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# Riot, Revolution, Repression in the IRON RANGE STRIKE of 1916

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IN 1916 the iron mining companies of Minnesota's Mesabi Range were looking to the future with confidence. The country was in a period of prosperity, the "Great War" being fought in Europe guaranteed continuing orders for steel, and industrial peace had reigned in the iron district for nearly a decade. Since 1907, when the local organization of the Western Federation of Miners had been destroyed as a result of an abortive strike, no major labor difficulties had plagued the mine owners. The defeat, achieved by mass importation of immigrant strikebreakers from Europe, was one of several setbacks that had helped to turn the WFM along a more conservative course—leading in 1911 to its affiliation with the American Federation of Labor.<sup>1</sup> The organization did not regain its hold in Minnesota nor was it replaced by any other labor group in the nine years between 1907 and 1916.

This period had seen the spread of industrial unionism as championed by the radical wing of the Industrial Workers of the World, advocating the overthrow of capitalism through strikes, sabotage, and other direct action methods. The greatest strength of the IWW—known popularly as "wobblies"—

lay in the western states, and the organization held a special appeal for unskilled and immigrant labor. Nevertheless, by early 1916 it had made no effort to organize the workers of northern Minnesota despite requests received from Finnish socialists on the iron range.

Craft unionism, as represented by the AFL, had little to offer the mine workers, but the early months of 1916 saw considerable AFL activity in the area. The state convention, which was to meet at Hibbing in July, was preceded by a widely publicized "Labor Forward Movement." This program was directed by E. George Hall and George W. Lawson, the president and secretary respectively of the Minnesota Federation of Labor. Although the movement was not launched officially until April 30, Hall set up headquarters in Hibbing early in the month and engaged in a general organization drive

<sup>1</sup> Paul F. Brissenden, *The I.W.W., A Study of American Syndicalism*, 320 (New York, 1957). For a general discussion of labor relations on the iron range during this period, see Hyman Berman, "Education for Work and Labor Solidarity: The Immigrant Miners and Radicalism on the Mesabi Range," an unpublished study, copy in the Minnesota Historical Society.

throughout the range. He noted that a number of new unions were "budding forth" in Hibbing alone. All, however, encompassed traditional skills, such as plumbing, baking, and painting.<sup>2</sup>

The "Forward Movement" included almost daily meetings in one range town or another. They were held, however, not to organize the miners but to "interest the people of the Mesaba range in the state convention." In a Hibbing address Lawson declared: "Our object in this country is not to disturb anyone but to arouse enthusiasm for the honor that Hibbing has bestowed upon itself of being able to entertain labor workers from all over this great state."<sup>3</sup>

Despite the bland assurances of the AFL leadership, disturbance of some sort on the iron range seemed probable. Labor costs in mining were low in relation to other American industries, and the immigrants from eastern Europe who had arrived by the trainload to take the jobs of striking miners in 1907 had had nearly a decade to learn the meaning of labor solidarity. A letter from a Virginia miner which was published on May 16 in the *Industrial Worker*, the organ of the IWW, called attention to the situation. If the miners were "not soon organized," the Minnesota wobbly argued, "unorganized strikes will break out."<sup>4</sup> His prediction proved correct.

LATE IN MAY Joe Greeni, an Italian immigrant miner, left his job with the Alpena Mine at Virginia because of dissatisfaction with the amount and system of payment. Before departing he agitated without success for a strike. Greeni then went to work in the St. James at Aurora, a small independent mine where discontent already prevailed.<sup>5</sup>

According to the contract system under which all miners on the iron range worked, they were paid not for their time but for the amount of ore produced. Such a piece-work system was manifestly unfair to those men working veins of ore that were unusually hard or lean — a situation the companies tried to meet by frequently varying the contract rate per ton. Miners at the St. James were hampered by large amounts of earth and rock in the ore. They complained, and the company recognized the grievance by raising the rate slightly. Not enough, however, the miners claimed. They felt that even with the increase, they were still receiving an income well below what the contract intended. To this situation Greeni's agitation immediately set fire; on June 2, 1916, he and the rest of the workers at the St. James walked off the job.<sup>6</sup>

The word spread rapidly. The Miller mine in Aurora struck the same day, and within a short time a large part of the Mesabi Range was tied up. Long lines of miners — Finns, Serbians, Italians, Montenegrins, and many from other parts of the world — marched from town to town, passing the word down the seventy-five-mile length of the range that a strike was on. As soon as the walkout reached significant proportions, a new factor appeared in the situation. Following a strategy used elsewhere in the country, the IWW immediately sent a group of young and energetic radicals onto the range to take control. The miners, alone and unaffiliated, lacked even an organization to make their demands known, and they welcomed the leadership of men like Joseph Schmidt, Carlo Tresca, and Sam Scarlett.<sup>7</sup>

All three were immigrants and experienced agitators. Scarlett, the chief organizer

<sup>2</sup> Clippings from the *Minnesota Union Advocate* (St. Paul), March 31, 1916; *Labor World* (Duluth), April 1, 1916; *Brainerd Tribune*, April 6, 1916; unidentified newspaper, April 14, 1916, all among the E. George Hall Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>3</sup> Clippings from the *Mesaba Miner* (Chisholm), May 5, 1916, and the *Hibbing Tribune*, May 9, 1916, in the Hall Papers.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, 4:493 (New York, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> Marion B. Cothren, "When Strike-Breakers Strike," in *The Survey*, 36:535 (August 26, 1916).

<sup>6</sup> *Labor World*, June 24, 1916, p. 6; Minnesota Department of Labor and Industries, *Biennial Report*, 1915-16, p. 169.

<sup>7</sup> Cothren, in *The Survey*, 36:535; Department of Labor and Industries, *Biennial Report*, 1915-16, p. 169.



Striking Mesabi miners marched in midsummer, 1916, to recruit support for their cause.

of the strike, was a native of Scotland who had worked as a wobbly lecturer and organizer since 1911. Schmidt's radical activities had spanned three continents in his thirty-four years. Born in Lithuania, he had been engaged from the age of sixteen in revolutionary plotting against the Czarist government. In 1903 and 1904 he led successful strikes in three Lithuanian towns. Arrested as a result, he was sent to prison in Siberia, escaped in less than a year, and fled to the United States. There he became active in the socialist movement and in 1909 joined the IWW. Tresca was an Italian with a record as a socialist newspaper editor and secretary of his country's largest labor union. After numerous arrests stemming from radical activities, he was given a choice of eighteen months in prison or ten years of exile. He chose exile in the United States, where he remained an editor and labor agitator, taking part in all the major IWW strikes that involved Italians.<sup>8</sup>

THE UNION'S center of operations on the range was IWW Local No. 490, with head-

quarters at Virginia and branches at each mining location. Its officers included both IWW leaders and range workers. Among the latter were John Seppanen of Virginia, who served as treasurer of the general strike committee, and George Andreytchine, a Bulgarian clerical worker formerly employed by one of the mining companies, who filled the post of secretary. The union's active organizers included Joe Greeni, whose agitation had set off the strike. William Wiertola, a Finnish socialist miner, became a leading spokesman for his countrymen.<sup>9</sup>

Strike strategy was decided at regular business meetings, and committees were elected to oversee various aspects of the long and costly contest. Usually two representatives of each nationality group served on a committee. A strike committee was estab-

<sup>8</sup> Harrison George, "Victory on the Mesaba Range," in *International Socialist Review*, 17:430 (January, 1917).

<sup>9</sup> Department of Labor and Industries, *Biennial Report*, 1915-16, p. 168; *United Mine Workers Journal*, August, 1916, p. 4; September, 1916, p. 7; Berman, "Education for Work and Labor Solidarity," 48.

lished in each town in addition to the general committee for the range. The IWW later claimed a complete tie-up of the mines, with from sixteen to twenty thousand men out. Mayor Victor L. Power of Hibbing supported the union's claim with his estimate of fifteen thousand, while the state's Department of Labor and Industries considered seven or eight thousand a more accurate figure.<sup>10</sup>

Local 490 voiced the demands of the miners, co-ordinated strike activities, saw to the distribution of strike benefits (usually in the form of food rather than money), and scheduled meetings for a variety of purposes. These were commonly held in the Finnish socialist halls, some in secrecy, but others open to the public and aimed at encouraging the miners and their families and influencing nonstriking sympathizers. Sometimes a band supplied music, and the program frequently featured some well-known agitator as the main speaker. Frequently films were shown of recent strike parades. Talks given in several languages stressed poor working conditions (details of which were often supported by miners' affidavits) and explained and attacked the contract system — and, of course, the mining companies, with particular attention to the Oliver Iron Mining Division of United States Steel, which, as the principal ore producer on the range, was the strikers' chief adversary.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> George P. West, "The Mesaba Range Strike," in *New Republic*, 8:108 (September 2, 1916); Department of Labor and Industries, *Biennial Report*, 1915-16, p. 168; *Eveleth News*, June 15, 22, September 1, 1916; *Daily Virginian*, June 16, 1916. Unless otherwise noted, all newspaper citations occur on page 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Eveleth News*, June 15, 22, August 3, 1916; *Daily Virginian*, June 16, July 21, August 4, 11, 1916.

<sup>12</sup> A. K. Knickerbocker, "The Contract Wage System for Miners," in *Mining and Scientific Press*, 120:497 (April, 1920); Department of Labor and Industries, *Biennial Report*, 1915-16, p. 168; *Daily Virginian*, June 16, 1916.

<sup>13</sup> Department of Labor and Industries, *Biennial Report*, 1915-16, p. 168.

<sup>14</sup> Tyler Dennett, "The Mining Strike in Minnesota: The Other Side," in *The Outlook*, 113:1048 (August 30, 1916).

It was argued that under the contract system there was no security for the miner, who seldom knew how much his pay envelope would contain at the end of a month. Variations in the difficulty of work and the quality of ore were theoretically compensated by varying the contract rate, but this resulted in frequent and arbitrary changes made without notice to the worker. An even more bitter criticism of the system was the claim that it resulted in bribery and kickbacks to the foremen and mine captains who assigned work sections.<sup>12</sup>

Abolition of the entire contract wage system was first among the economic demands put forward by the IWW soon after the strike began. The system should be replaced, the union maintained, by a flat rate of \$3.50 a day for work in wet underground areas, \$3.00 a day for dry underground work, and \$2.75 a day for work on the surface. Other demands included an eight-hour day, to start as soon as the miners were on company property and to end when they left; payment immediately after discharge; two paydayes rather than one a month; discontinuance of Saturday night work; and the abolition of the private mine police.<sup>13</sup>

The companies, led by Oliver, asserted that the demands were unreasonable, claiming that the miners were already receiving a higher income than that for which they were striking. The contract system, they declared, was actually favored by most of the workers; bribery and kickbacks were against company policy and occurred infrequently. They argued that the miners were free to check each day on their rates of pay and could thus know what their earnings would be. In addition, monthly statements of earnings were given out at least five days before payday. As for semi-monthly payment, the companies claimed that most of the miners did not want the added bookkeeping and pointed out that it was the same money whenever it was paid.<sup>14</sup>

The overtures made by the IWW to the mining companies were in vain. The companies positively refused to deal with the

miners. Tresca and Scarlett stated that the union did not request recognition nor insist on having its organizers take part in bargaining talks. These would be conducted, they said, by a committee of strikers who were not even IWW members. When this offer was rejected, the IWW agreed to withdraw from the district if such action would lead to settlement. At the same time the strikers would pledge in writing that they would not ask for recognition of any union. The companies still refused to meet with the men. A final attempt to bring the adversaries together—a meeting called by several of the village governments on the iron range in mid-July—also failed. Mining company officials did not attend.<sup>15</sup> Their determination to break the strike rather than negotiate was clear.

THE STRATEGY that had worked so well in the strike of 1907 was no longer available to the companies. Prosperity at home and the major war being fought in Europe made it impossible to recruit the number of strikebreakers necessary to keep the mines producing at a normal profit. Thus they either had to wait for hunger to bring the workers back or quickly destroy the strikers' morale and organization. The companies set out to accomplish the latter.

Obviously to protect private property and the safety of nonstriking workers, the mine police forces were increased during June to the proportions of a small army. Loaded with firearms, they barricaded the mines like fortresses and roamed the streets of the range communities. It was reported, for example, that armored cars manned by sharpshooters with rifles patrolled the Hull, Rust, and Mahoning mines near Hibbing, "ready to adopt stringent measures the instant any violence is attempted by striking miners."<sup>16</sup>

It is difficult to avoid concluding that the companies actually sought to provoke violence, knowing that if it occurred it would be laid at the door of the IWW. Such a certainty was justified by statements in the

local press, which repeatedly attacked the union and the immigrant miners in the most vicious demagogic terms. The *Biwabik Times* found that the IWW "doctrine of 'sabotage' has no place on American soil and must be uprooted even though it is necessary to do the very things which we are fond of blaming the south for." According to the *Tower News*, "The trail of the I.W.W. is one of blood. It is their history. It will persist as long as a single follower of their red emblem remains." The editor of the *Chisholm Tribune-Herald*, having quoted these statements with approval, advised that violence against the union would be merely self-defense and assured potential troublemakers that the wobblies were "such cowards that their yellow streak overcomes them when it comes to facing an unarmed native born American."<sup>17</sup>

The first significant disturbance occurred on June 21, when a parade numbering nearly a thousand strikers started out from Hibbing's Workers Hall. They carried a red flag at the head of the procession. Incensed by this, a special police officer named George King, employed by the Duluth, Missabe and Northern Railway, attempted to snatch the flag away, supposedly for patriotic reasons. A *mélee* broke out and King was somewhat mauled along with a number of strikers. The *Virginian* of June 22 reported characteristically that "a policeman's club broke when it landed on the head of one of the strikers."<sup>18</sup>

The miners demanded protection from the town police, and when this was promised by Mayor Power, they scheduled another demonstration for the following day. Gathering in the Workers Hall at nine o'clock in the morning on June 22, they were addressed by Andreytchine, who begged

<sup>15</sup> Dennett, in *The Outlook*, 113:1047; *Hibbing Daily Tribune*, July 1, 1916; *Duluth News Tribune*, June 24, p. 9, July 12, p. 5, 1916.

<sup>16</sup> *Duluth News Tribune*, June 21, p. 5, June 22, p. 5, June 27, p. 5 (quote), 1916.

<sup>17</sup> *Tribune-Herald* (Chisholm), June 23, p. 6, June 30, p. 3, July 7, 1916.

<sup>18</sup> *Labor World*, June 24, 1916; *Duluth News Tribune*, June 22, 1916, p. 5.



*These men gathered in Duluth in May, 1916, for an AFL "Labor Forward Movement" meeting. Though active before the strike, craft unions had little to offer mine workers.*

them to create no disturbance. "We don't want to fight the flag, we don't want to fight anybody," he was quoted as saying. "What we want is more pork chops. We will march and have a big, beautiful parade. Be peaceful brothers. . . . Let the mining companies be the ones to incite disorder. We will put them to shame."<sup>19</sup>

Though Andreytchine was unaware of the fact, the mine police had already obliged. Between five and six o'clock the same morning a large group of Virginia strikers, gathered on public property to picket, were ordered by Oliver guards to disperse. Fighting followed and gunfire was exchanged, although according to witnesses the miners were armed mainly with stones and debris. By the time the battle ended, several of the guards had been hurt, the most serious injury being a scalp wound from a brick.

<sup>19</sup> *Duluth News Tribune*, June 23, 1916, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Daily Virginian*, June 22, 1916; *Duluth News Tribune*, June 23, 1916, p. 1, 9.

<sup>21</sup> *Duluth News Tribune*, June 27, p. 5, June 28, p. 10 (quote), June 29, p. 5, June 30, p. 1, 5, 1916.

Three miners had been shot, one fatally. The slain man was an immigrant named John Alar, who left a widow and three small children. No one was arrested or indicted for the act, but his death stimulated demonstrations by miners throughout the iron district.<sup>20</sup>

Alar's funeral procession was headed by a large red banner reading "Murdered by Oliver Gunmen." Virginia law authorities used this as a pretext for arresting Tresca and Scarlett on charges of criminal libel, but bail was furnished, and they were soon at liberty. They and other IWW leaders called for self-defense on the part of the miners. Andreytchine, speaking to a large audience in Hibbing said: "We shall try civilized methods if possible. But if they attack us they shall pay dearly." Two days later, following a street fight between pickets and guards in which Martin Teller, chief of the Oliver special deputies, was seriously injured, Andreytchine was arrested also.<sup>21</sup>

On June 29, several shots fired by unknown persons at a moving train in the Hull

mine prompted a headline in the *Duluth News Tribune* reading: "Violence Starts in Strike of Iron Miners Throughout Range." The paper, plainly echoing the policies of the mining companies, sought to give the impression that some kind of armed labor rebellion was taking place—a view that was spelled out more clearly a few days later in an editorial stating: "The I.W.W. is not a labor union and the condition faced on the range is not a labor strike. . . . What is faced on the ranges and threatened in Duluth is revolution, just that and nothing less."<sup>22</sup>

The companies had little trouble in persuading the state government to accept this interpretation of events. Governor Joseph A. A. Burnquist was a conservative, strongly sympathetic to United States Steel. On June 30 he dispatched a telegram to St. Louis County Sheriff John R. Meining which read: "Arrest forthwith and take before magistrate, preferably in Duluth, all persons

who have participated and are participating in riots in your county and make complaints against them. Prevent further breaches of the peace, riots and unlawful assemblies. Use all your powers . . . for the preservation of life and property." Meining accordingly deputized over four hundred of the private mine police, although he admitted that many of these newly created law officers had questionable reputations.<sup>23</sup>

AN EVEN MORE telling blow at the strike was delivered early in July, when authorities launched a concerted attack upon the IWW leadership. Andreytchine, under arrest for inciting riot, was an immigrant from Bul-

<sup>22</sup> *Duluth News Tribune*, June 29, p. 5, July 7, p. 8 (quote), 1916.

<sup>23</sup> George P. West, "The Mesaba Strike," in *International Socialist Review*, 17:160 (September, 1916). The full text of Burnquist's telegram was printed on the front page of the *Duluth News Tribune*, July 1, 1916.



"Speed the Parting Guest" was the line over this anti-IWW cartoon from the *Duluth News Tribune* of July 1, 1916.

garia, and deportation proceedings were immediately started against him. At only twenty-two, he was one of the younger IWW organizers. An anarchist and pacifist who had read Tolstoy, Thoreau, and William Lloyd Garrison, he had left his homeland to avoid military service, and after studying for a time in Germany, he had come to the United States. When the strike began, he had been an office employee of the Oliver Division for some two years. Quitting his job, he joined the strikers and the IWW.<sup>24</sup>

The United States immigration inspector at Duluth, Brown McDonald, argued that Andreytchine was in bad company and was dangerous. He pointed out also that since the young man was a sincere anarchist, he would often find himself in jail, thus becoming a public charge. The argument failed to convince the United States Department of Labor, and the deportation action was eventually dropped, but it served to neutralize Andreytchine's strike activities.<sup>25</sup>

The other principal IWW leaders on the range were dealt with in legal proceedings reminiscent of Chicago's notorious Haymarket trial thirty years earlier. The action grew from an incident that occurred in Biwabik on July 3, when several of Sheriff Meining's company-employed deputies forced their way without a warrant into the home of a miner named Phillip Marsonovitch, allegedly to make an arrest for violation of a

local liquor law. Several miners were gathered there and a fight broke out. When it was over, the scene as described in the *Virginian* of July 5 was gruesome, with blood splashed over the floor and walls and bullet marks everywhere. Several persons were wounded, both miners and deputies, and Mrs. Marsonovitch was badly hurt. Two men were killed — James C. Myron, one of the deputies, and Thomas Ladvalla, a soft-drink peddler whose cart was nearby.<sup>26</sup>

It was assumed that the killing of Ladvalla was accidental, but not so Myron's death. According to the coroner's jury, the slayers of the deputy were unknown. Nevertheless, all the miners present at the scene were jailed on charges of first degree murder, as was Mrs. Marsonovitch, who was placed in a cell with her nine-month-old baby. Scarlett, Tresca, Schmidt, and other IWW leaders were also arrested as accessories. It was admitted that they had not been in the vicinity when the incident occurred, but it was argued that their statements calling upon the miners to fight in self-defense had incited the crime.<sup>27</sup>

Until this time the IWW on the range had been represented in court mainly by John A. Keyes of Duluth, but for the murder trial the organization sent in its top legal talent. The defense was led by O. N. Hilton, known affectionately to radicals as "the little judge," who had often been employed in the past by the Western Federation of Miners. He was assisted by Leon Whitsell, a California lawyer, also with a long record as a defender of western miners, and by Arthur Le Sueur, a well-known socialist lawyer and president of the People's College in Fort Scott, Kansas. Keyes also took part, as did Victor Power of Hibbing. Appeals for defense funds were widely circulated, and unions from all over the country responded with small donations.<sup>28</sup>

At the preliminary hearing Duluth municipal judge William H. Smallwood decided against the defense. A grand jury was convened, and eight IWW leaders and sympathizers were indicted for the murder of

<sup>24</sup> *United Mine Workers Journal*, August, 1916, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> *United Mine Workers Journal*, August, 1916, p. 4; September, 1916, p. 1-4.

<sup>26</sup> *Duluth News Tribune*, July 6, 1916.

<sup>27</sup> *Daily Virginian*, July 6, 28, 1916; *Duluth News Tribune*, July 28, 1916; Otto Christensen, "Invading Miners' Homes," in *International Socialist Review*, 17:161 (September, 1916). Among the IWW leaders arrested but not held was Frank H. Little, who had arrived in Minnesota only a day or two before the shooting of Myron. The lynching of Little a year later in Butte, Montana, attracted nationwide attention.

<sup>28</sup> William D. Haywood, *Bill Haywood's Book*, 291 (New York, 1929); George, in *International Socialist Review*, 17:431; *Labor World*, December 2, 1916, p. 3.

Myron. The trial was to begin on the following Monday, but a motion of continuance was granted to the defense on the grounds that the people of the community where the case was to be tried (Virginia) were prejudiced. Thus the trial was carried over to the December term.<sup>29</sup>

In the intervening period an agreement was reached between the lawyers for the state and the defense that three of the miners who had been at the scene of the crime would plead guilty, while charges against the IWW leaders and two of the local defendants would be dropped. The miners who pleaded guilty received indeterminate sentences up to twenty years. These were commuted a short time later. The compromise was made at the insistence of the lawyers, especially Le Sueur, who felt that the hysteria on the range was too great to permit a successful head-on confrontation. It was resented by national IWW

leaders like William D. Haywood, who placed a high value on the propaganda effect of mass trials and believed that range leadership had been duped by the lawyers.<sup>30</sup>

WITH THE MAJORITY of its strike organizers in the Duluth jail, the IWW found that reinforcements were needed on the range. Accordingly it sent the union's general organizer, Joseph Ettor, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, who was already nationally known for her part in the eastern textile strikes of 1912. Her arrival on July 12 had been eagerly looked for, and to judge by the iron range press, she completely took control of the situation, her personality overshadowing

<sup>29</sup> *Duluth News Tribune*, July 28, August 31, 1916; *Daily Virginian*, August 30, September 21, 1916.

<sup>30</sup> Haywood, *Bill Haywood's Book*, 292; Meridel Le Sueur, *Crusaders*, 52 (New York, 1955); Margaret C. Banning, "End of Mesabi Range Strike," in *The Survey*, 37:411 (January, 1917).

"Somebody Has Got to Get Out of the Way!" From *Solidarity*, August 19, 1916



that of Ettor. She caught the imagination of even the hysterical anti-IWW press. Haywood they called a social renegade, black-mailer, and murderer; Scarlett, Tresca, and Schmidt were described in similar terms. But Elizabeth Flynn was "a woman with a big heart, . . . filled to overflowing with sympathy for humanity." Even the *Virginian*, which lauded the arrest of the strike leaders, found her "more sincere in her work than any other agitator of the I.W.W."<sup>31</sup>

Sympathy for the strikers—or at least resentment of the mining companies' high-handed tactics—had never been entirely absent on the range. It was reflected especially in the views of many village officials and local businessmen. Early in July, at a meeting of town officials called in the hope of mediating the strike, representatives of Virginia, Hibbing, Buhl, and Eveleth protested Burnquist's order that arrested miners be tried in Duluth and publicly condemned the governor's personal agent, Gustaf Lindquist of St. Paul, who had been sent to investigate the situation on the range. During the week he spent there, they claimed, he had talked only with mining company officers and had refused to meet with either town officials or representatives of the strikers. Lindquist denied the charge vigorously, but it was probably in response to this local pressure that Governor Burnquist at length sent a commission from the state's Department of Labor and Industries to make an official investigation.<sup>32</sup>

A measure of backing for the miners also came from the AFL, which held its state convention in Hibbing as planned. But although the organization went on record in

support of the strike, a resolution calling for impeachment of the governor because of his grossly antilabor stand was never permitted to reach the floor of the convention. Also ignored was an appeal—both public and private—by Victor Power, asking that the AFL step in and organize the miners.<sup>33</sup>

THESE FACTORS—the staying power and restraint of the IWW leadership, the general sympathy of other labor groups, and the influence of responsible and relatively impartial local governments—helped to prevent the situation from degenerating into an all-out labor war. Such a development could only have resulted in the smashing of the miners' organization and the immediate breaking of the strike. This, apparently, was the hope of the companies, but instead the mines remained closed or operating at a fraction of capacity throughout the summer, the walkout lasting two full months after the mass arrest of its leaders.

There was much conflict, and neither side was free from responsibility for direct acts of violence. Many of these involved attacks on strikebreakers, whom the striking miners saw simply as "scabs" willing to take their jobs while they and their families faced starvation. Illegal picketing was carried on to prevent strikebreakers from reaching work—either by intimidation or direct force. Occasionally vehicles carrying strikebreakers to work were fired upon, as were strikebreakers' homes. At one time two homes were blown up, and three days later it was reported that a boardinghouse full of strikebreakers was riddled with bullets. Strikers sometimes surrounded local jails in an attempt to intimidate officials into releasing their arrested comrades. In Hibbing one mine was attacked and forced to close. There was even an attempt to burn a bridge on the Duluth and Iron Range Railway.<sup>34</sup>

The wives of the strikers were active in various types of agitation. Together with their children, they joined the men in picketing. Often women were arrested for throwing "ancient hen fruit," as the news-

<sup>31</sup> *Duluth News Tribune*, July 12, 27, p. 5, 1916; *Tribune-Herald*, July 21, 1916, p. 2; *Mesaba Ore and the Hibbing News* (Hibbing), July 29, 1916 (quote); *Daily Virginian*, August 3, 1916.

<sup>32</sup> *Duluth News Tribune*, July 8, 13, p. 5, 1916.

<sup>33</sup> *Duluth News Tribune*, July 19, 1916; Berman, "Education for Work and Labor Solidarity," 53.

<sup>34</sup> *Hibbing Daily Tribune*, July 1, 21, August 18, 1916; *Tribune-Herald*, June 30, 1916; *Daily Virginian*, July 1, 1916; *Duluth News Tribune*, July 14, 1916.

papers called it, at strikebreakers. In Chisholm three women were arrested for assaulting a strikebreaker by scratching his face and dumping his lunch box, and on another occasion in the same town a group of some twenty women created a commotion by combining their favorite forms of strike action—picketing, throwing rotten eggs, and dumping lunches. The reaction was not always restrained. In early August the *Duluth News Tribune* reported that in Hibbing 150 deputies “armed with repeating rifles, revolvers, and riot sticks” had attacked a group of female pickets, beating them to the ground, even when they “raised their infants as protection.” Nor did the wives limit themselves to demonstrations. An Aurora woman was charged with cutting the air hoses on ore trains, and the wife of one militant striker was reported manning a rifle in an exchange of fire between strikers and deputies. While the *Virginian* may have exaggerated in stating that outbreaks of violence were usually led by women, the miners’ wives certainly took an active part in the more vigorous forms of strike activity.<sup>35</sup>

At no time, however, was the union implicated in acts of violence or sabotage, and there is little likelihood that evidence linking the IWW with these sporadic outbreaks would have been overlooked by the authorities. Picketing was continued, even though it had been outlawed, but for the most part the IWW leaders cautioned the strikers to “keep their hands in their pockets.”<sup>36</sup>

BOTH THE federal and state agencies investigating the strike placed the major share of blame for violence upon the mining companies and their army of “police.” The report to the United States Commission of Industrial Relations depicted the importation of deputized thugs to break the strike and stated that “the miners of Minnesota and their families face want and suffering and endure the abuse and violence of a private army of gunmen.” It pointed out “the length to which the companies went in

beating up, shooting and jailing and terrorizing their workmen.”<sup>37</sup>

Speaking in more guarded language, the two deputy commissioners representing the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industries said: “We are not entirely in sympathy with the belief that vigorous measures were necessary to maintain peace and safety in this strike. But we are entirely satisfied that the mine guards have exceeded their legal rights and duties and . . . that such violence as has occurred has been more chargeable to the mine guards and police than to the strikers. . . . Numerous cases of arrest of strikers without warrant and unfair trials in the justices’ courts were brought to our attention.” The report went on to note that “every shooting affray . . . has occurred on public property. . . . The parades of the miners had been peaceful, the public police have had no trouble in maintaining order, and if the private mine guards had been compelled to remain on the company property we do not believe that there would ever have been any bloodshed on the range.”<sup>38</sup>

In fairness to the mining companies, it should be pointed out that they felt committed to keeping the mines in operation despite the strike, and to do this meant using strikebreakers. Given the history of labor relations in western mining areas, physical protection for nonstriking employees must have seemed indispensable. Recruiting a large force of private police would hardly have been possible without drawing upon some of the less stable elements of society,

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<sup>35</sup> *Daily Virginian*, June 26, July 22, August 4, 1916; *Tribune-Herald*, July 28, September 8, p. 5, September 18, 1916; *Duluth News Tribune*, August 2, p. 5, August 3, p. 10 (quote), August 4, p. 5 (quote), 1916; *Bear River Journal*, June 22, 1916; *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, June 22, 1916.

<sup>36</sup> *Duluth News Tribune*, July 27, 1916, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> The report of George P. West to the United States Commission on Industrial Relations is reproduced in full in the *United Mine Workers Journal*, August, 1916, p. 12–14.

<sup>38</sup> The report, signed by special inspectors Don D. Lescohier and Martin Cole, was printed in full in the *Duluth News Tribune*, August 17, 1916, p. 8.

and the resulting gang of unruly gunmen was almost inevitable. That these men were deputized was likewise within the tradition of mining areas, and the action received general acceptance in Minnesota.

After gaining the co-operation of the state authorities in jailing the strike leadership, the companies still found themselves faced with opposition from local governments and stubborn resistance from the IWW. In the end the strike was defeated not through arrests or violence, or by importation of strikebreakers, but simply because the resources of the miners, always meager, were finally exhausted. They survived for a while on credit, then on donations. Through the summer many miners took agricultural jobs, but by the end of August the harvest was ending in the area, and instead of sending

<sup>39</sup> Berman, "Education for Work and Labor Solidarity," 54.

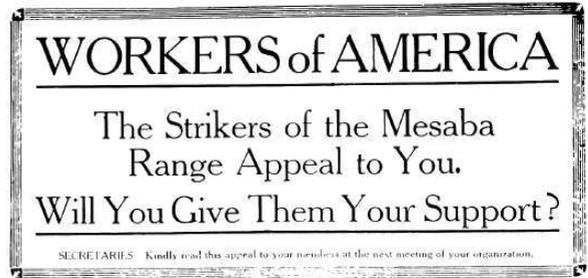
<sup>40</sup> Cothren, in *The Survey*, 36:536.

THE PICTURE of marching strikers on page 84 is from *The Survey* for August 26, 1916. The cartoon on page 90 is reproduced from *Rebel Voices*, edited by Joyce Kornbluth, with permission of the University of Michigan Press. The photograph on page 87 is from the society's picture collection.

money back to the range, those men were returning to their families, thus increasing the burden on strike funds. By early September half the mines were operating, for men with families were slowly returning to work. The national office of the IWW stopped supplying funds for the range, no doubt feeling that the cause was lost. At last, between September 17 and September 21, at meetings in various range towns, the men voted to call the strike off.<sup>39</sup>

By today's standards, the bloody three-month contest would be considered an extremely violent one. Yet at its close in September the employers commented with some truth on the "remarkable absence of violence."<sup>40</sup> Beatings, lynchings, and gun fights were commonplace in the freewheeling capitalism of western mining towns at the time. They had been relatively infrequent on the range. As in 1907, Minnesota had avoided such extremes of industrial warfare as pitched battles, vigilante action, and herding of workers into bull pens. The very fact that the Mesabi strike of 1916 was considered a relatively peaceful one is a commentary on labor relations in the period.

*A plea for help, published in Virginia, September 6, 1916, appeared under the aegis of the Mesaba Iron Range Strikers' Relief and Defense Committee.*



<sup>41</sup> Sheriff Meining admitted to the writer that if gunmen in the employ of a private corporation were to enter his home without knocking and threaten the safety and lives of himself and family he would feel justified in defending himself. "...Geo. P. West's report.

## THE IRON ORE MINERS

*This song, purportedly written in jail by an anonymous miner, was first published in Solidarity, August 5, 1916. It is here reproduced from Rebel Voices, edited by Joyce Kornbluh, with permission of the University of Michigan Press. The tune is "It's a Long Way to Tipperary."*

The Miners of the Iron Range  
Know there was something wrong  
They banded all together, yes,  
In One Big Union strong.  
The Steel Trust got the shivers,  
And the Mine Guards had some fits,  
The Miners didn't give a damn,  
But closed down all the pits.

It's a long way to monthly pay day,  
It's a long way to go  
It's a long way to monthly pay day,  
For the Miners need the dough,  
Goodbye Steel Trust profits,  
The Morgans they feel blue.  
It's a long way to monthly pay day  
For the miners want two.

They worked like hell on contract, yes,  
And got paid by the day,  
Whenever they got fired, yes,  
The bosses held their pay.  
But now they want a guarantee  
Of just three bones a day.  
And when they quit their lousy jobs  
They must receive their pay.

It's the wrong way to work, by contract  
It's the wrong way to go.  
It's the wrong way to work by contract  
For the Miners need the dough.  
Goodbye bosses' handouts, —  
Farewell Hibbing Square.  
It's the wrong way to work by contract  
You will find no Miners there.

John Allar died of Mine Guards' guns  
The Steel Trust had engaged.  
At Gilbert, wives and children  
Of the Miners were outraged  
No Mine Guards were arrested,  
Yet the law is claimed to be  
The mightiest conception  
Of a big democracy.

It's the wrong way to treat the Miners,  
It's the wrong way to go.  
It's the wrong way to best the Miners,  
As the Steel Trust soon will know.  
God help those dirty Mine Guards,  
The Miners won't forget.  
It's the wrong way to treat the Miners,  
And the guards will know that yet.

The Governor got his orders for  
To try and break the strike.  
He sent his henchmen on the Range,  
Just what the Steel Trust liked.  
The Miners were arrested, yes,  
And thrown into the jail,  
But yet they had no legal rights  
When they presented bail.

It's a short way to next election,  
It's a short way to go.  
For the Governor's in deep reflection  
As to Labor's vote, you know.  
Goodbye, Dear Old State House,  
Farewell, Bernquist there.  
It's a short way to next election  
And you'll find no Bernquist there.

Get busy, was the order to  
The lackeys of the Trust,  
Jail all the Organizers  
And the Strike will surely bust.  
Trump up a charge, a strong one,  
That will kill all sympathy,  
So murder was the frame-up,  
And one of first degree.

It is this way in Minnesota  
Is it this way you go?  
It is this way in Minnesota,  
Where justice has no show.  
Wake up all Wage Workers,  
In One Big Union strong.  
If we all act unified together,  
We can right all things that's wrong.



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