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THE ANTHRACITE COAL STRIKE IN ITS SOCIAL ASPECTS

THE anthracite coal-fields of Pennsylvania lie in the north-eastern part of the State. Their total area is about 473 square miles, and a population of over 650,000 depends directly or indirectly upon the anthracite industry for its subsistence. A strike of five months' duration among the mine employees of this territory is so grave a calamity that its influence will be felt for many days to come. The object of this article is to consider the strike of 1902 among the miners of north-eastern Pennsylvania from a social point of view.

Ominous signs of the industrial struggle were perceptible from the beginning of 1902. There were many local strikes, and the operators¹ complained that it was impossible to maintain discipline in the mines. The miners believed that better wages could be obtained, and their just portion of the produced wealth increased. It was obvious that a fierce struggle was inevitable. Men with large commercial interests were the first to read the signs of the coming fray, and they exercised more than usual care in selling and buying. The wholesale agents were warned not to force the sales. The store-keepers withheld their usual orders. The thrifty consumers laid what money they could aside, and the bankers felt a falling off in the deposits for some months previous to the strike. These were premonitions of the coming storm. Commercial travellers speak highly of these valleys, which are studded with mining towns and villages, and the volume and variety of consumable goods sold here are not equalled in any other part of equal area in our prosperous State. Three months previous to the strike the volume diminished and the demand for certain classes of goods fell off considerably. This was chiefly felt in the consumption of meats and canned goods. It was the instinctive action on the part of the people to prepare themselves for the fight confronting them.

¹ Employers.

On May 12th, 1902, not one of the 375 collieries in the anthracite coal-fields was in operation; 140,000 mine-employees were on strike for higher wages and better conditions. The effect was instantly perceptible in the migration of large numbers from our communities to other localities where they could get work. From every mining village and town young men were seen in troops carrying their boxes or packs to the depot, to board the trains to regions where work was plentiful, and a chance was given them to earn a livelihood. Many of the migrants boarded the freight trains, and took a "John Mitchell" excursion. Thousands left, and those who first departed found no difficulty in securing work in the cities of New York and Philadelphia. Very soon these and other cities within convenient distance to the coal-fields were glutted with surplus labour. Those who left in the third and fourth months of the strike could get no work, and were obliged to return home. Thousands of our people left for the bituminous coal-fields, which were now operated to their full capacity, in order to supply, in part, the market formerly supplied by anthracite coal. Families were broken up and scattered. Friends parted, and young men, for the first time, left the home of their childhood. It was all due to the economic pressure brought to bear upon the homes because of the strike. Fifty per cent. of our people live from hand to mouth, and there was no alternative, save to scatter or contract debt. The honest did the former, the thriftless did the latter, and without compunction became dependents. No accurate statistics can be gathered as to the number of those who left these regions during the strike. In the county of Schuylkill, with 170,000 inhabitants, the assessors found about 6,000 electors absent. In the whole of the anthracite coal-fields, we have a population of 430,000 directly dependent on the mining industry, so that about 15,000 electors left, and another 5,000 aliens may be added.

Those who remained at once reduced their standard of living. It was summer time, and the hills were scoured for berries. Never were the huckleberries picked so thoroughly as last summer. This work became an implement of war, and thousands of men, women, and children found in this way the means whereby they might keep bread in the home while the struggle was being waged. Car loads of berries were shipped to the cities, while many families found their chief means of subsistence, during the months of June and July, on bread and berries.

Retail stores felt the change. A butcher said his trade fell

off 50 per cent. Swift and Company, meat importers, doing business in one of our mining towns of 13,500 population, reduced its weekly shipment of beef from 24 carcasses to 12; a weekly consumption of from 60 to 80 boxes of pork shoulders was cut down to 15; the quantity of pork loins sold by the firm fell from 15 or 20 boxes to 5 or 6. The only commodity handled by this firm for which there was an increased demand was smoked sausage. This increased from 40 or 50 boxes to 100. Other lines of consumable goods felt a similar falling off. Drummers who handled canned goods, biscuits, cakes, bottled pickles, catsups, *etcetera*, could not sell their articles, and sought other markets than the anthracite coal communities. Over 100,000 families reduced their purchases to the prime necessities of life. They found out what their real wants were, and even fell below that. "No junkets" was the cry of the hour, and many families sat at table supplied only with bread and molasses for a meal. What sacrifices these men are willing to make in an industrial struggle! When Mr. Mitchell said, in one of his public addresses, that there was no one in the coal-fields suffering for the want of bread, we knew a family of six who had no bread in the house, and the father, when he read the leader's statement, said, "That's so, there is no one suffering." A druggist said, "The strikers are finding out the great virtue of salts, for that is about all I sell at present." Jewellers, dry-goods merchants, furniture dealers, carpet vendors, hardware store-keepers, did very little business. Many of them were brought to bankruptcy, while others are so crippled that years of careful management will be necessary to extricate them from their financial embarrassment.

The amount of suffering incident to so momentous a conflict can never be told. The response of the labour world to the call for help was prompt. The money in the local treasuries was soon expended. Over a million dollars was sent into the strike area by labour organisations, and another million was distributed among the sufferers. Two millions of dollars is a large sum, but it was only \$4.00 per capita if equally distributed among those whose means of subsistence was cut off by the strike—less than \$1.00 a month during the suspension. How these people were able to exist as they did for five months without work is a mystery. The day-books of grocery stores partly explain, as did also the gaunt forms of men and the anæmic faces of children. Relief was distributed in the form of orders upon certain stores. The store-keepers said that, without exception, the wife who brought the order asked for flour. Bread,

the prime necessary of life, was the first demand. The vast majority of mine workers live in rented houses, and during the strike, no rent was paid. Property owners lost in rent during the five months' suspension from \$175,000 to \$200,000. One of the unfortunate features of a great industrial struggle is that the burden falls most heavily upon the thrifty. The shiftless enter the conflict with nothing and come out of it the same. It is not so with a man who owns property and tries to save it. He finds himself out several hundreds of dollars, and the loss cannot be made good. Men, who by nature are honest, are in conflicts of this nature unable to pay their way, and secure what is necessary for the life of the family.

Society during the strike was in a state of war. Those who have never passed through such an experience cannot fully understand the confusion into which these communities were thrown. Both parties to the controversy were intemperate and unjust. Hasty action and vituperation were indulged in. The noise of conflict hid the real issues, and the disputants were little inclined to listen to the voice of reason or justice. One thing that ever favoured the mine employees' cause was, the moderation and the conciliatory attitude of their leader. John Mitchell from the first offered to arbitrate, and the Anglo-Saxon sense of justice threw public opinion on the side of the workmen. It was this pressure of public opinion which ultimately forced the operators to agree to arbitrate, and argue their case before a Commission of impartial men appointed by President Roosevelt.

The leaders among the mine workers were uncompromisingly opposed to lawlessness and disorder. They succeeded in many instances in checking men who resorted to unlawful means in defending their claims. Every colliery was in a state of siege and guarded by deputies. From the 1st of August the military power of the State was in the field, but lawlessness prevailed and violence was common. If any one considers fully the situation, the wonder is, that there was no more violence. A hungry man is a desperate being, and here in our area an army of from 80,000 to 100,000 strong was in want. If every barricade had been swept away, and every coal plant destroyed, it would not have been very surprising. The fact that the vast majority of men abstained from violence is highly complimentary to the moral restraint and self-control of these mine employees. As the struggle was protracted, violence became more intense and frequent, and by the middle of October, the whole National Guard of the State, comprising 10,000 men,

was in the field. Notwithstanding the presence of this army, the miners did not return to work and lawlessness did not cease. The Governor of our State is reported to have said that the miners would not return to work if a soldier were strapped to the back of each one of them. That truly expressed the sentiment of the men.

The question of individual right has come to the front as never before. The anthracite coal companies affirm that they fight for the preservation of individual liberty—the right of employers to hire or dismiss whom they please, and the right of the workmen to work under conditions suitable to themselves. The attorneys of the operators have insisted on this right above all else before the Commission, and the Press of the country has discussed the question in all its phases. Working-men become conscious that their only hope of combating the great aggregations of capital is by organisation and the very exigencies of the situation make them intolerant of any one who insists upon his individual right to stand alone in the industrial army. The opprobrious epithet “scab” is hurled at those who are considered unfair workers, and so powerful is the sentiment that all workers should be within the social bond, that social ostracism and hatred meet those who insist upon remaining outside of it. This division of sentiment brings discord into society. When both parties to this great controversy argued their case before the Commission, one could not but feel that the disputants to the quarrel were as far removed as individualists and socialists are. They belong to two distinct schools of thought, and the future of our civilisation will be largely modelled as either of these forces comes to the ascendancy. In the meantime, intemperate language, uncompromising hostility, and bitter rancour divide men. The feelings stirred and the wounds inflicted in the last strike will not disappear for many days to come.

In the political sphere, the effect of the strike is very apparent, and questions of grave importance have been brought to the front. The relation of the politicians to the dispute has been peculiar. In the strike of 1900 political influence brought about a settlement. The men relied upon the same influence in the struggle of 1902, but the operators refused to have anything to do with the political leaders. United States Senator Mark Hanna effected a settlement in the strike of 1900, but his efforts were nugatory in the last. After four months' suspension, the

fallelections were approaching and our representatives in Congress, Matthew S. Quay and B. Penrose, tried to bring the contending parties together, but failed. Governor Stone, of our State, made a similar attempt, but his efforts also proved futile. A more serious consideration than possible political contingencies moved conservative men to apprehension. Autumn had come, and the mornings and evenings were cold. The people of our large cities on the Atlantic coast clamoured for fuel. There was a possibility of a sudden fall in temperature, and no one knew what that might bring forth. President Roosevelt saw the danger, and expressed himself strongly. The operators, when summoned by our Chief Executive, proved stubborn, but they knew that the President was capable of energetic action, and that coal would be mined even if they persisted in their refusal to arbitrate.

The socialists have displayed considerable activity in the United States lately, and the industrial war in the coal-fields offered them an occasion they at once set to work to improve. Speakers and literature were sent to these cities, villages, and towns, and socialistic clubs were organised in populous centres throughout the coal-fields. The denouncers of the capitalistic system never failed to get an audience, and the people were saturated with the extravagance and wild dreams of impractical theorists. Under the excitement incident to industrial war, men's reason is beclouded, and they listen with avidity to Utopian programmes which promise to all abundant riches without protracted and exhausting labour. In the fall elections the socialists placed a ticket in the field and called upon all workmen to vote it. In the returns of 1900, adherents of these theorists polled less than one per cent. of the total vote in our area. Last fall they had from twelve to fifteen per cent. of the votes cast in the anthracite communities, and in the convention of the Federation of Labour in New Orleans last November, the delegates from the United Mine Workers of America fell in line with the advocates of socialistic doctrines. Strenuous efforts are being made in many directions to organise the working men into a labour party, and nothing so aids this work as industrial struggles such as we have passed through in the anthracite coal-fields of Pennsylvania. Economists teach that in industrial development, by the action of immutable laws, a larger share of the produced wealth is annually being distributed among the working classes. To make them feel this is the great need of the hour. If the antagonism now existing between capital and labour

grows more intense, the day is not distant when some form of socialism will be launched, and any one familiar with the character of the politics of the United States must look upon such a contingency with apprehension. Collective ownership of public utilities in the hands of sinister politicians would be the greatest calamity which could befall us. If capitalists persist in their mad antagonism to organised labour, the working classes will become socialists at an astounding rate.

The effect of the strike in the moral world is none the less apparent. The income of adult mine employees will not average more than \$500.00 a year. This is hardly enough to meet the expenses of a family of five for one year. Unless there is great economy practised in the home, the arrears contracted during the strike will not be paid although the family is anxious to be honest. Not only are they dishonest by necessity, but a long strike drives them to deceit. All animals when hungry resort to cunning to secure food. Men are not different. Reduce men to starvation, and few among a thousand have moral stamina enough to patiently endure privation. Most of them will contract debt which in times of prosperity they forget. Many of them will deliberately lie in order to procure food, while a few will go forth to either steal or rob. Hunger is a test of moral fibre. It is comparatively easy to live virtuously when one is well fed, but privation suffered for five months will test the discipline of the best regulated army. The mine workers in the anthracite coal-fields are largely made up of men of limited knowledge and experience. They reason within the limits of their knowledge, and are largely swayed by sentiment. Can we then be surprised when, under the pressure of want, they practise deception and fraud. An industrial struggle invariably destroys moral fibre in the masses, and the religious leaders in these communities feel that it will take years of careful attention to restore what has been destroyed in the few months of the strike.

The struggle not only blunts the moral sensibility, but also renders men careless in habit and conduct. There are many men in our communities who have all they can do to retain their place in the industrial army. Subject these to economic pressure, incident to a conflict between capital and labour, and the inevitable result is that they become discouraged and indifferent. Protracted suffering leads to despondency and despair. This is true of communities as well as individuals. The drink evil is nowhere as great a curse as in the slums, and, notwithstanding general stagnation in the anthracite coal industry, men

drank. Some wretches were so forgetful of the need of their family as to exchange the very order issued them by the union for drink, others fell into a state of moral indifference and neglected discipline in the home and lost respect for law and order in society. Many moral wrecks were effected by the strike, and the spirit of lawlessness, which runs riot in days of conflict and excitement, instigated youths to disorder. One of the professors of Yale University, in his visit to these coal-fields during the strike, was impressed with the frequency of brawls on the public streets. It was the spirit of lawlessness repeating itself in the idle youths of our towns. Boys in their teens left home without the consent of their parents, and we saw men stoned on the street by a crowd of vicious youths. It was all due to lack of discipline in the homes of the people, which was largely accounted for by the strike.

Indifference to the claims of religion is also traceable to industrial struggle. Men say, "What is the use of trying to be good and industrious, when we do not get our rights?" Whether the wrongs of which the miners complained were real or imaginary, they are facts in their life, and they feel the intensest antagonism against corporations. It is largely due to absentee capitalists. Bureaucracy is in control of these mines, and the men whose capital is invested in these shafts are living in distant cities. It is not strange that mine employees should look with suspicion upon them. Our people speak of their hardships in the home, on the street, and in the saloon, and invariably blame the capitalists who are in the city. Reverence and respect for authority, which are the very foundations of the religious sentiment, are thus destroyed. This habit of indifference to superiors produces itself in the young, and, with vehemence more virulent than their fathers, they denounce the supposed authors of their wrongs. This evil breeds degeneracy and insubordination in the young, and a spirit of lawlessness among our youths is the result. All this is fatal to the culture of true piety.

Many mine workers also look with suspicion upon the Church, and have little sympathy with its conservative attitude. Consciously or unconsciously there is in the heart of the working classes a revolt against the spirit of patient endurance inculcated by Biblical precepts. The Church, since its ascendancy to power, invariably is on the side of conservatism. Its pessimistic teachings of meek submission to the powers that be has little in common with the spirit of modern labour organisations. Mine workers, as well as other labourers, resent the doctrine of patient

submission. They believe that they do not receive the portion due to them of the produced wealth, and experience has proved that it will only be yielded under pressure. They organise to bring that pressure to bear on capital, and demand what they think is just. Their leaders also boldly proclaim that men should seek justice here and now, rather than rely upon an adjustment of wrongs beyond the vale. For these reasons the mine workers in the recent strike manifested little patience with the spirit of the New Testament teaching, and looked with suspicion upon the interference of the clergy. Add to this the facts that the financial pillars of the Church are among the capitalists, and that leaders in religious organisations are the apologists of large fortunes, and we have an adequate explanation of the suspicion cherished by these men toward the Church. The following incident throws light upon their position. In the early stages of the conflict some clergymen championed the cause of labour, but soon it was observed that their tongues grew silent and their pens were buried. The men explained this by affirming that an order was issued by the Church dignitaries commanding silence.

Not only is this suspicion of the Church derogatory to morality, but also, the concentration of attention upon material affairs has a tendency to becloud the spiritual concerns of men. A strike of 140,000 employees for five months, affecting the material interests of over 600,000 persons, must necessarily attract attention to the question of daily bread. When an army 50,000 strong endures privation, most of whom are forced to beg the means of subsistence, it is a fruitless task to ask their consideration of the higher interests of man. A concentration of thought upon material affairs for months in succession cannot but lead to deterioration of morals and to degeneracy in the working classes of these regions.

There is, however, amid much that is lamentable in this conflict, one cheerful feature, one star of hope. It is the consciousness of the interests of the group. Was there ever in the annals of industrial conflict so brave a struggle carried on as the last strife in the anthracite coal-fields of Pennsylvania? Here we had over 100,000 men standing together against fearful odds. They remained loyal to their union and idolised their leader. They endured hunger and nakedness for a principle. Stubbornly did they resist the enticement of operators, and firmly but courteously rejected the overtures of the President. Patiently, and yet in hunger, they asked for

arbitration, and, when troops encamped in the towns and villages, in grim silence these thousands stood more resolutely than ever, and sent forth to the world a cry of defiance, by re-asserting their demands at the beginning of the fifth month of the strike more resolutely and unanimously than on the day they resolved to go out. Never in the history of trades unions was there given to the world a better illustration of the social bond which binds men in distress, and whatever be the opinion of men as to the merits of this controversy, we all must admire the loyalty of the anthracite mine workers to the principle of unionism.

Whatever be the final effect of this conflict, the public has had an exhibition of resolute courage and patient endurance which ought to convince all of these men's capacity for intellectual and moral progress. In striking contrast with their suffering stands the obstinacy and self-assertion of the operators. If capitalists persist in their attitude of superior indifference to the welfare of the toiling masses, the day of socialistic experiments of some kind is drawing nigh. Blind greed and stupid arrogance make more socialists among the ranks of wage-earners than either the speeches of enthusiasts or the pamphlets of dreamers.

Capitalists are generally keen and far-sighted, but the arbitrary attitude taken by the anthracite coal operators in the recent strike, and their absolute refusal for five months to submit the questions in dispute to a board of impartial arbitrators, bespeak an indifference to the interests of the public little short of criminal. Considerations of public policy and patriotism ought to dictate a different policy. If these men imagine that industrial peace will be promoted by crushing the miners' union, they will be awakened from their delusion by movements which will threaten the very existence of our present industrial system, and possibly result in a revolution.

PETER ROBERTS