

“The Young Communists”

“You can’t parade. Our orders are to prevent it.” In a moment there was a seething, screaming mass around the policemen. Staves and sticks began to fly.

--San Diego Sun, May 31, 1933

On May 29, 1933, San Diego’s city manager, Albert Goeddel, publicly warned that there was a grave possibility of a major riot in the city streets. Scores of Communist youths and radical agitators were about to descend on the city, the manager claimed, with plans to disrupt a Memorial Day parade in downtown San Diego. But Goeddel was reassuring: “the police are ready for them.”

Hints of trouble had begun days earlier when “National Youth Day” organizers requested permission to hold a parade. By a 4-3 vote, the city council refused to issue a permit when the students declined to promise that their rally would have no “red flags.” Unperturbed, the group told the council they would probably march, anyway.

San Diego’s Memorial Day parade was scheduled to begin at 10:00 on Tuesday, May 30. Serving soldiers from all military branches, veterans groups, Boy Scouts, and high school military cadets, all planned to march from downtown to Balboa Park, for patriotic services at the Spreckels Organ Pavilion. Automobiles would follow carrying Civil War veterans.

But the newspapers seemed most interested in reporting that several truckloads of “radicals” had arrived early that morning from Los Angeles. Singing the “Internationale” a crowd assembled at New Town Park, at Columbia and F Streets (today’s Pantoja Park). Several speakers led by known “Reds” from Los Angeles--Jack Olsen, 22 and Jean Rand, 26--took turns denouncing American imperialism and the capitalist system. President Roosevelt was attacked as a “Wall Street president” and leader of the “boss class.”

According to reporting by the San Diego *Union*, “the Communists” appeared to be mostly “children, aliens and unfortunates headed by and herded by a handful of determined organizers.” Many carried banners: “All War Funds for Unemployed,” Roosevelt’s New Deal: Hunger and War, and “No Curtailment of Education.”

Watching the rally from the park perimeter, uniformed police and several plainclothes men seemed most offended by the banners. Sgt. Charles Glick, a burly Marine, pointed out particular banners that he didn’t like to a reporter for the *Sun*. “If those birds start any trouble, I’m going after those and start a collection.”

After speeches and songs, Olsen suggested a march to 6th and A streets for a second rally at the First Congregational Church. Grabbing their banners the crowd formed in ranks and began marching to the edge of the park. “Well, that’s that!” murmured a policeman. About thirty officers barred the path, and then surged into the demonstrators to grab their banners.

Sticks pulled from the banners and staves yanked from park benches quickly became weapons for the demonstrators. For fifteen minutes the police and demonstrators pummeled each other. The “Communists,” a reporter observed, appeared to have the upper hand by the “sheer weight of their numbers.” The tide turned when the police fired tear gas into the crowd.

Nine policemen were injured and sent to the hospital. The *Union* estimated that about thirty rioters had been hurt but none were hospitalized. Instead, “they were loaded into trucks by their fellow Communists and returned to Los Angeles without stopping for treatment.” A dozen motorcycle patrolmen escorted the trucks to the county line at Del Mar.



Courtesy San Diego Police Museum

Nine arrests had been made. Six for misdemeanor inciting a riot. Three men were booked at the city jail for felony assault with a deadly weapon. Reports of “third degree methods” employed at the jail circulated about town but all the demonstrators were soon released on bail.

The next morning, editorials in San Diego’s rival newspapers--the *Union* and *Sun*--dueled over the causes of the violent brawl in the park. The *Union* “thoroughly approved” of the city council’s decision to deny approval of a “red-flag parade” but admitted “there could have been more intelligent handling” of the affair.

The *Sun* was less understanding. “The disgraceful riot could have been prevented by the city council,” the newspaper declared. “Had the agitators been permitted to march peacefully” nothing would have happened. “Fanatical as they may be with respect to the best way of curing our social ills, these young men and women [had] the right to convene and parade.”

The following week, a defensive city council sat in session and listened to a barrage of complaints from San Diegans alleging “police brutality and councilmanic intolerance.” A letter read by respected businessman George W. Marston tried to strike a conciliatory tone: “we are actuated more by desire to prevent its repetition than to censure any person or group.”

But Marston left no doubt that he believed the councilmen were culpable, saying it was unwise and discriminatory to refuse the parade permit. Regarding the actions of the police, Marston added: “Disinterested witnesses testify that the police, led by a sergeant of marines, charged the crowd without warning . . . striking indiscriminately and precipitating the violent struggle that followed.”

In June, three demonstrators charged with attacking police officers went on trial. Contradictory eye witness testimony bewildered the jury. Defense attorneys charged that the council’s refusal to issue a parade permit had amounted to entrapment, and the police action had been “a deliberate and shameful frame-up.”

Only one demonstrator was convicted. Frank Young, a young black man from Los Angeles, was found guilty of assaulting two policemen and given the maximum sentence of six months in jail. The leaders of the rally in New Town Park, Jack Olsen and Jean Rand, escaped prosecution though both would appear frequently in Los Angeles newspapers in coming months for disturbing the peace in radical demonstrations.

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