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Books for Union People



THE STRIKES OF '49

The Coal Miners' General Strike of 1949-50 and the Birth of Marxist-Humanism, by Andy Phillips, *News & Letters*, 59 East Van Buren, Chicago 60608, 48 pages, \$2

In 1947 John L. Lewis went to jail when the United Mine Workers struck, and the union was fined \$3 million. In 1948 it was fined another \$1.45 million for a strike he did not call. In 1949 the union faced the Taft-Hartley Act, which had been passed over President Harry S. Truman's veto. Only the UMWA, the IWW, and the printers in the ITU had refused to submit the affidavits required by the Act on the policies of their officers, and late in May the NLRB ruled that for that reason the union-shop contracts at the mines owned by the steel companies were now illegal.

With mine contracts expiring June 30th and about three months' supply of coal above ground, union miners had rested from their labors for a two-week "memorial period", allowed by the contracts, in March and again in June, shortly before their two-week vacation. The law required a 60-day notice of intent to strike, and no such notice was given. In mid-June the Steel Workers' contracts expired, but they sparred without a contract till they went on strike in October. Instead of striking when its contracts expired, the UMWA decreed a three-day workweek east of the Mississippi, for the law required its members to work only if they were "willing and able".

Once the contracts had expired, the operators quit payments into the union Health and Welfare Fund; so Lewis announced the suspension of payments from it. "Spontaneous" strikes resulted in all coal fields, with roving pickets assuring the spontaneity. On September 30th Lewis ordered the anthracite miners and miners west of the Mississippi back to work. The steel strike began the next day, and for the first time coal miners and steel workers were out together.

As the steel companies started settling, Lewis ordered the miners back to the three-day week November 10th. In January 1950 Consolidated Coal sought an injunction against the three-day week, the union called a strike against Consolidated, and miners all across the country stopped work on their own. Lewis wired a "suggestion" that they return to work, but they stayed out. On February 7th President Truman invoked the Taft-Hartley

Act, which he had opposed, so Lewis wired orders for the miners to return to work. At the meetings where these wires were read, the miners were informed that as laws cannot be passed against individuals, they could stay out as such—and that's what they did. Thus a new contract was reached assuring older miners likely to be forced off the job by the new "continuous miner" (a machine requiring such strenuous labor that only young miners could operate it) of seniority rights for the first time.

Such is the background of this first-hand account by Andy Phillips, who went to college on the GI Bill, started mining in 1948, and went through the long strike with both arms in casts from a coal-mine blast, but not deterred from action. He had become involved in efforts of leftists from Morgantown who, when UMWA relief sources were gone, got aid from comrades in Detroit. Out of all this grew the tendency currently expressed in the periodical *News & Letters*, which issues this pamphlet, setting its origins in this major labor struggle.

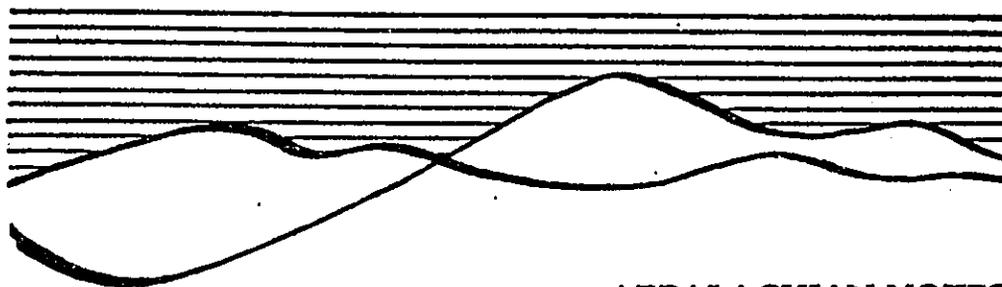
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Labour / Le Travail
Fall 1985

Andy Phillips and Raya Dunayevskaya,
*The Coal Miners' General Strike of
1949-50 and the Birth of Marxist-
Humanism in the U.S.* (Chicago: News &
Letters 1984).

MINERS' STRIKES HAVE a habit of restructuring class relations and perspectives. This pamphlet presents a view of the UMWA strike against automation in 1949-50 that stresses the spontaneity of the miners and then links it to the theoretical consolidation of "Marxist-humanism" in the anti-Leninism of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, a faction of the Socialist Workers Party led by C.L.R. James (Johnson) and Raya Dunayevskaya (Forest). Here is a historical document worth thinking through in the midst of the 1983-4 British miners' struggle.

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APPALACHIAN NOTES

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A 1980's View. The Coal Miners' General Strike of 1949-50 and the Birth of Marxist-Humanism in the U.S. Chicago, News & Letters (59 East Van Buren Street, Suite 707), 1984. 45 pp. \$2.00.

There are two essays in this pamphlet: Andy Phillips, "A Missing Page from American Labor History," and Raya Dunayevskaya, "The Emergence of a New Movement from Practice That Is Itself a Form of Theory." Phillips' account of the 1949/50 miners' general strike is a factual account of events in northern West Virginia as seen by a well informed miner who was also associated with radical groups. In spite of a specific orientation from the latter element, Phillips tells his story objectively but with his own editorial comments. Particularly important is his version of John L. Lewis and the power struggle within union groups, a valuable commentary (from one viewpoint) on American labor history. An unexpected dividend are notes on mining technology and routines from the worker's standpoint. There are a number of photographs of considerable documentary value.

At the end of the pamphlet there is an ad for a microfilm of Marxist-Humanist archives, 1941 to date, in the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Whether there is anything here on Appalachian labor history would have to be ascertained from the printed guide, available from News & Letters for a dollar. Nevertheless the existence of this collection suggests that various labor archives may have unsuspected resources, representing a wide variety of ideas and attitudes, on the story of organized labor in Appalachia. An inter-institutional inventory could be useful.

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A "Marxist-Humanist" view

From *News and Letters*, which claims to be "the only Marxist-Humanist paper in the U.S.," comes *The Coal Miner's General Strike of 1949-50 and the Birth of Marxist-Humanism in the U.S.*, 52 pages of text and photos which will give readers the unique perspectives of one political group. The booklet is really two separate essays tied together by their viewpoint on the miners' struggle. The first, "A Missing Page from American Labor History" by Andy Phillips, is a factual account of the "first major strike in the United States against automation," with photos of the work site and the machines that were opposed. The second, "The Emergence of a New Movement from Practice that is Itself a Form of Theory" by Raya Dunayevskaya, a regular writer for *News and Letters*, sets out the Leninist, Marxist political theory that she draws from the strike. The pamphlet provides an inexpensive way to obtain an interesting radical perspective with which to balance collections dominated by mainstream labor and/or political opinion and reporting. Order for \$2 per copy (add 75¢ to each order for postage) from *News and Letters*, 59 E. Van Buren St., Rm. 707, Chicago, IL 60605.

LIBRARY JOURNAL/SEPTEMBER 1, 1984

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