
The Coal Miners' Strike

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All things considered the strike of the coal miners of the United States is probably the most serious event in industrial affairs that ever occurred in this country.

In the onward march of invention steam power is employed almost universally; coal has practically displaced wood as fuel, and as a result, wherever a locomotive puffs and whistles on the 200,000 miles of the railroads of the country, or wherever a stationary engine is located, coal is in demand as a fuel. Nor is this all. Beyond the limits of natural gas, in all the great cities and most important towns, coal is used for domestic purposes, and thus coal becomes a universal fuel — an article of prime necessity, the importance of which cannot be exaggerated.

A person at all thoughtful need only to survey the field of enterprises in which coal is used to generate steam, to be convinced that to cut off the supply of coal, or to materially reduce the quantity mined, must be attended with incalculable disasters to business; disasters so overwhelming in their sweep as to arrest the wheels of progress and the march of civilization.

According to the census report there was mined in the United States in 1889, 65,723,110 tons of bituminous coal, and 35,863,230 tons of anthracite coal — a total of 101,586,360 tons, and it is safe to say that now the annual product of the mines is not less than 150,000,000 tons, and to say there are 300,000 men employed in mining this annual output is an exceedingly conservative estimate.

In this brief outline it is seen that in itself the coal mining industry expands to vast proportions, and when we consider how intimately and indissolubly coal is associated with all the great industrial enterprises of the country, the mining industry expands to such proportions of interest and importance that it is practically impossible to grasp sums total.

If we were to introduce arguments relating to cause and effect, we are inclined to the opinion that no other industry in this country is productive of an amount of wealth approximating that which can be traced directly to the labors of the coal miner; and the inquiry is naturally suggested, Does the miner, even in a remote degree, share in the benefits which his arduous vocation creates? That he does not is universally conceded.

If the investigator goes to the anthracite coal fields of Pennsylvania for facts and proof, he will be forced to the conclusion that in no land beneath the sun, in no era of the world's history, has human depravity had a more satanic exemplification than in the afflictions which the proprietors of the Pennsylvania anthracite coal mines have studiously and continuously visited upon coal miners; and coal proprietors everywhere throughout the country, with exceptions as rare as angels' visits, have pursued the same degrading, defrauding, hunger-panged policy. The world has known the enormity of the evils complained of. The story in all its haggard features has repeatedly been told. The miserable victims of "man's inhumanity to man" have occasionally rebelled, only to be forced, into submission by hunger, cold, and nakedness. Living but one remove from the condition of wild beasts, they lived and toiled and died, the victims of cruelty, poverty, and degradation such as have cursed no civilized land under heaven.

But, and America ought to be thankful for the fact, coal miners have not become so debased that they would no longer protest, and under the leadership of men who knew the right and dared maintain it, the miners organized to demand justice, and all ordinary efforts having failed to secure redress, at least 150,000 men resolved to cease digging coal until they secured fair wages for their work. This organization is known as the United Mine Workers.

The cause of the strike now in full blast was the reduction of wages in certain districts, where the prevailing price at the beginning of the reduction was 79 cents a ton and the cut proceeded until prices were reduced all the way from 38 to 60 cents a ton, netting a man from 50 to 75 cents a day.

The resistance to this piratical policy began by local strikes, but no benefit resulted, and there came the order for the members of the United Mine Workers to quit; and as we write not less than 150,000 men are idle, demanding 70 cents a ton as a uniform rate for digging a ton of coal; and no man who is at all familiar with the subject will charge the miners with making an unreasonable demand.

We have indicated the great importance of coal as a fuel, and this fact has prompted proprietors to put forth superhuman efforts to replace the miners who are striking, by men who, regardless of right and justice, are willing to accept such wages as the proprietors offer. The regular miners, who are contending for simple justice, are disposed to resist the employment of such men, and as we write news comes of battle and blood — of dead and wounded, and the outlook is full of peril.

Already the premonitions of a coal famine are widespread and unmistakable. In numerous instances railroads have felt its grasp and have reduced the number of their trains. From every direction information comes that factories have had to suspend operations, and the declaration is made that unless the miners at an early day resume work, the condition of business will be of a character so deplorable as to defy exaggeration. Every branch of business will, to a greater or less extent, be involved. Ten thousand engines will stand still, and a million employees will be added to the ranks of the idle — and all because 150,000 or 200,000 miners absolutely declare they are robbed, degraded, and starved that mine owners may grow rich upon their unrequited toil.

What is to be done?

It is the old, old question. If the miners can hold out the operators will be compelled to pay them fair wages; and since the alternatives are work and starve, or be idle and take the chances, the indications are that the latter choice will be made, and if it is, the duration of the struggle cannot, in the nature of things, be long protracted, and the miners will win a notable victory, all the more certain because their demands are just.

We predict a victory for the Mine Workers. In saying this we are not unmindful of the sacrifices the mine workers are making, but we believe the interests at stake demand that the struggle shall be carried forward until the nation shall learn also, by sacrifice, the fact hitherto disregarded, that the nation's boasted wealth and progress, civilization and all its attendant blessings, depend primarily upon the toiling masses, and that justice to them, whether resulting from legislation, arbitration or striking, is the basis of national prosperity. Experience may be, and often is, a dear school, but if the nation will learn in no other school, then, let the test come, as come it will, and the sooner it comes the better it will be for all concerned.