

Blood on the coal: Colorado strike of 1927 - Patrick Murfin



A short history of the great Colorado coal strike of 1927, called by the revolutionary union Industrial Workers of the World which lasted until the following year, facing savage repression and killings and won concessions, although not IWW union recognition.

On October 18 the Great Colorado Coal Strike of 1927 began. Despite being one of the most important and dramatic industrial struggles of the 20th Century chances are that you never heard of it even if you are fairly well versed in labor history.

That's because it doesn't fit tidily into the grand narrative that has been constructed for labor history which says that the great period of industrial upheaval which began roughly about the time of the Great Railway Strike of 1877 ended in the wave of patriotism caused by America's entry into World War I and the glittering era of universal prosperity ushered in with the Roaring Twenties. In this account, labor agitation does not resume on a wide scale until the Depression when it finally succeeds due to the beneficent support of the New Deal. Moreover the organization which successfully called over 8,000 miner across the state out on strike was supposed to have been crushed to insignificance by the post war Red Scare prosecutions which had jailed literally the entire leadership of the union on Federal charges and under various state criminal syndicalist statutes.

Here is the forgotten story.

The Colorado coal fields had been a particularly vicious labor battle ground since the 1890's because the industry was largely under the control of a handful of powerful corporations instead of multiple local operators as was common in the eastern coal fields. Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, owned by Rockefeller interests, and Rocky Mountain Fuel Company were the largest of these companies and often were in virtual control of the state government. The use of state Militia to support the company's own large security force and local sheriff's posses composed of gun thugs selected by the company, resulted in repeated and brutal suppression of organizing efforts and strikes.

The United Mine Workers (UMW) made the Colorado mines a major target in the early 20th Century. Legendary agitator Mother Jones was active there including her famous recruitment of striker's wives to replace their jailed husbands on the picket lines. But despite years of effort, the mines remained un-unionized. The struggle came to a head in a 1914 strike at Ludlow. Strikers and their families, evicted from company housing set up a tent and shanty town. The town was attacked by Colorado National Guard troops using machine gun fire and grenades. It was burned to the ground. Two women and 11 children died in the flames. Three union leaders, two rank and file members, one child, a bystander, and a Guardsman (killed in the cross fire) were killed by bullet wounds. Scores more were injured. After a

spasm of retaliation attacks on mines and more battles with the Guard, the strike petered out and the UMW mostly withdrew from the state and turned its attention eastward.

But the conditions that had led to earlier conflicts had not changed. Miners still worked up to 12 hours a day, six days a week. They were required to buy their own tools and even their own blasting powder. They were not paid for time in the mine not directly related to the extraction of coal, which included not only the frequently long trips to the mine face from the surface by tram, but also necessary safety work like installing and maintaining shoring timbers. In the most isolated mines, workers were paid in scrip redeemable only in company stores that offered shoddy goods at inflated prices. The familiar company town system kept most workers perpetually in debt to the companies and thus virtual serfs. Safety was also an issue. In addition to almost daily fatal accidents the region had seen several major disasters including 121 miners killed in an accident at a mine in Hastings in 1917, 31 miners were killed in explosions at the Oakdale and Empire mines and in 1922, and 27 were killed in mines in Sopris and Southwestern in 1923.

The Industrial Workers of the World had supposedly been smashed when the government launched nation-wide raids in 1919. 101 union leaders in Chicago, including General Secretary William D. "Big Bill" Haywood, the secretaries of most affiliated Industrial Unions and the entire General Executive Board were sentenced to prison. Another 48 leaders were tried and convicted in Kansas. Hundreds of others were tried and convicted in state courts.

But the Feds misunderstood the rank and file nature of the organization. With their big name leaders in jail and Haywood fled to the Soviet Union, ordinary delegates, un-jailed local leaders, and rank and file members stepped up. The union actually grew in numbers and continued significant organizing drives in the woods of the Pacific Northwest, on railroad and other mass construction projects, among both dock workers and seamen for the IWW's Marine Transport Workers Union, and among California migrant workers. It was a 1924 internal split that actually did more damage than the raids and imprisonment. Membership fell and gains in most of the battle ground industries were lost. But the union was not dead yet and turned to new ground.

When the state of Idaho released A. S. Embree from prison after a criminal syndicalist rap, the veteran organizer relocated to southern Colorado. Embree had a long record as an organizer of hard rock miners, particularly in the copper industry and had made a name for himself in campaigns in Butte, Montana and Arizona. He was a survivor of the Bisbee Deportation and one of the most respected Wobblies.

Embree started slowly at first working with veterans of the 1914 strike and some long time Colorado Wobs. He soon had a network of stationary delegates throughout all three of the state's big coal fields. He started with general educational work, circulating copies of the IWW newspaper Industrial Solidarity, pamphlets, and tens of thousands of "silent agitator" stickers which were soon found at mine heads, on tram cars, and in any place miners gathered.

Particularly important were copies of literature and periodicals in several different languages because the miners were largely immigrants from eastern and southern Europe or were Spanish speaking recruited both from the large local population and from Mexico. Slowly a network with contacts in every mining community and most mines in the state was built up.

Still, given the violent history of the region, there was a reluctance to move too soon against the mine owners. But Embree noticed that material circulated by the IWW's General Defense Committee in support of Sacco and Vanzetti struck a genuine note of sympathy and solidarity. On August 21 the IWW called for a general strike against the executions of the Italian Anarchists. Response in Colorado exceeded beyond

anyone's expectations. More than 10,000 miners went out in all sections of the state, virtually closing down the industry. To prevent retaliatory firings workers at many mines stayed out for three days.

Clearly the time was ripe for action. The IWW called representatives of all mines to a conference at Agular on September 8 to iron out demands—a daily wage of \$7.50, union check weigh men¹, payment for “dead work”² and recognition of pit committee at each mine. To comply with the rules of the Colorado State Industrial Commission a strike date was set with more than the required 30 day notice. The workers offered to allow the Commission to conduct elections at each mine to ascertain that the action had the support of members. The commission refused to act and when the strike began as scheduled on October 18 ruled that it was illegal and declared any meetings or picketing by miners to be illegal and subject to being broken up by the Colorado Rangers, state police usually called the militia by strikers. Although the strike was led by the IWW, pit committees were open to all miners who supported the goals of the strike including remaining members of the UMW and members of independent and company controlled unions at Colorado Fuel and Iron mines concentrated in the southern field.

About 8,400 miners walked out and 113 mines across the state were closed and only 13 still running were still running with scabs. The majority of miners in the state were on strike, about 8,400. In the northern field only the Columbine located just north of Denver remained open, limping by with limited production by 150 scabs. In the southern field frequent mass gatherings on the coalfields called more and more of the miners still at work out to join the strike despite inducements to join the scabs by offers of premium pay and improved conditions. Picket lines were almost constantly harassed by the police, and arrests were frequent. Union halls were raided and smashed. Strikers were arrested in mass and moved from one jail to another to prevent access by IWW lawyers. Others were deported to the state line and told that they would be shot on sight if they returned. But the strike held and expanded.

Workers fought back with ingenuity. In one country jail, miners refused to be released when their terms expired to prevent more strikers from being imprisoned. In the southern fields the 19 year old daughter of a Croatian miner, Amelia Milka Sablich gained fame as Red Milka. After the arrests of her father and older sister she donned a bright red dress and with fiery rhetoric led marches against scab mines. She was jailed twice herself and physically fought a policeman to a draw.

In November the IWW dispatched a squad of “singing agitators” south from Lafayette to Walsenburg by car caravan—a new tactic. Despite being harassed by mounted Ranger and buzzed by state owned airplanes, the squad held successful meetings in several towns and camps, reviving sprits and leaving behind miners who could sing the anthem Solidarity Forever in a dozen languages.

The Columbine Mine, the lone operating mine in the north, became a focus of attention. It was operated by Rocky Mountain Fuel Company. Josephine Roche, a well known liberal with strong sympathy for unionism had just inherited the firm from her father but did not yet exert total day-to-day control. She told reporters that she would welcome union representation at the mine, but not the IWW.

For two weeks strikers had been rallying daily outside of the Columbine gates in the town of Serene. On earlier marches Roche had ordered that the picketers be served coffee. Other mine owners, however, were determined to break the strike at Columbine. They induced Governor Billy Adams to reactivate the Colorado Rangers, who had officially been disbanded before the strike largely due to their reputation for being used as an employer's armed force. With questionable legal authority the Rangers under the command of Louis Scherf arrived sometime in the night of October 17/18. They were heavily armed with rifles, hand grenades, and three 50 caliber machine guns which they deployed at the mine tipple where coal was loaded onto railroad cars and on trucks including one near the water tank. Together the guns commanded an enfilading field of fire.

Just before dawn 500 miners and many of their wives and family members arrived at the shut gates of the town of Serene. They marched behind three U.S. Flags and as usual were under orders to carry no weapons. They were surprised to find the Rangers out in force and heavily armed, although not in uniform. As the marchers neared Scherf announced that they would not be admitted to town and that their gathering was illegal. He demanded to know, "Who are your leaders.?" The crowd responded with cries of "We're all leaders!" After some discussion Adam Bell was selected to go forward with a flag bearer to ask that the gates be unlocked because the town was public and the strikers had children in the school and business at the Post Office.

Bell was struck in the head by a baton and a guard tried to seize the flag from its 16 year old bearer. As a struggle for the flag ensued, a volley of tear gas was fired one striking a Mrs. Kubic in the back as she tried to get away. Miners began heaving the teargas grenades back into the town and the injured Bell let up a cry, "Let's Go!" leading an assault on the gate. Bell was soon surrounded and beaten unconscious. Mrs. Elizabeth Beranek, mother of 16 children and one of the flag-bearers, tried to protect him with her flag. The police turned on her, beating her severely.

Wave after wave of enraged strikers scaled the gate to be met with truncheons and lengths of iron pipe in a desperate hand to hand battle. Despite inflicting severe injuries, the outnumbered police retired to a line at the mine gate 150 yards inside the town.

21 year old Jerry Davis grabbed one of the fallen flags and led hundreds of angry miners through the smashed gate. Others scaled the fence east of the gate. As the miners closed in Scherf fired twice with his .45 automatic signaling a volley of rifle fire. At least two of the machine guns opened up a withering crossfire. The miners and their families ran leaving scores of bodies on the ground both dead and wounded.

John Eastenes, a 34 year old of six children and Nick Spanudakhis, 34, both of Lafayette, died at the scene. Frank Kovich of Erie, Rene Jacques, 26, of Louisville and Davis died hours later in the hospital. The American flag Davis carried was riddled with seventeen bullet holes and stained with blood. Mike Vidovich of Erie, 35, died a week later of his injuries. The total number of injuries may never be known because many miners were afraid to seek medical attention.

Despite the bloodshed, the strike continued. And so did daily violence against strikers and their families both on picket lines and in towns. On January 12, 1928 the IWW hall in Walsenburg was attacked and riddled with bullets. Wobblies Chavez and Martinez were killed.

The strike petered out in February when owners granted significant concessions, but not recognition of the IWW. In the southern fields dominated by the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company wages were boosted by a dollar a day. Increases of 50 cents were won in the north. In all parts of the state pit committees were recognized, weigh men elected, and some grievance procedures were adopted—at least temporarily.

In the southern fields the CF and I announced that in the elections that it supervised, miners voted not to allow IWW members back on the job. In the North Josephine Roche announced her intention of eventually recognizing the UMW, which had taken no part in the strike. But even this was not followed up on until 1929. The willingness of the UMW to "scab" on the IWW led to bitter feelings between the two unions that would only intensify as both contended in the Illinois coal field wars later in the decade.

Roche later ran unsuccessfully for Governor of Colorado as a labor Democrat and served as Assistant Secretary of the Treasury under Franklin Roosevelt. She continued to be associated with the UMW as one of three directors of its welfare and retirement fund until forced from office amid charges of mismanagement and corruption in 1968.

Although the IWW valiantly led the strike, it ended with no on the job representation. A few locals hung on for a few years and had some influence in the non-union pit committees and Wobblies were frequently trusted and elected as weigh men.

The Rocky Mountain Fuel Company went bankrupt in 1944. The Colorado Fuel and Iron business records were donated to the Steelworks Museum of Industry and Culture. The records conclusively proved, as if anyone ever doubted it that the company had systematically spied upon, disrupted, and sought to discredit the IWW during the 1927 strike.

On a personal note Red Milka, the young heroine of the southern coal fields, went on to study at the IWW affiliated Work People's College in Duluth, Minnesota where one of her instructors was the young Canadian [Fred W. Thompson](#). He would go on to be a legendary IWW organizer, officer, editor, labor historian and my personal mentor. He was the principal co-author of our 1975 book *The IWW: Its First Seventy Years* and was the best man at my wedding in 1981.

Taken from <http://patrickmurfin.blogspot.co.uk/2013/10/blood-on-coalcolorado-strike...>

- [1](#). libcom note: coal miners were normally paid according to the amount of coal they dug out, and companies would regularly swindle workers by lying about the weight of coal. The law allowed for workers to appoint check weigh men, however in most mines any worker requesting a check weigh man would be fired or worse.
- [2](#). libcom note: we assume this means work which miners have to do, but during which no coal can be extracted, for example digging through areas without coal etc