

Louis Goaziou and the Coal Strike of 1894 in Hastings

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The 1894 coal strike was an important event for coal miners, the United Mine Workers, and the coal industry. However, the depression, the Pullman Boycott, and Coxey's Army received more press and public attention. This neglect has included historians resulting in a rather skimpy scholarship on the topic. This marginalization is surprising because its 180,000 participants exceeded the size of previous strikes in the United States.

The 1890's featured developments in industrialization and immigration. Not only did the pace of immigration increase, but a major geopolitical shift in the sources of immigration emerged. Immigration from eastern and southern Europe superseded northern and western Europe as the dominant source of new entrants. The growing labor supply contributed to the extreme surplus of coal miners in the early 1890's.

The delegates to the annual convention of the United Mine Workers, who met in April 1894, discussed this situation and proposed remedial actions which resulted in a national coal strike that was coordinated by John McBride, president of the United Mine Workers. However, local factors also influenced the character and outcome of the strike with Hastings serving as one of the hubs of the strike in District 2.

Louis Goaziou, a French-born radical and labor activist, played a pivotal role in the strike. He possessed impressive credentials for strike leadership. He worked as a miner in several coal towns, he belonged to the Knights of Labor, and he participated in strikes. More importantly, he was delegate to labor conventions, he published L'Ami Des

Ouvres, a French language newspaper which covered domestic and foreign news about workers and radicals, and he was the checkweighman at Sterling No.8 Mine in Hastings.

Prior to the national strike, the miners and coal operators of Hastings clashed. The coal miners complained about lay offs, the refusal of the superintendent to allow a checkweighman, and the lack of compensation for “dead work,” Goaziou wrote many letters to the editor of the National Labor Tribune. He used this outlet to offer his perspectives on the strike and the state of American society. He rejected compromise with the coal operators. Instead, he demanded that the strike leaders display more manliness and backbone. Resolute action was necessary, he declared so that the producers, who created all of the wealth, could gain access to the good life. To dramatize his abhorrence of compromise, he called on the union leaders who counseled compromise with the coal operators to join the coal miners in experiencing six months of slow starvation. Goaziou predicted that this ordeal would make them amenable to “a little radicalism.” In coping with this issue, he eschewed elections and political solutions. Instead, he advocated building strong unions and preparing workers for a peaceful revolution. Only fundamental change, he declared, not piecemeal reforms, would address the deep seated inequities of society. Goaziou targeted the radical press and radical speakers as essential elements in raising the consciousness of workers and preparing the working class for a transformative experience.

Goaziou pinpointed several other major change agents. He advocated labor solidarity and condemned ethnic, racial, and religious prejudice. In order to overcome oppression and lives as industrial slaves experiencing horrendous living and working conditions, class unity was imperative. Democratic industrial unions were essential

elements in defeating the monopolists and establishing a just society. Goaziou recognized many barriers blocked this transformation. Big businessmen and conservative political leaders erected barriers to fundamental changes. More unexpectedly, inept and selfish labor leaders and unassertive workers also blocked the path of progress. Goaziou directed his ire at them as well. Unions must empower and practice democracy to be effective tools in the fight for social justice. Education played an important role in his program for progressive change. When the 1894 coal strike fell far short of the transformative event Goaziou sought, he took solace from several positive developments. He was impressed with the geographical scope of the strike and perseverance and endurance displayed by the miners and their families. The rhetoric of the strikers impressed him with emphasis on antimonopoly, increased wealth and power to the producers, and the importance of labor solidarity. He was also heartened by strike support from women, from some community leaders in coal towns, and from some segments of the press.

The 1894 coal strike displayed the willingness of a host of miners to strike under very unfavorable conditions. Hastings offers an example of the endurance of coal miners and their families. The presence of Louis Goaziou provided a link between a small coal town and national and international audiences with dual access to a locality and to the Atlantic world.