

Coal Culture

William Lockyer and the Coal Strike of 1894

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Both labor historians and historians of the late nineteenth century have neglected the coal strike of 1894. This conflict deserves more attention because the United Mine Workers, while suffering a decisive defeat, survived and later grew into a powerful labor organization. The strike also gave an impetus to increased union centralization, the emergence of a new national leadership, and the search for union stability. The negotiation of the Central Competitive Field Agreement played a crucial role in this process.

As a fledgling union in 1894, founded in 1890, the policies and practices of the United Mine Workers had not yet crystallized and there was some space for the development and dissemination of diverse perspectives and programs. These circumstances provided William Lockyer, a Reynoldsville labor activist, with the opportunity to reach a national audience through a series of letters to the editor of The United Mine Workers Journal. This correspondence was published between February and June 1894, and provides an overview of the strike, a description of the events in the Reynoldsville area, and Lockyer's proposals for improving the condition of coal miners and for democratizing American society.

Triumph and tragedy characterized the American economy of the 1890's. The United States became the world's largest industrial economy. However, the decade also witnessed a prolonged depression (1893-98) as well as a wide class and wealth gap between workers and big businessmen. The railroad network, the iron and steel industries, and the coal companies undergirded economic growth, but the labor force, which included many recent immigrants, suffered intensified deprivation as a result of the severe economic downturn.

The coal industry went into the doldrums as lower prices resulted from the combination of increasing supply and decreasing demand. Coal operators responded to the crisis with a campaign to decrease labor costs. To achieve this goal they lowered wages, laid off miners and offered others part-time employment, and recruited recent immigrants rather than hire the more costly English-speaking miners. By 1894 hunger stalked the coal fields and desperate coal miners joined the coal strikes by 1894.

Reynoldsville developments capsulized the miners' plight and their responses to this crisis. In November 1893 the Bell, Lewis, and Yates Coal Company announced a wage reduction and shortly thereafter the other coal companies in the region followed suit and by early 1894 the situation of the coal miners worsened. For example, the miners at the Big Soldier mine suffered from slow work, overcrowding, and an exploitative company store. Similar conditions at other facilities brought miners to the verge of starvation.

The miners reacted by holding a special convention at which the delegates resolved to follow the lead of the United Mine Workers. In reality, while the national leaders of the strike provided general direction, within that framework coal miners and local labor

activists exercised considerable autonomy. Mass meetings, usually held in DuBois, were a major response to dire circumstances. These occasions were designed to maintain the morale of the strikers, to elicit support from the public, and to obtain labor solidarity.

However, in spite of these initiatives, labor solidarity remained elusive as ethnic divisions and rivalries fragmented the labor force in Reynoldsville and other locales. Lockyer asserted that the presence of Italian and Polish coal miners, willing to work for lower wages, reduced the wages and increased the unemployment among English-speaking miners. While critical of recent immigrants for their acceptance of low wages and their reluctance to unionize, he emphasized the role of their common enemy. All coal miners, he contended, faced the “soulless corporations,” “corporate tyranny,” and “corporate greed.” The plundering ways of the industrial monopolies and the land monopolies hurt all of them. Therefore, Lockyer advised coal miners “to not fight each other and instead strive for unity and to be brothers and to live by the Golden Rule.”

John Robinson, another prominent Reynoldsville labor activist, reinforced Lockyer’s call for labor solidarity and recommended ways to achieve this goal. He called on the miners and their labor leaders to “instill harmony, especially among those who can’t speak our language,” with the expectation that “once they become familiarized with the true facts they are pillars of the organization.” To accomplish this outcome, labor activists called for the use of interpreters, for the publishing the Constitution of the United Mine Workers and The United Mine Workers Journal in foreign languages, and for assuring that recent immigrants received services from the union commensurate with the dues that they paid.

Lockyer focused on labor solidarity, manliness, and labor education as the keys to advancement for coal miners. In spite of the difficulties of achieving manliness under difficult circumstances he stressed its importance. In “A Manly Letter,” Lockyer entreated the miners to manifest the will and courage to prevent the operators from forging the “chains which will bind their children to slavery.” Finally, he reminded his readers that they had “fought for the black man” and “now is the time to fight for the interests of their children.”

Lockyer also prized labor education as a keystone of individual growth, of group advancement, and of societal progress. He called for the establishment of reading rooms and libraries, the holding of lectures and the sponsoring of debating clubs, and the patronizing of the labor press.

In spite of their valiant efforts, the miners and the union succumbed to the superior power and wealth of their adversaries and both paid the price of this outcome. With the grievances of the miners unaddressed by unionization and striking, some Reynoldsville residents turned to protest politics to ameliorate their conditions. The Populist Party, composed of farmers and workers pursuing a democratic society, challenged the major parties in the 1894 election. The results in Pennsylvania were disheartening as Jerome Ailman, the candidate for governor, pulled only 3% of the vote. The tally in most of District 2 was also meager. However, Reynoldsville Borough was a major exception to these trends as the Populist ticket pulled 25% of the vote.

The coal strike of 1894 was an important junction in the history of the United Mine Workers with its survival at stake. The effects of the depression, the presence of powerful employers, and the opposition of the government could have resulted in the

death knoll for the union, as it did for the American Railway Union led by Eugene Debs. However, the United Mine Workers, although weakened, survived and within a few years began to grow. Survival was the most important result, but the strike had other outcomes as well.

The “space” for diversity and alternative directions was removed as the union pursued centralization exemplified by the Central Competitive Field Agreement and the decade-long presidency of John Mitchell. Nevertheless, while the grassroots democracy focus of William Lockyer declined, it continued and would resurface periodically. For example, in the 1920’s John Brophy, president of District 2, called for nationalization of the coal mines, organizing the unorganized, and labor education. He emphasized labor politics and the labor press as mechanisms to achieve economic democracy. Brophy and District 2 coal miners pursued its twin goals of democracy and decentralization at the district and national levels of the union.