

Forward to Victory!
Open Letter to Seceding West Virginia Miners
(February 12, 1916)

Terre Haute, Ind., Feb. 12, 1916.

My dear Boswell:—

Please send me another copy of the last issue of the *Argus-Star*. I wish to make special use of the matter it contains in reference to the situation of the miners in West Virginia. For some time I have had an eye on affairs there among the miners and I am deeply interested in recent developments as reported in your current issue, which I have read carefully.

The statement of Harold Houston strikes me as a perfect summary of the situation. Houston has covered that entire ground and knows whereof he speaks; he is thoroughly honest and his judgment is sound and I am satisfied that he correctly describes the situation — that affairs in official circles of the old [United Mine Workers] union are in a corrupt state and that the honest miners of West Virginia are absolutely right in their position in seceding from the old organization after all attempts to clean out the crookedness and corruption at home and to get a hearing and a square deal at the national convention had failed.

The statements of the new district officials leave no doubt as to the necessity of the betrayed rank and file taking matters in their own hands after seeing the high officials of the district, supposed to represent the miners, conniving at crooked bargains with the operators and then doing the dirty political work for the tools for the operators who are in public office, and most earnestly do I hope that they will hold their ground and vigorously prosecute their new and clean propaganda until they have driven the corruptionists and betrayers, masquerading as union leaders, out of the state and organized the miners upon a thoroughly industrial and revolutionary basis.

Of course the old officials who have been hand in glove with the operators and the capitalists politicians will make a tremendous fight to retain their graft and will undoubtedly have the backing of the national organization, but as cleanness can always stand against corruption and finally win out against all odds, so are these revolting miners who represent true unionism and who propose to organize to protect the rights and advance the interests of the miners bound to triumph over the miserable

labor politicians who have betrayed them and whose only interest in them is to use them as a means of furthering their own selfish and corrupt interests.

The recent convention proved beyond doubt that reaction is in the saddle in the national organization of the United Mine Workers. There was little in the proceedings of that convention to give encouragement to progressive unionism and to the honest rank and file. The revolutionary minority was completely overwhelmed by the maudlin sentiment that insisted on "harmony" in the face of the gravest charges of extravagance and corruption against the national officials and had they felt themselves absolutely guiltless of these charges they would not only have welcomed investigation but would have insisted upon it instead of using the power of their high offices to suppress it, and in the face of such a situation the handshaking incident so widely heralded in the press was positively sickening and disgusting. It is not the least strange that the capitalist press uniformly congratulated the convention on their good sense in preserving "harmony" and putting their foot down upon the "disturbers," and loaded President White and his administration with praise for his triumph over the "enemy." President White and his colleagues are extremely popular with the owners of the capitalists newspapers, who are brothers to the owners of the coal mines, and it is easy enough to see why they exulted so openly and without attempt to disguise their feelings over the triumph of reaction in the miners' union.

Some time ago I gave the UMW credit for coming nearer being a real industrial union and more revolutionary in spirit than any other union and I advised the miners to pull out of the reactionary federation controlled by Gompers and his machine and lead the way toward general industrial organization but the conservative officials could not see it that way and they have since succeeded in checking the revolutionary tendency and making the union quite respectable, safe and sane, pure and simple, and in all regards satisfactory to the operators. I did not fail to note the change and in an article I wrote in the *Rip-Saw* I warned the miners against what has since taken place and I told them plainly what would be the result.

I no longer advise the miners to withdraw from the Gompers machine. The UMW is now back where the rest are and fits in perfectly with the rest of the reactionary pure and simple unions that are hooked up with the Gompers craft unionists and the Seth Low¹ and August Belmont² Civic Federationists.

In prosecuting your work in West Virginia a live, clean, fearless, incorruptible paper is absolutely indispensable. The miners can easily put the Argus-Star squarely on its feet to fight their battles for them. The issue of this week should be in the hands not only of every West Virginia miner but of every miner in the United States. Without a paper the miners will be under so many disadvantages that they can hardly hope to make substantial headway against the formidable opposition which confronts them. This opposition consists not only of the corrupt old union officials but of the politicians, operators, grafters, and other leeches and parasites that suck labor's life blood and fatten in its misery. If the miners put a live paper in the field and spread it over the state their triumph, substantial and enduring, is assured.

You are at liberty to make use fo this letter or any part thereof in any way you may think proper.

My last word to the West Virginia miners is: Forward to Victory!

Yours fraternally,

Eugene V. Debs.

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¹ Seth Low INSERT FOOTNOTE HERE

² August Belmont INSERT FOOTNOTE HERE