



Kurt Gustav Wilckens, 1886-1923

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KURT GUSTAV WILCKENS was born 3 November 1886 at Bad Bramstedt in Schleswig-Holstein, close to the Danish border in Germany, one of the five sons of August Wilckens and Johanna Harms. Of average height with red hair and light blue eyes, he loved nature and hated cities. Starting work as a miner in Silesia, he emigrated at the age of 24 to the United States where he got work in the Arizona mines.



In Arizona he became involved in the agitation of the revolutionary workers' organisation, the Industrial Workers of the World (popularly known as the Wobblies).

Wilckens took part in strikes and became an orator in the miners' mass meetings, The IWW organised successfully among Mexicans and South Europeans, the lowest paid of the miners. As a result of the growing might of the miners in the Bisbee area, the local businessmen and scab miners organised into Loyalty Leagues. Early on 12 July 1916, 2000 Loyalty Leaguers commenced a round-up of miners. One miner shot dead a Loyalty leaguer in self-defence and was gunned down. There were robberies, vandalism, and beatings and abuse of women carried out by the Leaguers during the round-up. 1,186 men, including 104 Wobblies, among them Wilckens, were herded into cattle trucks and dumped across the border in the New Mexico desert. Wilckens, by now an anarchist as well as an IWW member, was interned in a camp for German prisoners. He escaped from there, was recaptured and deported to Germany in 1920 from where he departed to Argentina, arriving there in late September.

Here, he got a job as an agricultural worker in Rio Negro, then as a docker in Buenos Aires. He frequented the anarchist bars and centres. On 12 May 1921, he was the victim of a provocation by a cop who attempted to have him expelled from Argentina. This failed, but Kurt spent four months in prison before being freed. At this time, anarchism was strong among the working class of Argentina. After his release from jail Kurt devoted all his energy and money to help his imprisoned comrades.

In the south, in Patagonia, the anarchists had started organising among the agricultural workers of Santa Cruz province and among the workers of the meatpacking plants and ports. General strikes broke out regularly and workers formed themselves into horse-mounted units. Patagonia was experiencing an armed uprising inspired by anarchists. The government sent in the troops and, egged on by the British landowners, 1500 workers, including many anarchists, were rounded up and summarily executed. The leader of the repression, Colonel Hector Varela, was feted by the British who sang, "For he's a jolly good fellow". The reaction of prostitutes in a local brothel was different, shouting, "Assassins, Pigs! We won't go with killers", when Varela's troops turned up after the slaughter. They were jailed for insulting men in uniform!

Disgusted

Wilckens was disgusted by the murders headed by Varela. He was heavily influenced by the pacifism of Tolstoy, but felt that violence from the ruling class had to be answered. On 27 January 1923, he met Colonel Varela on the street and hurled a bomb at him. Wounded in both legs, Varela attempted to draw his sabre. Wilckens emptied his colt revolver into him, ending the life of this butcher. Arrested by vigilantes, he bluntly shouted, "I have avenged my brothers". Wilckens insisted that his act was an individual act, with no accomplices. At his trial he stated that he had shot Varela so that he could never kill again.

In jail, Wilckens began to recover from the injuries sustained during the assassination. Anarchists gave great solidarity and he was visited frequently and received food parcels (he was a teetotaler and a vegetarian). He was able to write for various publications, including some international anarchist papers. He explained that he didn't, "see Varela as an insignificant official. No, in Patagonia he was governor, judge, executioner and gravedigger! Tomorrow, our tomorrow will not foster strife, crime and lies; it will foster life, love, science; let us work to speed that day".

The sentence proposed by the judiciary was 17 years in jail. But already the army and the right were plotting. On the night of 15 June 1923, before sentence was passed, prison guards smuggled in Ernesto Perez Millan. This young man, an ex-police sergeant from Santa Cruz province, was a member of the Patriotic League, a reactionary and anti-Semitic organisation formed after the 1919 general strike, with the backing of the army, the Church and the employers. He had sworn revenge at Varela's funeral. He shot Wilckens through the chest. The bullet pierced a lung but did not kill him outright. He died the following morning.

The police and the government confiscated his body, but news spread and an unlimited general strike broke out throughout the country. The police fired on a mass demonstration in Once Square. Two workers were shot dead, including the Spanish anarchist Enrique Gombas, and one cop. Millan himself did not long survive the murder. The authorities made out he was unbalanced and had him put in a secure mental hospital. Here, he was gunned down by a Yugoslav midget!

Wilckens had acted in a time of great social strife and class war. A gentle and idealistic man of great integrity, he expressed immense solidarity. His disgust at the massacre of workers had forced him to act.

Nick Heath