

# Butte—A Soviet Strike

By Harold Lord Varney

THESE are cities in America which, one feels, belong peculiarly to the revolution. They are associated with stirring revolutionary traditions. Or else they are enacting the revolutionary drama today. Such a city is Chicago. Such a city is Paterson, N. J., or Seattle, Wash. Such a city is Butte, Mont.

In Butte, ideas which are wildly new, elsewhere, are traditional and common place. Proletarianism is an accepted theory. Class consciousness is surprisingly general. Even the dread letters, I. W. W., are a badge of popularity, and the I. W. W. feels here all the familiarity of home. For Butte claims the honor of being the birthplace of the "Wobly." For it was here in Butte, in the long-ago year of 1893, that the Western Federation of Miners organized, and the Western Federation of Miners was but the opening phase of the Industrial Workers of the World.

Naturally, then, in coming to Butte upon the summons of the strike, I foresaw a revolutionary struggle. And now, in the heart of the fight, I do not hesitate to state that this Third Butte Strike is the most perfect and class conscious of all the strikes of the I. W. W.

Butte, even in normal times, seems colorful and picturesque. Perched upon a sloping plane—high of altitude—ratified of atmosphere—ringed by a circle of mine dotted mountains, which, in the winter stand white and stately with their snows—this copper city bursts upon the blase eyes of the traveller from the east, as a city unutterably "different." And, upon closer intimacy, as he brushes against the strata of its population, he learns that its people are unlike any others. Human temperaments in Butte are undeniably "Butesque."

In times of strike, the difference is cast into a deeper relief. Class lines approach a bitterness here, undreamed of, in other cities. The great copper octopus—the A. C. M.—leaps into conflict like a maddened, revengeful beast. And the workers, since their tragic lesson of 1914, meet the assault with ranks disciplined by an unwavering goal of Revolution.

It was this discipline which first struck me. The strike was a week old when I came. I had read the capitalist papers and I was prepared for scenes of chaos and riot. I did not find them.

Instead, there was quiet and purposeful restraint. The mines were closed and smokeless. The streets were crowded with idle men, but they shuffled along in a strange calmness. From time to time, soldiers clattered past with rifles and ugly-looking bayonets. But there were no fights. The strikers kept their way with indifference, and the footsteps of the soldiers died away in the crunching snow. No street cars were running. The quiet of a Sabbath, or better, of a holiday, was everywhere.

To visualize the Butte situation, one must view it in the frame of its labor factors. And these factors, in this present strike are four:

- 1st. The I. W. W.
- 2nd. The Independent Metal Mine Workers' Union.
- 3rd. The Soldiers', Sailors' and Workers' Council.
- 4th. The Butte Daily Bulletin.

To consider them singly, the power of the first factor, the I. W. W., in Butte was undreamed of until the present strike revealed it. Again and again, in the past, the I. W. W. had attempted to come into Butte and had failed. It attempted in 1914, it spurred the miners to free themselves from the coil of Moyersism, it smashed the old Miners' Union and wrecked the old Miners' Hall, but then came the saturnalia of martial law and the bayonet drove them from the city. After that, followed a blighted period of three years in which the rustling card reigned unchallenged and unionism was but a word of whispers.

The I. W. W.'s tried again in 1917 and paid into the struggle the life of their bravest fighter, Frank H. Little. And by 1917, they had found a new and unspeakable following—the Finns. But the supremacy of the I. W. W. in the 1917 strike was blocked hopelessly by the sturdy personality of Tom Campbell.

The strike of 1917 can best be described as a struggle between the Finns and the Irish. It is these two nationalities which fill Butte. And in 1917, the Irish were stalwart followers of Tom Campbell.

Campbell threw his weight against the I. W. W. When the 12,000 miners of Butte rushed out of the mines in that wild, precipitate stampede, they did not follow the example of their Arizona brothers. Instead of the I. W. W., they followed Campbell. And he organized them in an independent union—the Metal Mine Workers' Union. It was this union, with its 4,000 enrolled members, which dominated

the six months struggle. And the I. W. W. growth halted with only a few hundred Finns.

But after the strike, the tide began to turn. Slowly, but steadily, the I. W. W. membership mounted upward. Campbell's control of the Irish found a powerful adversary—old Joe Shannon. Volumes could be written about Joe Shannon. For thirty years he has battled the A. C. M. His personality towers out above any other in Butte,—in picturesqueness and in rude, compelling force. He was a leader in the flare-up of 1914. Gradually now, in the early months of 1918, he swung the Irish miners to the I. W. W.

In September, 1918, when the outrage of the Chicago convictions was wired to Butte, the I. W. W. was strong enough to call out 6,000 miners on a three weeks protest strike. And what was more significant, it was strong enough to return to work again intact.

It was on Feb. 6, that this third and present strike began. The A. C. M., drunk and mad with the unbridled lust of its war profits, determined to cut wages. With \$53,000,000 of undivided profits in its coffers, it brazenly announced a wage cut of a dollar a day. And the next day, the workers rushed from the mines. By the second day, the mines were empty. By the third day, the strikers were turning to other crafts and planning to make the tie-up general.

The I. W. W. at last dominated the miners. It was discovered that their membership had passed the 5,000 mark before the strike began. With the strike on, new hundreds swarmed in.

And as they had grown, Campbell's independent union had declined. It mustered only 200 men when the third strike came. And it has acted merely as an auxiliary throughout the present situation.

But the I. W. W. have not attempted to press their control. They have shared it. They have taken advantage of this strike situation to cement a new unity with the A. F. of L. craft unions of Butte. They have admitted these unions into joint control with them of the strike. They have taken a leaf from Russia—and from Seattle. They have formed a Soviet.

In this Soviet—the Soldiers', Sailors' and Workers' Council—every bona fide union in Butte, except Moyers' aggregation of engineers, is affiliated. The control of the strike is vested in this delegate body. It was this body which decided to make the strike general. And so other crafts began to follow the miners—the electricians, the machinists, the street car men, the smelter workers, the boiler makers, the molders, the laborers, the culinary workers—one by one, they came off the job in a general city wide revolt. And like a permanent governing body, this Soviet sits continuously, legislating every detail of the changing crises.

A splendid advantage was won by the strikers when they enlisted the support of the returned soldiers. Despite tremendous pressure from the A. C. M., the boys from France enlisted in this new fight against the Beast of Butte. They headed the picket lines, clad in their uniforms. They put one over on the bosses when they entered the Army and Navy Club meeting. Like similar bodies in other cities, the Butte Army and Navy Club is a counter-revolutionary junta, controlled by city politicians. But I. W. W. soldiers, suddenly swarming in to exercise their prerogative to vote, captured the organization, endorsed the strike, and elected delegates to the Soviet.

Of course, retaliation followed. The local Red Cross officials blacklisted all pro-strike soldiers and barred them from the relief funds. And a detachment of regulars, sent to Butte by the governor, drove the pickets from the hill and stripped off the uniforms from the I. W. W. soldiers.

But, despite persistent provocation, the strikers held their hands from violence. Strenuous efforts were made to declare martial law. The regular troops—picked and thought-proof, for this strike duty—harried the citizens on the streets, jostled passers-by off from the sidewalks, stabbed them with their bayonets. On February 10, they raided the I. W. W. building, broke up a mass meeting, and cleared out the strikers. But the I. W. W.'s were grimly silent and the troops marched away.

But apart from the I. W. W. and the Soviet, the outstanding factor of the strike is the courageous Butte Daily Bulletin. In other strikes, the workers have been paralyzed because publicity was in the hands of the plutes. In I. W. W. strikes, the venom of the press has been a barbed and fatal foe. But in Butte, the situation is grotesquely reversed. Here, it is the capitalist papers which are silenced; and the

Bulletin, with its passionate summonings to strike, is found and read everywhere.

For even the newsboys were class conscious. When the strike began, they spun the *Butte Miner* and the *Butte Post*. Many were the fights between the loyal little fellows until not a boy was left to sell the organs of the A. C. M. And so the menace of a lying press was averted. The truth of the strike was published and read and popularized.

And, although the *Bulletin* was founded and owned by the A. F. of L. unions it is not opposed to the I. W. W. On the contrary, Bolshevism and the I. W. W. find favorable interpretation in its columns. The I. W. W. shares in the management. The policy of the *Bulletin* is the policy of a One Big Union. It is opposed to craft autonomy. It seeks revolutionary unionism. It does not flinch from exposing even unions of the A. F. of L. when, like the engineers, they prove disloyal to labor's broader cause.

Long has the labor movement needed such dailies as the *Bulletin*. Let us hope that the present surge of the New Unionism will bring many such voices in its wake.

Such are the forces which have combined in this epoch-making Butte Soviet Strike. With a harmony which is unbelievable, they are fighting the A. C. M. and their gigantic opponent is already on the run. It is literally, an entire city in arms against the copper trust. But the only weapon which they bear is the one weapon which is indomitable—solidarity.

The outstanding figure of the situation is A. S. Embree. His name is strange to many even of the students of the I. W. W. He does not belong to the old group who led the I. W. W. and sprang into national fame at Lawrence and Paterson: Haywood—Ettor—Flynn—Tresca. His personality is not spectacular; he does not attempt oratory. Embree represents the new generation of leadership which is slowly coming to the fore in the place of the old. He is western in psychology. His education was in the Western Federation of Miners. He is an executive, not an agitator. He is a strategist, not a spell-binder. And possibly, in this distinction, the basic difference between the I. W. W. of Lawrence days and the I. W. W. of today, is made most plain. It is Embree who generalizes the strike at Butte.

His control of the miners springs from their confidence. He knows the miners and he knows the Copper Trust. He fought at Bisbee and he led the strike which perished in the deportation. His personality inspires belief and his decisions are tactical and lucid. And his courage, has never flinched from a fight.

Under such leadership, the strike grinds on. The issue of course is still speculative. But come victory or defeat, one battle has already been won—the miners are organized. And their organization will go back, stronger for the fight. And the Soviet, grown from this strike, will become an institution in the labor movement of the city—an indestructible organ of solidarity. Its very existence will continue to constitute an argument for unity.

But there is one organization in Butte which has been false to the cause of labor from the beginning. This is the Engineers, organized in the I. U. of M. & S. W. As in the 1917 strike, they have refused to join in the fight of the miners. They have refused to enter the Soviet. And while every A. F. of L. body in Butte looked to them as an example, they attempted to bludgeon the spirit of the strike by voting against it, two to one. If defeat comes, the responsibility will be obvious. And if the temper of the other A. F. of L. bodies in Butte can be judged by the utterances in the Soviet, a defeat in the strike will bring a definite rift in the ranks of the A. F. of L. unions and may be the precursor of a secession of crafts to the I. W. W. There is a bitter undercurrent among the union men against the Engineers. And day by day, this undercurrent is threatening the A. F. of L. itself. Certainly, whatever the outcome, the I. W. W. will emerge with a prestige and a support which it never had before.

While there have been no general arrests so far, the A. C. M. is expected to seek reprisals soon. The Trust-owned press is demanding arrests. If their words are an index to the future, it will be the Finns who will be made to suffer for the strike. Wholesale deportation is demanded by the *Butte Miner*. A resolution has been introduced in the Montana Legislature for similar action. But the Finns themselves are blandly indifferent. "I should worry," one of them chuckled in a recent meeting. And this is the spirit of all the strikers.

Undoubtedly, the next chapters of the strike will soon be enacted.