
Mine Managers Culpable in Leadville Strike (May 10, 1897)

VI.

Terre Haute, Ind., May 10, 1897.

There is a chapter in the report of the legislative committee under the caption of "Mine managers blamed," page 38, which I deem it proper to reproduce in full as follows:

That the mine managers from the beginning and throughout the entire progress of the strike, have shown an unjustifiable antagonism to organized labor in general; that this committee is forced to the conclusion that the proposed agreement prepared and discussed by the mine managers prior to the strike was aimed at the existence of the union in much the same way as the agreement of June 22nd, above set forth, is; that with the existence of that agreement, which was kept secret until it was produced in the course of the committee's investigations, it is not likely that any agreement or arbitration could have been arrived at before the Coronado affair, even if the union had been less arbitrary in its demands; that a failure to bring about a settlement of the difficulty since the Coronado affair, and up to the present time, *is directly traceable to the unwillingness of the mine managers to treat with the union in any way that will recognize its existence*; that in considering the terrible outrages committed in Leadville, the injury and financial disaster brought to a number of mine managers by reason of these outrages, and the state of terror and fear of personal violence which a number of the mine managers have suffered during the strike, there is justification on their part for their feeling of bitterness towards the union, but even that does not justify a refusal to deal with any labor organization; that in the opinion of your committee a dissolution of the present union and the organization of a new union would be an idle form, because the new union would no doubt be composed of the same members, and that therefore, if the mine managers will recede from their position not to deal with labor organizations, your committee can see no further practical reason why they should not deal with the present union; and here it is proper to stat that a number of the

leading mine managers testified that they had no objection to organized labor, but on the contrary believed it was necessary for the welfare of the laborers and for the state, that laborers should organize to protect their interests.

The testimony of the mine managers who were examined at the hearing clearly indicated that they hold a large body of the union men in high esteem, and that they would be only too glad to give them employment. It is safe to say that reconciliation between the parties is rife and that it needs but reasonable concessions on both sides to bring it about.

This confirms what I have previously said in reference to the disruption of the Miners' Union having been the paramount issue. For some time the mine owners had seen the tide of organization rising. They viewed it with no little apprehension for they were shrewd enough to discern in the movement a power that might interfere with their plans and give them trouble. Among them were those imperious, self-willed men who would brook no interference from any source. They had always had their own way and they had become used to issuing orders and having them implicitly obeyed. They grew furious at the very thought that they were "to be dictated to as to how to run their own business," and this is what they construed the purpose of organization to be. They proposed to "run their business to suit themselves and if the wages and conditions were not satisfactory to the men, they might quit," and the sooner this was settled and understood the better for all concerned. This was the general spirit of the mine managers, although there were those who freely conceded the right of their employees to organize and to protect themselves in their rights and wages by all the lawful means that organization could provide.

The attitude of the mine managers is shown in the statement of the legislative committee "that the proposed agreement prepared and discussed by the mine managers *prior to the strike was aimed at the existence of the union*" and that "from the beginning and throughout the entire progress of the strike" the mine managers have shown an unjustifiable antagonism to organized labor in general, and that "a failure to bring about a settlement of the difficulties since the Coronado affair, and up to the present time, is directly traceable to the unwillingness of the mine managers to treat with the union in any way that will recognize its existence." These are strong words and the responsibility for the long continuance of the strike and its attendant crime and suffering is charged wholly to the policy

of the association of mine managers in refusing to recognize or treat with the miners as an organized body. "For," says the report, "while there is justification on their part for their feeling of bitterness towards the union, even that does not justify a refusal to deal with any labor organization."

While organized themselves and made secure in their position by united action, they denied the miners the same privilege and refused to recognize or treat with them in that capacity. It is urged that the reason of this was that some of the miners had committed violence and that therefore, the union had forfeited the right to be recognized as a law abiding body. Ah, but the mine managers had taken this attitude before any violence had been committed; indeed, before the strike had been declared, so that this plea cannot be made in extenuation of their implacable hostility to the union. And it was this element in the opposition to the union that engendered most of the bitterness which, as I believe, culminated in the Coronado attack and directly or indirectly led to almost every other breach of the law.

As I have previously stated, the miners who declared and carried on the strike were not infallible. That they made mistakes, some of them grave ones, cannot be questioned. In my opinion the most serious of these was in declaring the strike on such short notice, and not allowing the mine managers more time for consideration. Not that this would have prevented the strike, for this seems to have been inevitable and bound to come, but the miners would have been stronger in their position after having given the mine managers ample time and every reasonable opportunity to make the desired concession. That the men acted with undue haste is undoubtedly true, but this is readily understood by those who have attended similar meetings and know how men are swayed under the excitement incident to a recital of their grievances and the refusal of their employers to give them any satisfaction. However, as the purpose is to profit by the mistake of the past I quote as follows from the report, with which I fully agree:

Your committee believes that whatever the grievance of the miners may have been, the strike should not have been declared without further effort on the part of the union to bring about an adjustment, either by agreement or by arbitration, and that the strike should not have been declared without reasonable notice.

The strikes of the past three years have been fraught with great suffering but it has not been in vain. Although thousands have been

Forced from their homes a melancholy train
To traverse climes beyond the western main ¹

the sacrifices have not been useless and some time they will have their compensation. In no other way can humanity reach higher elevations. Our antecedents suffered that we might enjoy and we can only bear testimony of our gratitude by doing something for those who are to come after us.

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¹ Couplet from "The Traveller" (1764), by Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774).