RACE AND ETHNICITY IN THE NORTHERN FIELDS: THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY A CASE STUDY

By James Dougherty

Initially immigrants from Britain made up the bulk of the mine workers in the northern Appalachia fields. By the turn of the 20th century eastern and southern Europeans were recruited to meet the growing needs of an expanding industry. Employment of these latter groups became noticeable when the former were forced to move to the western fields in Kansas and Oklahoma as the result of the operators beating back organizing drives of the Miners' National Association in Pennsylvania with the use of "blacklegs" or strike breakers.

Importing strike breakers became unofficial labor policy early in the histoy of the northen fields. One of the regions first agency specializing in recruiting "blackleg" was established in Pittsburgh in 1864. The Pittsburgh Gazette reported the organization guaranteed its customers that it could deliver both skilled and unskilled laborers of all kinds. Shipments of workers came from Great Britain, Germany, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Norway, and Sweden. The Brady's Bend Coal Works in Armstrong County was one of the first companies to utilize these services when it used over three hundred Belgian miners to break a strike in 1864.[1]

The importation of African American labor from the south was another part of the operators' strategy to defeat the union during these early battles. The use of southern African American labor was particularly crucial to stemming the tide of organizing efforts in Ohio's Hocking and Tuscarawas Valley in the early 1880s. After 1882 bringing southern black labor north became the unofficial policy of many of the major operators in

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[1] Pittsburgh Gazette, 3.30.1864, minutes of the Pittsburgh Coal Exchange. One regional operator was able to guard his strikebreakers with U.S. soldiers during the latter part of the Civil War (Pittsburgh Gazette, 2/27/1865).

the Pittsburgh district.[2]

The H.C. Frick Coal and Coke Company, of western Pennsylvania, also began importing southern African American miners as early as 1892. As late as 1920 there were hardly more than 3,000 African American miners in the state. Most were confined to the Connellsville coal and coke section in Fayette and Westmoreland Counties until the major labor disputes of the post WWI period.[3]

Increased labor demand needed to meet escalating war-time production served as the major magnet for attracting black workers into the coal industry. Between 1910 and 1920 the black population in southern West Virginia, for example, increased to almost 50 percent, from 40,000 to 60,000. The number of black coal miners increased from 11,000 in 1915 to over 15,000 during the war years. This accounted for nearly 25 percent of the region's labor force, while immigrant labor declined from 31 to 19 percent during the same period.[4] A second wave of black migration hit the central Pennsylvania region in

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[2] African Americans lived in the region since the early part of the 19th century - both as slaves and freedmen. In 1810, for example, the first census for Indiana County listed only fourteen "colored" persons. The ratio of blacks to white was one to 444. By 1850 the African American population reached 254.

Progressive organizations were also a part of the region's heritage. One of the first known anti-slavery societies, the Indiana County Anti-Slavery Society appeared in 1837. The county also produced an abolitionist newspaper which battled slavery for nearly twelve years. Later under the supervision of one of the county's medical doctors, Dr. Robert Mitchell, the region became an important link in the underground railroad, connecting the Pittsburgh line to Clearfield, central Pennsylvania's link to New York State.

Another Indiana county resident, Absalom (Albert) Hazlett, participated in John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry and is buried with his fallen comrades on Brown's farm near Lake Placid New York (Clarence D. Stephenson, The Impact of the Slavery Issue on Indiana County, Indiana County Historical Series Number Two, Marion Center: Mahoning Mimeograph & Pamphlet Service, 1964, p. 1).

[3]. Spero & Harris, The Black Worker, pp-212, 213.

[4]. Joseph Trotter, "Race, Class, and Industrial Change: Black Migration to Southern West Virginia, 1915-1932," p-49. In Joseph Trotter, ed., The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

The black population in the state of Pennsylvania increased during

1923. In July local newspapers reported that over 7,000 southern blacks arrived in Altoona within a "few week period" to work for the Pennsylvania Railroad" (Indiana Evening Gazette, 7/19/23, p-7)

Despite these major changes the UMWA was not able to gain a substantial hold in southern West Virginia. Organizing drives and strikes for union recognition did occur, the most famous being the Matewan incident in the 1921, but operators were able to keep the union out by employing a number of tactics including:

appealing to mine worker individualism by portraying the union organizers as outsiders; hiring a "judicious mixture" of whites, blacks, and foreigners to forestall unionism by pitting one group against another; invoking nativism as upheld by the Ku Klux Klan and other groups and individuals; aligning with local black community leaders who would impede black miner militancy; the ability to tap into a large reserve of workers from southern rural and urban areas; and fostering among black miners the idea that they were not given the same opportunity for advancement in the union fields as compared to non-union fields of West Virginia.[5]

NORTHERN OPERATORS PERSPECTIVE ON BLACK MINERS:

Treatment of black miners by northern operators was mixed. Some refused to hire both blacks and Mexicans purely on racist grounds, while others maintained the recruitment patterns initiated in the 1880s by the H.C. Frick Company and others.

One of the most candid manifestations of the former attitude came during hearings conducted by the U.S. Senate Committee investigating conditions in the coal fields in

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this period from nearly 194,000 to almost 300,000. Most settled in Philadelphia but others scattered throughout other industrial communities including Lancaster, Pottsville, York, Altoona, and Harrisburg, among other cities (Emmett J. Scott, Negro Migration During The War, New York: Arno Press, 1969 p-134).

[5]. Spero & Harris, The Black Worker, pp 357-378.

1928. Both Mr. F.D. Welsh, superintendent of the Clearfield Bituminous Coal Corporation Rossiter (CBC), Indiana County mines, as well as Mr. Fred Musser, the CBC's vice president, had an opportunity to share their company's perspective on race with the committee members. Part of the exchange between the committee and superintendent went as follows:

Senator Wheeler: ... As Superintendent of the mine do you find that you can get as efficient help at the present time as you could under organized labor?

Mr. Welsh: We have done so. As a matter of fact, our labor has been improving, and it is almost entirely from right her in Pennsylvania, and they are experienced and practical miners.

Senator Wheeler: Are they colored or white?

Mr. Welsh: They are entirely white. We have never employed colored men. We have drawn the line at Mexicans and Spaniards and people of that class.

Senator Wheeler: You do not feel that the Mexicans and colored are as efficient miners as white men?

Mr. Welsh: Colored men are very efficient miners in many cases, but it makes a very undesirable element in the community. We take great pride in our schools, and take great pride in our churches, notwithstanding what has been said about this injunction, and we contribute to them. We contributed $22,000 to a school building in addition to our contribution by way of taxes. We do not want to bring in colored men and undesirable people and decrease the standing of the community, and particularly the schools.

Senator Wheeler: And you feel that the bringing in of colored labor in any community has a demoralizing effect?

Mr. Welsh: I do.

Senator Wheeler: Upon the community as a whole?

Mr. Welsh: I do, and I would not do it.

Senator Wheeler: Is it not a fact that it lowers the standard of morality of the people as a whole to bring in a large number of colored people?

Mr. Welsh: I have not had any actual experience and have never employed them, but from what I have observed in other places I think that is the result.

Senator Wagner: Their way of living, their accommodation, the way they sleep and live

generally make a great deal of difference in the matter of the morality of the people.

Mr. Welsh: You are entirely right.[6]

Other operators expressed more favorable but still racist and paternalistic perspectives on the black miner. Horace Baker of the western Pennsylvania Pittsburgh Terminal Coal Company told the 1928 Senate sub-committee that blacks performed as well as white miners when doing similar mining tasks. But perhaps a more revealing insight into how western Pennsylvania operators viewed blacks can be found when examining the living conditions companies provided black miners during the '27 strike. According to one account: .. "these barracks (occupied by black miners) were poorly ventilated, filthy, unsanitary, and some of them.. infected with vermin and hardly fit to house beasts, much less human beings who are employed in the mines all day where the sun's rays never penetrate, and where at best the air they breathe is never very pure. A number of miners were interviewed in this mine by your committee, but found few of them were satisfied with their conditions, and some of them expressed great discontent."[7]

THE UMWA'S PERSPECTIVE ON BLACK MINERS:

Compared to AFL unions the UMWA maintained a progressive position on race. The international union by constitutional decree mandated it unlawful for its members to hold membership in the Ku Klux Klan.[8] Many UMWA districts, such as District 2 of central Pennsylvania, as well as local unions adopted similar decrees.

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[6]. Hearings before the Committee on Interstate Commerce, United States Senate, 70th Congress, 1st Session (S. Res. 105), 1928, Pt. 2, p-281.

[7]. Hearings before the Senate Sub-Committee, Pt. 2, p. 346, as quoted in Spero & Harris, The Black Worker, pp 236 & 237.

[8]. From its founding in 1890, the UMWA's constitution banned "discrimination against a fellow worker on account of creed, color or nationality" (Constitution of the United Mine Workers of America, Article VII, Section 3).

Despite these actions the Klan became one of the major social movements of the 1920s. While they marched on Washington and carried out cross burnings and lynchings nation-wide, over 125,000 western Pennsylvanian's joined the hooded order. They built a series of Klan farms throughout the region to act as sites for their mass rallies. The Indiana Klan attracted between 35,000 and 40,000 to dedication ceremonies of its farm in 1924. Most of the Klan's hostility in central Pennsylvania was directed more toward ethnic miners, particularly Italians and Eastern Europeans rather than blacks.[9](David M. Chalmers, Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan, New York: Franklin Watts, 1981, pp 239/40; Indiana Evening Gazette, 8. 14. 25, p. 1).

One of the most unusual treatments of imported black strike breakers by local and district level union officials took place in the Kiski Valley, Westmoreland & Indiana Counties, during a strike in 1917. A campaign to organize non union sections of the valley began in 1914. Operators responded to these efforts by declaring that all miners who had joined the union should leave or be fired. Relations between the two sides flared up again in 1916 when the entire Kiski district went out on strike for "the right to organize, the eight hour day, the right to a checkweighman, and a general advance in wages."

The company responded by hiring gunmen, importing strikebreakers from nearby Pittsburgh, and gained an injunction which denied the strikers their right to a free press,

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[9]. The relationship between the Klan and African Americans in Indiana County took a rather odd twist. Some African American families were invited and did attend Klan picnics without the fear of racial threats or assaults (Interview with Sherman Schofield Sr., an African American who worked as a coal miner during the 20s & 30s, by the author, 8/15/88, Chevy Chase, Indiana County).

The most famous case of the Klan's anti-ethnic activity in the region turned to violence in the mining town of Lilly in Cambria County on April 6, 1924. Klansmen converged on Lilly by train from Johnstown "to give the micks something to think about." Four men died from the encounter, with Klansmen from Indiana County playing a prominent role in the adventure. The following year a group of miners completely destroyed the Indiana Klan Farm with an incendiary bomb. Membership in the Klan persisted in the region throughout the '20s. The Indiana Klan Farm continued up to 1930 when it passed into receivership

free speech, and hold public meetings. The injunction was issued and made permanent by Judge John Langham of Indiana Pa.[10] The UMWA called it one of the most "unjust, one-sided, unpatriotic" injunctions ever issued. According to the UMW Journal these actions demonstrated that:

> ..these coal operators with the assistance of unscrupulous judges would like to establish a government by injunctions instead of a free government for which great men shed their blood and thus made it possible for our nation to become great.[11]

Tensions between the two sides increased when the companies tried to import 200 black strike breakers from Birmingham Alabama into the Kiski Valley.[12] Before entering the mining area four UMWA officials flagged down the train at Tarentum but were denied the right to speak to the black workers. The organizers lead by the infamous first woman UMWA organizer of the region, Miss Fanny Sellins, were able to convince about 100 to jump from the windows and join the strike.[13] Those who deserted marched singing and cheering behind Miss Sellins into New Kensington where they were taken to the Slovak Falcon Hall and cared for until arrangements were made for those wishing to return to

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[10]. Langham and his injunctions contributed to the coal companies victories over the miners and the union in 1919 and throughout the 1920s. His injunction against miners during the 1927 strike, "the Rossiter Injunction," became synonymous with oppression and cast the Indiana County Judge into the national spotlight when he was questioned before the Senate Sub-Committee about the intentions of the ruling.

[11]. United Mine Worker Journal, 3. 22. 17, p-7.

[12] Eighty-four black strike breakers were sent to Hooversville, Somerset County, during this same time period (Telegram from "Burt" to District 2 President John Brophy, 4. 17. 17, UMWA District 2 Series II, John Brophy Box 16, File Folder #1, UMWA District 2 Archives, Indiana University of Pa.).

[13] Fanny Sellins started working for the UMWA as an organizer in Cowlers, WVA, in 1914 where she was jailed for providing striking miners with food, clothing and other assistance. She later received Executive Clemency from the charge. Fanny was eventually shot and beaten to death by Allengheny County sheriff's deputies along the Allegheny/Westmoreland County line near New Kensington during an organizing event leading up to the 1919 coal strike.

Birmingham or desiring employment in the local area.[14]

The strike was settled within one month after the incident. The existing records do not indicate how this display of class solidarity along racial, ethnic, and gender lines influenced the operators decision to reach a settlement. It does appear to have helped swing the strike momentum to the mine workers' favor.

About four weeks after the encounter, a huge Miners' Day rally was staged in New Kensington and Leechburg which brought out several thousand in each city. Speeches were given by international, district, and local mine worker officials who cited their strike accomplishments, including the black strike-breaker story, as contributing factors to their seemingly imminent victory. The burgess of Leechburg welcomed the UMWA to his town, while over 2,000 spirited rank and file miners paraded 10 miles in the rain past the mines on strike in the Kiski Valley. Operators reacted to Miners' Day by closing their operations and sending the handful of remaining strike-breakers home, and put their coal and iron police.[15]

The reaction by miners was markedly different during the 1927 strike. Prior to the strike 6,000 strike breakers, half of them African American, were transported into western Pennsylvania. This activities angered both the local and national union leadership. In some cases these hostile attitudes were carried out in acts of physical violence which led to numerous injuries, and in some cases murders. The following is a list of murders of African-Americans committed in two coal company mining camps during the 1927 strike in western

Pennsylvania.[16]

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[14]. UMWA Journal, 3. 15. 17, p-6.

[15] UMWA Journal, 4. 12. 17, p-7 & 26.

[16] Violent attacks against black miners were not uncommon in parts of the region. One black miner was shot to death and another injured by two striking "foreign" born miners near the town of Edri, Indiana County. Although the incident was witnessed by the victim's associates, the two perpetrators were acquitted when brought to trial (Indiana Evening Gazette, 1.24.22, p. 1 & 1.25.25, p.1) One resident of Edri maintained that there were many more black miners killed during the strike but were never discovered by the authorities because "they were buried under the boney pile." (Anon interview by Jack Smith near Edri, 7.15.88).

TABLE 1

Name:	Co. Employed At:	Cause of Death	Place
- Arrie Wilson	Pitt. Coal Co.	Shock & Hemorrhage following gun shot and wound of chest	Blythes-dale
- John P. Black	Pitt. Coal Co.	Shock & Hemorrhage following gun shot wound of neck	Pitts.
- Otis Simon		Shock & internal hemorrhage follow-ing gun shot wound of left side of chest	McKees-port
- Laura Holyfield		Shock & hemorrhage following a compound fracture of skull due to blows on head with ax	Bethel Twp.
- James Lawrence	Pitt. Coal Co.	Shock & hemorrhage following gun shot wound of chest	Moon Run Robin-son Twp.
- Frank Snapp	Pitt. Term. Co.	Shock & hemorrhage following gun shot wound of chest & neck	Bruceton
- Robert Holsley	Pitt. Coal Co.	Shock & hemorrhage following gun shot wound of chest	Cliff Mines
- Floyd Sidney	Pitt. Coal Co.	Shock & hemorrhage following stab of heart	North Fayette Twp.

Source: U.S. Senate Commission, cited in Spero & Harris, P 234.

According to Linda Nyden it was these racist attitudes along with physical assaults that contributed to black union members deserting the UMWA and the subsequent creation of an even larger strike-breaking work force. Black membership in the UMWA dropped from 25,000 in 1920 to no more than 5,000 nation-wide in 1927. Prior to the strike, District 5 (western Pennsylvania) had 3,000 black members out of a total of 45,000.[17] This fractionalism would nearly deal the union a death blow. Instead of maintaining a path toward coalition building the union stumbled into the destructive process of splintering along racial, ethnic, and class lines.

CONCLUSION

Conditions in the coal fields worsened following the '27 strike. Some families took up residency in abandoned beehive coke ovens, shanties, and chicken coops. The State Health Department's Bureau of Vital Statistics released a report showing infant mortality rates had risen to astronomical heights with Cambria, Fayette, and Washington counties showing the highest rates of over 100 deaths per 1,000 live births. Indiana, Westmoreland and Greene counties followed with a rate of 90-99 per 1,000, and Somerset, Bedford, Fulton, Blair and Huntingdon counties with 80-89 per 1,000. Infant mortality rates in the bituminous coal region, spurred by the decline in the standard of living, were identified as the highest in the state.

The United Mine Workers of America was virtually destroyed by the end of the '20s. The union's membership declined nation-wide from over 400,000 in 1920 to 100,000 by 1929. Outside of Illinois, the union was a mere paper organization. Nearly every mining operation was non union in central Pennsylvania. The District office of the UMWA reduced it's staff to three officers, a president, vice-president, and secretary/treasurer.

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[17]. Nyden, "Black Miners, 1925-1931," p 77.

The failure of the UMWA both in the north and south was the result of lack of resources, internal union disputes from the international down to the rank and file, and an inability to offset the divisive strategies initiated by the operators. The issue of race along with the ability to gain protection from the state and the judicial system were among the major factors that helped the operators achieve victory over the UMWA.

Although the post WWI era was marked by severe setbacks, mine workers continued to protest and agitate for a more equitable distribution of wealth. Utimately their sacrifices helped set the stage for the return of the UMWA and the rise of industrial unions in the 1930s.