Pennsylvania anthracite coal workers strike for better wages and working conditions, 1902

Timing
12 May 1902
to:
23 October 1902

Location and Goals
Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: "Coal Region," Northeastern Pennsylvania
Location Description: 5 counties in Northeastern Pennsylvania

Goals:
To improve working conditions and increase wages for mine workers. Specifically, a 20% wage increase, an 8-hour workday (down from 10 for miners and 12 for maintenance workers), the right to check the operator's stated weight of coal, the creation of a grievance policy fair to workers, recognition of the union, and the right to collectively bargain.

Methods
Methods in 1st segment:

• 016. Picketing›Mine workers picketed mine entrances
• 106. Industry strike›Mine workers strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

• 016. Picketing›Mine workers picketed mine entrances
• 106. Industry strike›Mine workers strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

• 016. Picketing›Mine workers picketed mine entrances
• 106. Industry strike›Mine workers strike

Methods in 4th segment:

• 016. Picketing›Mine workers picketed mine entrances
• 106. Industry strike › Mine workers strike
Methods in 5th segment:

• 016. Picketing › Mine workers picketed mine entrances
• 106. Industry strike › Mine workers strike
Methods in 6th segment:

• 016. Picketing › Mine workers picketed mine entrances
• 106. Industry strike › Mine workers strike
Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 013. Deputations

Segment Length:
Approximately 4 weeks

Classifications
Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Economic Justice
Human Rights
Group characterization:

• many were recent immigrants
• mine workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites
Leaders:

John Mitchell, president of the United Mine Workers of America
Nicholls, president of District One
Thomas Duffy, president of District Seven
John Fahy, president of District Nine, former president of District One

Partners:
Districts of the UMWA not in the "Coal Region," but in bituminous mining areas.
External allies:
Clarence Darrow gave closing arguments to the Anthracite Coal Strike Commission on behalf of the mine workers
Involvement of social elites:
President Roosevelt intervened to attempt to resolve the conflict
Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Segment Length:
Approximately 4 weeks

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Mine operators, including George F. Baer and William H. Truesdale. The mine operators were backed by a tight-knit cadre of railroad owners, mine owners, and bankers, including J.P. Morgan.

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
In late July, a violent conflict occurred between a group of striking workers and a sheriff escorting three men working in the mines. The sheriff's brother, attempting to protect the sheriff from harm, was killed. This violence was abnormal and discouraged by the UMWA.

Repressive Violence:
Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
3 points out of 6 points
Survival:
1 point out of 1 points
Growth:
3 points out of 3 points
Total points:
7 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:
The Anthracite Coal Commission granted about half of the coal workers' demands, although the UMWA was not officially recognized by the mine operators after the strike. The UMWA still exists today.

At the turn of the 20th century, the United States was heavily dependent on coal to supply its energy needs. At the time, two major types of coal were mined - anthracite and bituminous coal. Anthracite coal burns cleaner than bituminous coal, and was thus preferred by many Americans for residential use. The major anthracite coal site in the United States is the so-called “Coal Region” in Northwestern Pennsylvania. Because of the proximity of the Coal Region to many of the major urban areas in the East Coast, in the early 1900s, anthracite coal was the primary fuel used by most East Coast residents to heat their homes.
In the early 1900s, coal miners in the Coal Region faced horrendous working conditions. They were required to work ten hour days in dangerous mines for little pay; they had no way of confirming that mine operators weighed the coal correctly (this was of particular importance for those workers paid in whole or in part based on how much coal they mined); and they had no way of addressing grievances with the mine operators.

The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), a mine worker’s union, was formed in 1890. The UMWA gained support first from bituminous coal miners in Appalachia and the Midwest, especially after a series of successful or semi-successful strikes of bituminous coal miners in 1894 and 1898. In 1898, John Mitchell, a bituminous coal miner from Illinois, was elected the president of the UMWA.

In 1900, John Mitchell attempted to negotiate with the coal operators in the Coal Region for increased wages and improved working conditions. The coal operators, however, were a tightly knit group of mine owners, bankers, and railroad owners, who agreed not to negotiate with Mitchell or recognize the union. On September 17, 1900, Mitchell called for a strike of the anthracite coal miners. Despite the fact that only 9,000 mine workers in the Coal Region were UMWA members, over 110,000 mine workers (of a total of 145,000) joined the strike within the first week. At the urging of J.P. Morgan, who owned the bank that owned many of the railroads and mines in the Coal Region, the coal operators made some concessions to the striking workers rather than risk harming the re-election campaign of William McKinley. The union ended the strike on October 29; the mine operators agreed to a minor wage increase but did not recognize the union, nor was any structure set up to allow for future wage increases or airing of grievances. In the month and a half since the strike began, UMWA membership increased by over 200,000 mine workers in both bituminous and anthracite mining areas.

By January 1902, the UMWA had over 78,000 members in its three divisions - Divisions 1, 7, and 9 - that represented anthracite coal workers; this comprised over half of all the anthracite mine workers in the Coal Region. Although the strike in 1900 had been partially successful, working conditions were still incredibly harsh in the mines, and wages were still low. Mine workers were increasingly dissatisfied with the conditions in the mines. On March 18, 1902, Mitchell and the leaders of Dvisions 1, 7, and 9 called a convention of union delegates in Shamokin, PA. Just days before the delegates were to convene, the local mine operators informed workers that the current wage agreement - which was to end on April 1 - would be extended for another year. This announcement angered many of the delegates, since it was a pre-emptive and authoritative decision that indicated that the mine operators were not willing to enter into any form of dialogue with the workers. As a result, many of the delegates decided they wanted to strike.

At the convention of delegates, John Mitchell encouraged the delegates not to strike. He asked them to wait until a time when anthracite and bituminous coal workers could strike together in a nationwide strike of all coal miners. Instead, Mitchell wanted to ask the National Civic Federation (NCF) to mediate between the union and the mine operators. The UMWA asked the mine operators to create an industry-wide agreement that gave all hourly workers an eight-hour work day without change in salary and a minimum daily wage. For contract workers, the UMWA asked for a 23% increase in wages in cases when coal could not be weighed. Additionally, the union asked to have some control in how coal was weighed, and for recognition and collective bargaining rights.

The mine operators did not agree to these terms, but agreed to meet with the workers in a month, so long as the union did not strike or reduce the hours union workers worked in that month. The UMWA agreed, so long as the mine operators did not stockpile coal during that time. On April 26, the NCF met with both the UMWA and the mine operators. The mine operators refused to make any concessions. In order to advance the negotiations, Mitchell and other union leaders reduced their ask to a 10% wage increase, a nine-hour work day, and the ability to weigh coal. The mine operators refused. The UMWA returned with a demand for a 5% wage increase. The mine operators again refused.
After the NCF negotiations failed, the UMWA leadership and membership were divided. They agreed to a suspension of work on May 12 while a convention was held in order to determine the next course of action. Only the miners themselves participated in this walkout. At the convention, Mitchell acknowledged that he was against a strike, fearing that it would endanger all the gains the UMWA had made over the last years, but realized that his view was not necessarily that of the entire union. Ultimately, after contentious debate, the union delegates voted 57% to 43% to strike.

On June 2, the maintenance workers - firemen, pumpmen, and engineers - joined the miner’s strike. This angered the mine operators, and made them less inclined to negotiate with the union. The mine operators denied that there were any problems in working conditions or compensation, and as a result claimed there was no reason that they should need to talk to workers or the UMWA.

On June 8, President Roosevelt asked his Commissioner of Labor, Carroll D. Wright, to investigate the strike. Wright compiled his report in two weeks, during which he interviewed mine operators and John Mitchell. The report did not endorse either the miners’ or the mine operators’ point of view, but expressed both positions. Given that, historically, the U.S. government had only acted as a strikebreaker, this neutral portrayal of the mine workers’ struggle represented a shift in how the U.S. government saw labor organizations.

In July, as the strike entered its third month, isolated incidents of violence broke out. In Shenandoah, a militia fired at unarmed mine workers on strike. No one was killed, but many workers were injured. After that incident, also in Shenandoah, a group of workers - most of whom were immigrants - confronted a sheriff while he was escorting three people working in the mines. A violent chaos ensued. The sheriff’s brother was killed. Aside from this incident, the strike remained nonviolent.

The mine workers continued the strike through the months of August and September. The UMWA made it clear that they would accept arbitration or mediation, while the mine operators refused. This helped to galvanize public support for the strike, since the union appeared reasonable, while the mine owners were being difficult.

In late September, due to issues with railroad usage from the Midwest and Appalachia to the East Coast, the price of bituminous coal increased dramatically. After the strike and the resulting increase of anthracite coal prices, East Coast residents started buying bituminous coal to heat their homes. However, when the price of bituminous coal increased, consumers became upset.

President Roosevelt was concerned that if the price of coal was still high in November, his party might suffer in the midterm elections. He invited mine operators and John Mitchell to meet with him on October 3. In the meeting, President Roosevelt stated that he had no legal standing to intervene in the conflict, but that he personally wanted to see the conflict resolved. He offered to mediate the dispute. Mitchell agreed, while the mine operators refused.

Shortly afterwards, the Pennsylvania Governor ordered the State National Guard to mine the coal mines so that the mine operators could meet market demand for anthracite coal. Despite this support, the mine operators still failed to mine enough coal.

On October 6, President Roosevelt sent Wright to meet with Mitchell. Wright told Mitchell that if the UMWA ended the strike, the President would create a commission to investigate the workers’ grievances. Mitchell refused the offer, since he doubted that the President could enforce the commission’s recommendations.

On October 9, Roosevelt’s secretary of war, Elihu Root, a friend of J.P. Morgan, met with Morgan to discuss the strike. Two days later, they met on a yacht and made a proposal for arbitration by a committee that Morgan
would agree to as long as the mine operators did not have to communicate directly with the union, since that would imply recognition of it. Morgan, using his influence within the banking, mining, and railroad communities, convinced the mine operators to agree to his arbitration proposal. The operators agreed to Morgan’s proposal, with the caveat that the committee have a certain composition. They wanted the committee to include a military engineer, a mining engineer, a federal judge from Eastern Pennsylvania, a veteran of the coal industry, and an “eminent sociologist.” Additionally, they wanted President Roosevelt to appoint each member of the committee.

The UMWA was willing to agree to these terms of arbitration, but disagreed on the composition of the committee. The union wanted to include a Catholic clergyman (since most of the mine workers were Catholic) and a labor representative. The mine operators were unwilling to accept a labor representative on the committee. In response, President Roosevelt appointed a labor representative as the “eminent sociologist.” Additionally, he added Carroll Wright to the committee. The mine operators were unable to challenge these appointments, since the President technically met their demand, not that of the union.

On October 23, after news of the Presidential commission reached all workers, the strike ended.

Once the strike ended, the Anthracite Coal Strike Commission visited the Coal Region for a week of site visits. The commission then held three and half months of hearings, in which John Mitchell presented much of the evidence for the mine workers. Clarence Darrow made the closing arguments on behalf of the union.

On March 21, 1903, the Anthracite Coal Strike Commission announced their findings. For the most part, they awarded the workers about half of their initial demands. Mine workers were given a 10% wage increase and a 9-hour work day. Workers were allowed to elect their own checkweighmen. A commission comprised of three people selected by mine operators and three people selected by mine workers was to be created to handle future grievances. Although the mine operators refused to openly acknowledge the union, Mitchell argued that the creation of this commission was tantamount to union recognition.

**Research Notes**

Influences:

The anthracite coal workers' strike was influenced by a series of strikes by bituminous coal workers, also organized by the UMWA, in 1894 and 1897. (1)

Sources:


