the HMS markers look so official may give them an extended life. Yet any attempt to gage how long the signs will stay up is only guesswork. Realistically, it would take a complaint directed at the city to alert officials or a motivated person or municipal worker to take down the signs, considering that they are bolted into posts. Additionally, some signs are in fairly remote locations. And the city's priority for removing "graffiti" is low, making Pittsburgh a

haven for street art.

Plus, what is the point of the city removing them? The signs are aesthetically interesting, informative, and mirror the pride that many residents have for their city, presumably making any official decision to take them down counterproductive. However, assuming that the city would embrace its labor history ignores the fact that part of the nature of governments is to control public space, and presenting a sanitized version of the past is part of this control. Thus, time will tell how long the signs will remain. As one HMS member notes:

*I think the group's hope is that once they've been up for awhile and been assimilated into the visual landscape of the city, we will announce them more boldly. At that point, they'll either be accepted, since they've already been in place for quite some time, or in a less ideal scenario, they'll be taken down. But they'll at least have had a nice, long life at that point.*

And if the signs do come down, they will still become part of public memory for those who witnessed them. Additionally, they might encourage others to take a more active role within public space.

Indeed, one cannot lose sight of the politics behind actions such as these. As one HMS member states, "I consider these signs a form of Direct Action; rather than spending our efforts lobbying a bureaucracy created by those we oppose . . . we just went out and did it." ♦