

The United Mine Workers of America

Early History

The American Miners' Association.

Organization among the coal miners of the United States has been subject to marked vicissitudes. Not until the present organization, the United Mine Workers, got the upper hand did there seem any hope for a permanent unionization of the mine workers. The tremendous number of workers, the extremely different conditions in different districts, and the large proportion of immigrant workers have all greatly interfered with the existence of miners' organizations. The first national miners' organization was the American Miners' Association, established in Illinois in 1861. Its founders were men schooled in English trade unionism. It gradually extended its powers to several eastern states. However, it lacked centralization, and quarrels among its officials coupled with strike failures caused it to dissolve in 1867.

The Miners' and Laborers' Benevolent Association.

The year 1869 witnessed the birth of the Miners' and Laborers' Benevolent Association in the anthracite coal region of Pennsylvania. Soon it brought its influence for unionism into the bituminous regions of western Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Maryland and Kentucky. It did not extend to the western states, although separate organizations exchanged cards with it.

In 1873 it was absorbed by the Miners' National Association, a more widely extended body. For two or three years the new organization, under the leadership of John Siney, was rather prosperous. Soon, however, wages fell, and a series of disastrous strikes (culminating in the fatal struggle which was known as the "Long Strike") blotted it out of existence. Some of the locals were absorbed by the Knights of Labor.

Chaos in organization ended with the formation of the National Federation of Miners' and Mine Laborers in 1885. It succeeded in securing trade agreements from the operators of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and West Virginia. January 1886 was held the first interstate joint conference of miners and operators. Wrangling over interstate agreements decreased the power of the union very seriously.

In 1890 the United Mine Workers was organized. For the first time practically all the organized miners throughout the country were brought together. The great strike of 1897 was its life-test. Thousands of the non-union men flocked to its colors and the number of members grew from 11,000 to 54,000 with the highly successful outcome of the struggle. An 8-hour day was won. The next few years show even more remarkable strides. On January 1st, 1900, there were 931 local unions and 91,019 members. In January of 1901 these numbers leaped to 1433 locals and 172,529 paid-up members. Unionism was now accepted by miners in 15 states, and practically half the miners of the country were within the folds of the U. M. W.; although it had not yet touched Colorado, Wyoming, North Carolina and a few other states. At this date its main strength was among the bituminous workers. To realize the phenomenal success of this organization one must consider the conditions faced by the U. M. W. Here was ignorance, the parent of distrust, in an

usual degree; a past full of failures; a marked dissimilarity in language, race, religion; the existence of a normal surplus of mine labor, and last but not least a solid united front of operators.

In 1900 there was a gigantic attempt on the part of the union to conquer the anthracite fields of Pennsylvania. With but 8000 anthracite workers in its camp, the U. M. W. declared a general strike in the hard coal fields. The result was a surprise to all. The operators received the soundest beating. A general improvement of conditions, an increase in wages amounting to \$5,000,000 and an addition of 100,000 anthracite miners to the U. M. W. was the result. However, it was only with great reluctance that the union renewed this agreement. At this time the U. M. W. was still a narrow, aristocratic union of the class of the Typographical Workers. A hot jurisdictional fight broke out between the miners' organization and that of the Mine Stationary Firemen and Blacksmiths. In order to preserve their solidarity, they dropped their old craft lines and joined hands in May 1901 to become an industrial union, the present form of the U. M. W.

The occasion of the Anthracite strike of 1902 was the demand of the U. M. W. for an increase in wages, shorter hours, and other concessions. This time 147,000 answered the strike call of the union. Indeed, it may be rightly said that the twentieth century opened with this great anthracite battle. Baer's famous doctrine of the divine right of capital, national conventions, riots, a coal famine, and Roosevelt's commission were brought forth. The strike was compromised by John Mitchell's "loyalty" and Roosevelt's interference. The foundation of John Mitchell's fortune was laid at this time. The liberation of the miner from one of the worst phases of wage-slavery was initiated. The miner ceased to be a serf owing allegiance to the coal baron. Prostituted elections, notorious "company stores", the employment of thugs, and the miserable shacks of the workers received a heavy blow in the fields ruled by the U. M. W. Such conditions flourish this very day in the non-union fields.

The thing that surprises one in investigating this union is this: The government labor documents show that there have been more official investigations of strikes in mining industries than of those in any other dozen trades! And like in all other histories most emphasis has been laid on the battles. The U. M. W. is feverishly and constantly at work unionizing the unorganized mine workers.

In the last few years we have seen the Alabama militia burning the camps in which the union was housing evicted strikers; armored cars rushing through West Virginia coal camps and pouring the terrible hail of Gatling guns into the miners' cabins; the massacre at Ludlow, Colorado, by the hired thugs and Rockefeller-paid state militiamen and "government by injunction". The echoes of the shrieks of the nineteen helpless women and babes burned in the Ludlow tents on a balmy April morning in 1914 were heard throughout the world, and not even the horrors of the world war have banished its gory picture from the memory of the American proletariat. The Industrial Relations Committee tells us that

five of the seven demands of the Colorado strikers were laws on the statute books of the state. Eloquent testimony to the effectiveness of "social reform!" Officially the Colorado strike lasted 10 months and the national union alone expended \$2,209,000 to finance it.

In all \$4,500,000 was spent by Labor and over \$12,000,000 by the "industrial democracy" of Rockefeller.

In its present industrial form the U. M. W. is one of America's youngest unions. It is but 18 years old; yet it is the biggest union in the world and its only rivals for first place are federations like the German Metal Trades and the International Transport Workers. These war and revolution have weakened. Its membership is a bit fluctuating because of the shifting of men and unemployment. To-day close to 500,000 are dues-paying members.

Objects

Among its objects the union puts first: "To unite in one organization regardless of creed, color, or nationality, all workmen eligible for membership, employed in and around the coal mines, coal washers and coke ovens on the American continent." This comprehensiveness makes the U. M. W. an industrial and not a trade union. It has no labor aristocrats and wins and loses as a unit. Its second demand reads: "To increase the wages, and improve the conditions of employment of our members by legislation, conciliation, joint agreements or strikes." These methods have been used singly or sometimes even all combined. Since the union has come into existence wages have increased more than 200% and the 8-hour day is universal within its own field of jurisdiction. Although most of the 8-hour laws now on state statute books owe their existence to the efforts of the U. M. W., still most of its gains have been secured through "conciliation" by threat of strikes and strikes. A third object is: "To demand that not more than 8 hours from bank to bank in each 24 hours shall be worked by any members of the organization." This was wholly realized when the anthracite workers secured the 8-hour day after the last joint conference in 1916. "To provide for the education of our children" lawfully prohibiting their employment until they have at least reached sixteen years of age," is another of its demands. The sixth object provides for the securing of old-pensions and workmen's compensation laws. Its eighth object is "To secure by legislative enactment laws protecting the lives, and health of our members; establishing our right to organize; prohibiting use of deception to secure strikebreakers; preventing the employment of private armed guards during labor disputes, such legislation as may be beneficial to members."

Organization

The general scheme of organization close resemblance to a political state. are national, district, sub-district, and ruling bodies. The present jurisdiction of the national union covers either completely or in part all the coal-mining regions of U. S. and Canada. The district union covers a particular state, but in some cases the product varies in kind or with

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