
THE 1916 MINNESOTA MINERS' STRIKE AGAINST U.S. STEEL

Robert M. Eleff

UNITED STATES STEEL, the nation's first billion-dollar corporation, was created in 1901. It consolidated the steel-producing holdings of such financial giants as J. P. Morgan and Andrew Carnegie and the iron ore mines of John D. Rockefeller. On June 17 of that year the company's executive committee passed a resolution outlining its labor policies. "[W]e are unalterably opposed," it read, "to any extension of union labor and advise subsidiary companies to take firm position when these questions come up."¹

The company held steadfastly to this antiunion viewpoint. In a report issued in 1914, the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations concluded that "The most important setbacks encountered by collective bargaining on a national scale in the past fifteen years are directly traceable to the United States Steel Corporation and its subsidiary companies."² Yet another of these setbacks occurred on Minnesota's Mesabi Iron Range in the summer of 1916, when unorganized immigrant

miners battled the "Steel Trust" for better wages and improved working conditions in one of the largest and most violent labor strikes in Minnesota's history. Before the bitter confrontation ended that fall, three men were dead, scores were injured, and hundreds arrested.

In the quarter century since iron ore was first discovered on the Mesabi Range in northern Minnesota in 1892, a system was developed that connected underground and open-pit mines to hundreds of miles of railway that transported ore southeast to Duluth; giant carriers shipped the ore across the Great Lakes to America's steel-making centers in Illinois, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Overseeing these vast integrated enterprises were the nation's steel companies, of which the largest by far was U.S. Steel. In 1908 the subsidiary Oliver Mining Company controlled more than 75 percent of the ore resources on the Mesabi Range, the source of about two-thirds of all the iron ore produced in the country.³

The range itself had grown into a collection of over 20 villages and towns with a total population of 60,000 spread over 80 miles. These towns were as ethnically diverse as any in America. Dozens of nationalities were represented—English, Scotch, Irish, Italian, Slovenian, Montenegrin, Austrian, Serbian, Greek, Croatian, Finnish, and Bohemian. Most of them worked in the mines.⁴

The work was grueling. A young Finnish miner recalled his initiation into the mines: "My first days were a foretaste of hell. After making several trips from the

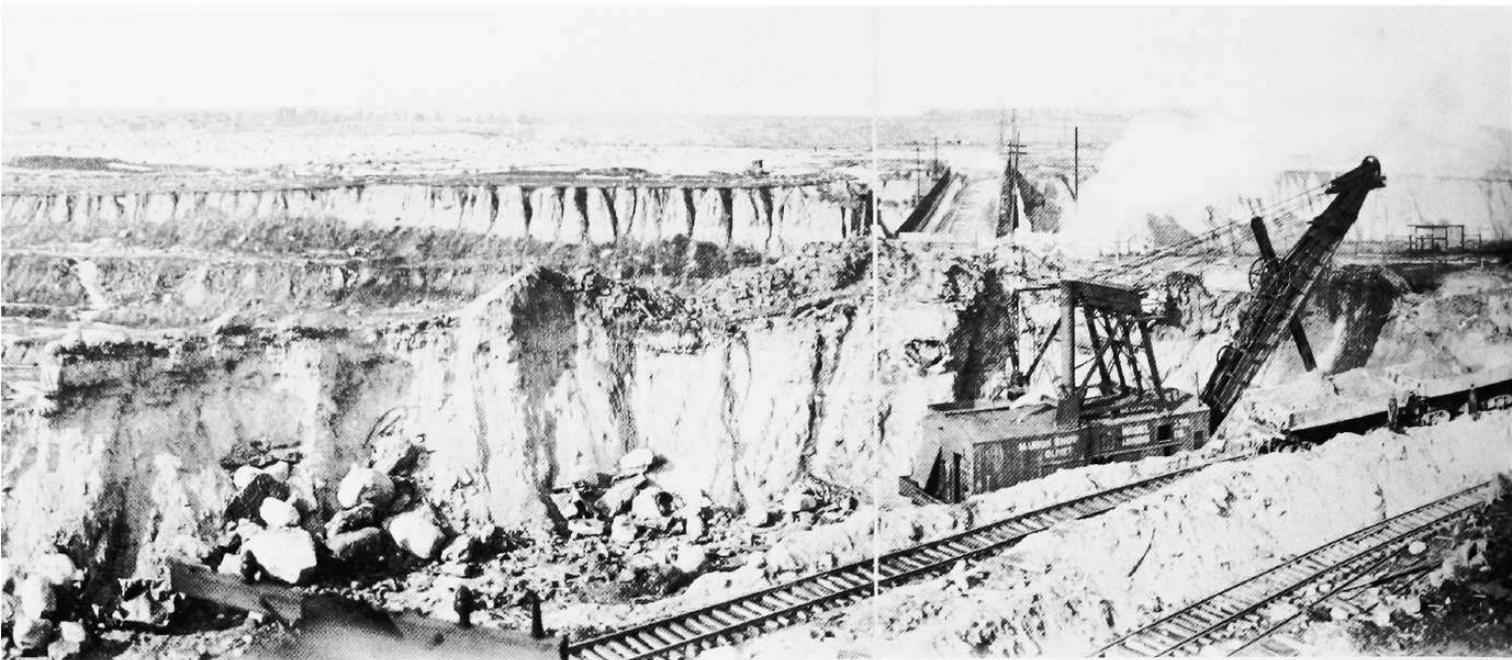
¹ David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 62. For a brief account of the establishment of U.S. Steel, see David A. Walker, *Iron Frontier: The Discovery and Early Development of Minnesota's Three Ranges* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society [MHS] Press, 1979), 224–230.

² Quoted in Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, volume 4, *The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1917* (New York: International Publishers, 1965), 497. See also Neil Betten, "Riot, Revolution, Repression in the Iron Range Strike of 1916," *Minnesota History* 41 (Summer, 1968): 82–93.

³ Foner, *History of Labor*, 4:487; John Borchert and Neil Gustafson, *Atlas of Minnesota Resources & Settlement* (Minneapolis: Center for Urban and Regional Affairs—Minnesota State Planning Agency, 1980), 52.

⁴ C. Whit Pfeiffer, "From 'Bohunks' to Finns," *Survey* 36 (April 1, 1916): 8.

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A PANORAMIC VIEW of open-pit mining in the Hibbing area, photographed in the 1920s

diggings to the shaft, pushing a heavy tramcar, I was wretchedly tired. My thirst was unquenchable; sweat flowed in rivulets from my pores. My legs threatened to give way, and my body became limp. . . . When lunchtime came . . . My food did not go down; my eyes saw dizzily; my ears rang; my heart pounded violently. . . . As we rode the cage to the surface after the shift was over, my partner showed me his gnarled, rust-eaten hands, and remarked: 'When your paws are like these, you'll be able to stand the grind.'"⁵

The pace of work was dominated by what one historian called "the rushing, pushing, almost frantic concern for output." Testimony from miners in the ethnic newspapers of the time agreed. "The watchman is strict and drives us like cattle," complained a miner from Ely. "Everyone has a right to drive you animal-like to work," added a Chisholm miner. "Always they are driving us in all manner of ways. We must work like former slaves in the South . . . until the sweat rolls off every hair on our head," commented another.⁶

The company's reduction of the workday from ten to eight hours in March of 1912 did not ease the miner's burden. "[W]e have made it very plain to the men," the general superintendent of the Chisholm district reported to Oliver's president, "that there is to be no increase in contract prices, and all miners are expected to do as much or more in the eight hours than they formerly did in the ten."⁷

For this backbreaking work, miners were paid on the "contract system," a kind of piece-rate system that rewarded them for the amount of ore mined rather

than hours worked. The contract rate was set for each man by the mining captain based on his estimate of the quantity of ore that could be produced given the difficulty of extracting it from the location the miner was working. Contract rates were adjusted upwards or downwards as thinner or richer veins were uncovered. At the end of the month, deductions from wages were made for the amount of fuses, powder, blasting caps, and other company supplies used. The Minnesota Department of Labor and Industries estimated that contract rates during 1915–16 averaged between \$2.80 and \$3.25 per day on the range. Open-pit miners, not paid on the contract system, averaged \$2.25 to \$2.60.⁸

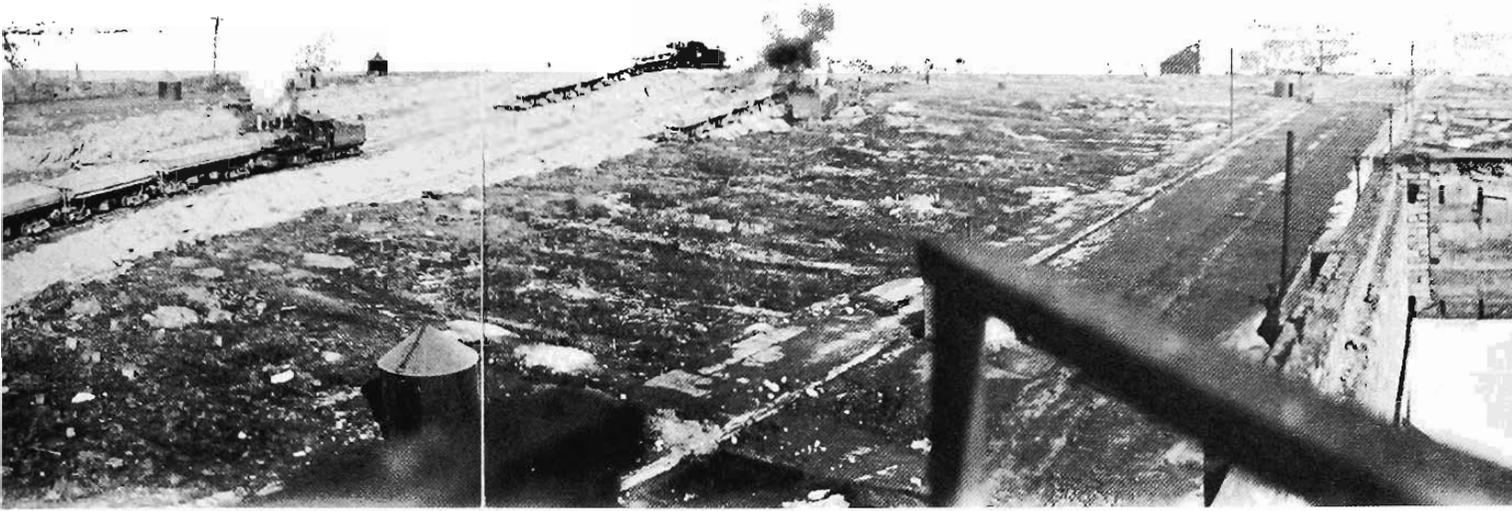
The company claimed that contract rates were raised to \$3.40 in May, 1916, but miners argued that deductions (which were not itemized) rose correspondingly, so that a miner's net pay was often below \$3.00 and sometimes below \$2.00 a day. In comparison, unskilled workers on the docks of Duluth were making \$2.75 to \$3.00 per day in August, 1916, a record high. Most important, the contract system was open to abuse. Miners claimed that mining captains often de-

⁵ Quoted in John I. Kolehmainen, *Sow the Golden Seed* (New York: Arno Press, 1979), 5.

⁶ Hyman Berman, "Education for Work and Labor Solidarity: The Immigrant Miners and Radicalism on the Iron Range," 12, unpublished manuscript, copy in MHS.

⁷ Memorandum, A. J. Sullivan to W. J. Olcott, Mar. 19, 1912, James S. Steel Papers, MHS.

⁸ Minnesota Department of Labor and Industries, *Biennial Report, 1915-1916*, 148, 169, 170.



manded bribes in return for choice working locations. Mike Stark, a Chisholm miner for 14 years, testified during the strike, "I can't make money there, and the good places—they are single men, you know. They go to saloons with the captains and bosses, and buy [them] cigars, and so forth, and they have good places, but we married men can't do that."⁹

Those who were not so favored with good locations had to work harder to obtain a decent wage. Declared one miner, "I challenge anybody to say that any miner that works in these mines at contract for ten years that he is entirely fit for any labor after he gets to be 35 or 40 years. . . . He is absolutely physically unfit for labor after that." Another simply stated, "That contract system just kills the man."¹⁰

"The mining captains did all the hiring," recalled one Oliver employee. "Some mining captains used to

insist on being paid off by the men. . . . A common way was via a snuff box with money in it." "Payoff was common," agreed one of his coworkers. Other methods included the compulsory purchase of raffle tickets with nonexistent prizes, Christmas gifts, and the sharing of moose or deer shot while hunting. The company recognized that abuses existed. A 1908 memorandum to the superintendent of the Holman Mine called for swift penalties for bribery: "In case any Foreman, regardless of his position, is accepting money for giving work to an employe, he must be discharged at once."¹¹

In March, 1912, Oliver president William J. Olcott notified all superintendents that he was aware that mining captains sometimes adjusted contract rates downward at the end of a month. "This is certainly radically wrong in principle and in practice," he noted, for it removed a miner's incentive to work hard.¹² Despite these warnings, such abuses continued.

⁹ Marion B. Cothren, "When Strike-Breakers Strike," *Survey* 36 (Aug. 26, 1916): 535; *Duluth Herald*, Aug. 3, 1916, p. 16; Proceedings, July 7, 1916, meeting of Officials of Range Municipalities, quoted in *Strikers' News—Official Strike Bulletin of the Striking Iron Ore Miners of the Mesaba Range* (Hibbing), Aug. 4, 1916, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Strikers' News*, Aug. 4, 1916, p. 1.

¹¹ Interviews with Odin Rudstrom, Aug. 28, 1962, and Steve Toman, Aug. 29, 1962; memorandum, John C. Greenway to L. R. Salsich, June 8, 1908—all in Steel Papers. See also Mary Heaton Vorse, "The Mining Strike in Minnesota Iron—From the Miners' Point of View," *The Outlook* 113 (Aug. 30, 1916): 1045; Berman, "Education for Work," 15.

¹² Memorandum, Olcott to all superintendents, Mar. 11, 1912, Steel Papers.



WILLIAM J. OLCOTT,
about 1901

Another source of tension between management and labor centered on ethnic rivalries. Many of the managers and mining captains were of Scotch-Irish, Cornish, or native stock, while the majority of the lower-paying laboring jobs went to Finns, Italians, Croatians, and other recent immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Negative ethnic comments were prevalent among middle-level management as well. A query about labor conditions from Oliver's president in 1909 brought these responses from managers at various company locations: "About two-thirds of the common laborers are Montenegrins and not very desirable as they are not good workmen," wrote one. "Very few of those looking for underground work are competent for this kind of employment, being principally Italians, Austrians and Montenegrins," reported another. "[W]e estimate that out of the total number of men seeking employment only about 40 per cent are desirable. This estimate is based largely on the nationality of the unemployed men and the location at which they reside."¹³

DESPITE LOW WAGES, living costs on the range were high. One investigator estimated in 1916 that housing costs and rents were 20 percent higher than in the Twin Cities and food costs ranged from 50 to 100 percent more. Housing quality was often less than satisfactory. Although the company built some modern, good-quality housing for employees, these units were inadequate for the large workforce involved.¹⁴

One Oliver employee described early housing on the range as "definitely substandard, being made with clapboard lined with tarpaper. . . . In winter the nail heads on the inside of the house would be all covered with frost." Many of the unmarried miners lived in boardinghouses, recalled by one miner as "hot in summer, cold in winter, and full of cockroaches all year."¹⁵

Housing conditions on the range were assessed in July, 1908, by Henry B. Needham, an inspector of working and living conditions of laborers who were then constructing the Panama Canal. While praising the steel company for its model homes built for skilled laborers, Needham had less complimentary words for the condition in which unskilled workers lived. "To tell the honest truth," he confided to a Duluth newspaper, "I wouldn't keep cattle in some of the places I saw used for men to live in." Writing later that month to President Theodore Roosevelt, Needham described a mining camp in the Chisholm district "located in a mudhole, foul-smelling water all about and refuse everywhere. Forty men were housed in a shack 28 by 16 [feet] . . . which was almost devoid of ventilation." When he told company officials of his findings, "they said it was no use to do any better, for some of the foreigners are so ignorant that they couldn't appreciate it." Needham concluded: "It is but the truth to say, that the common

laborer on the Canal Zone . . . is far better treated than the common laborer on the Missabe Range; in short, there is not the slightest comparison."¹⁶

These living and working conditions led to attempts on the part of the miners to organize collectively to improve their lot. But organizing efforts begun in 1894, 1896, 1903, and 1904 were quickly stamped out by Oliver, whose labor policy was unyielding. Internal memoranda show the company's deep concern over union activities. "There is a labor agitator in this city trying to form a union," wrote one company official in the spring of 1896, "and [we] have brought all possible means to bear on him [to prevent him] from getting our men." In 1903, a similar message to Oliver's president warned of a Finn trying to start a union at mines around Ely, on the Vermilion Range: "I took steps to drive him from the places mentioned, and he has . . . gone to the Mesaba Range. . . . This may be of benefit to the Mining Men under you . . . so as to keep a look out for him and suppress him as soon as possible whenever he should turn up."¹⁷

The company also maintained an extensive spying system which kept a close watch on those attending meetings about unions or subscribing to radical publications. Workers were summarily dismissed and black-listed for such activities. Another method used to deter any thoughts of strikes was to make sure sufficient surplus labor existed. A memorandum to Oliver's general manager in Duluth read, "I note your intention to commence importing common labor . . . at once with an idea of maintaining a large floating supply."¹⁸

IN JULY, 1907, a successful organizing effort by the Western Federation of Miners resulted in a strike when 200 union members were discharged by the company. Oliver adamantly refused to negotiate. "[S]hould a committee be appointed . . . in regard to increase in wages and shorter hours, if they belong to the Western

¹³ Arthur Edwin Puotinen, *Finnish Radicals and Religion in Midwestern Mining Towns, 1865-1914* (New York: Arno Press, 1979), 81; memoranda, J. H. McLean to Olcott, April 19, 1909, W. H. Johnston to McLean, April 19, 1909, both in Steel Papers.

¹⁴ Pfeiffer, "From 'Bohunks' to Finns," 8-9.

¹⁵ Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Nick Lagather, Mar. 18, 1962, and Toman interview, both in Steel Papers.

¹⁶ *Duluth Evening Herald*, July 1, 1908, p. 9; Needham to Roosevelt, July 24, 1908, copy in Steel Papers.

¹⁷ Memoranda, "J. P." [John Pengilly] to "CPC," Mar. 23, 1896, and Pengilly to T. F. Cole, Jan. 20, 1903, Steel Papers.

¹⁸ Frank L. Palmer, *Spies in Steel: An Expose of Industrial War* (Denver: Labor Press, 1928); interview with Al Prisk, April 4, 1962, and memorandum, Greenway to Pentecost Mitchell, Mar. 11, 1907, both in Steel Papers. On earlier company espionage, see Brody, *Steelworkers in America*, 82-84.



MISSABE MOUNTAIN, open-pit mine at Virginia, 1920

Federation of Miners, or any other union, no hearing will be allowed," wrote the company's general superintendent to officials in Duluth. The strike was broken within two months, as the company spent more than a

¹⁹ Charles Trezona to Mitchell, July 19, 1907, Steel Papers; Palmer, *Spies in Steel*, 62. On the 1907 strike, see Neil Betten, "Strike on the Mesabi—1907," *Minnesota History* 40 (Fall, 1967): 340–347.

²⁰ Puotinen, *Finnish Radicals*, 317–320; Kolehmainen, *Sow the Seed*, 40–41. National membership reached 15,525 by 1914, contained in 274 locals. On the federation, see also Michael G. Karni, "The Founding of the Finnish Socialist Federation and the Minnesota Strike of 1907," in *For the Common Good: Finnish Immigrants and the Radical Response to Industrial America*, ed. Michael G. Karni and Douglas J. Ollila, Jr. (Superior, Wis.: Tyomies Society, 1977), 70–71.

²¹ Trezona to Cole, July 24, 1907, Steel Papers; Karni, "Founding of the Finnish Federation," 78. James S. Steel of the U.S. Steel Corporation claimed in 1969 that Finns had made up 25 percent of the work force before the 1907 strike but only 10 percent a year later because of the company blacklist; Edward Marolt, "The Development of Labor Unionism in the Iron Mining Industry of the Virginia-Eveleth District," 49, Master's thesis, University of Minnesota, 1969, copy in MHS.

²² Cothren, "When Strike-Breakers Strike," 535.

²³ Cothren, "When Strike-Breakers Strike," 535; Foner, *History of the Labor Movement*, 4:494.

quarter of a million dollars to hire and arm mine guards and to import thousands of strikebreakers.¹⁹

The 1907 uprising influenced the course of the 1916 strike in an important respect. The company purged its workforce of pro-union elements by changing its ethnic makeup. In 1907, Finnish miners had formed the majority of the strike leadership and were the most militant of the rank and file, a result of the strong affinity for socialism among Finns. The Finnish Socialist Federation, founded a year earlier in Hibbing, counted 1,034 members on the Mesabi in 1910.²⁰

Even before the end of the strike Oliver was making plans to rid itself of these undesirable employees. "[A] great many of the Finns employed here have quit," reported one of the company's superintendents. "In my judgment they should not be re-employed and I have given instructions to our Mining Captains to this effect." The company estimated that 18 percent of its prestrike workforce was of Finnish extraction. After the strike, this proportion dropped to 8 percent, as 1,200 Finns were denied employment as a result of the company's blacklist.²¹

Thus, in the aftermath of the 1907 strike, a large group of union sympathizers was removed from the workforce and replaced with strikebreakers. Many of the latter had been recruited on the docks of Eastern cities to which they had recently immigrated, ignorant of U.S. labor conditions. Nearly a decade on the iron ranges under the tutelage of the U.S. Steel Corporation, however, provided them with a first-rate education on the subject. Ironically, the strikebreakers of 1907 formed the nucleus of the strikers of 1916.²²

ON MAY 30, 1916, Joe Greeni, who worked in the Alpena Mine in Virginia, opened his pay envelope to discover an amount much less than he expected. After spending the next three days unsuccessfully exhorting his fellow workers to strike, he went to the St. James Mine in Aurora, where his arguments were better received. Forty miners walked off the job on June 3 and began to spread their message throughout the Mesabi. Parades of miners, often supplemented by women pushing baby carriages, made their way from town to town. Within days, several mines had been shut down.²³

The unorganized miners soon realized that they needed help in their battle with the steel trust. The Western Federation of Miners, remembering its defeat in 1907 and weakened by an unsuccessful strike in the Michigan copper mines in 1913, was uninterested in organizing the range miners. The Minnesota branch of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was likewise unconcerned. Proud of its craft-oriented basis and record of moderation and co-operation with business interests, the AFL was not about to organize a flock of

laws, our institutions and their own rights." according to the state AFL organ) in a region well known for its Socialist tendencies. State AFL president E. George Hall even went so far as to denounce the strike on a visit to Hibbing on June 17. Abandoned by the mainstream labor movement, the strikers turned to the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), who responded immediately by sending its top organizers.²¹

The militant and class-conscious IWW, whose members were nicknamed "Wobblies," had built its reputation by organizing workers forsaken by the mainstream labor movement: the unskilled, immigrants, women, blacks. Its ultimate goal was not a better contract, but a better world. When all workers had signed up with the "One Big Union," a general strike would be called, and workers would return to work only on condition that the factories be turned over to the employees to manage.

Although the Wobblies had won only one major strike—that of textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912—their tactics, rhetoric, and publicity made them a feared element among employers and a conservative society at large. Their involvement in the miners' strike was a decisive step, for, in some sense, the strikers and their grievances were shunted aside as the press and the business community focused instead on the IWW.

The organizers that IWW leader William D. (Big Bill) Haywood sent to the range were seasoned veterans of the labor wars of the early 20th century. Carlo Tresca, secretary of the largest labor union in Italy, had been exiled in 1904 and became an IWW leader in the United States. He was instrumental in the IWW-led strikes in Lawrence and Paterson, New Jersey. Joe Schmidt, born in Lithuania, had been active in labor unions and in organizations to overthrow the Russian czar. Exiled to Siberia, he escaped and made his way on foot across Russia and Europe, moving finally to America. Sam Scarlett, a Scot, had been an IWW lecturer and agitator since 1911.²⁵

On June 15, a meeting of 1,500 striking miners was held at the Finnish Socialist Hall in Virginia. Scarlett "advised the strikers not to be violent, and do nothing but keep their hands in their pockets." A 150-man squad of "strike police" was appointed to make sure that advice was taken, although Scarlett also warned that if violence were perpetrated against the strikers, they would respond in kind.

A Central Strike Committee and various other groups were elected to oversee the strike. The miners also drew up a list of demands to present to the mining companies:

1. Pay of \$3.50 per day in underground wet places, \$3.00 in dry places, \$2.75 in open-pit mines;
2. An eight-hour day, measured portal to portal;

3. Payment twice a month;
4. Immediate payment when a miner quits;
5. Abolishment of the 4-hour Saturday night shift;
6. Abolishment of overtime work, or double payment for it;
7. Abolishment of contract work; and
8. Release of all men arrested during the strike.²⁶

Notably absent from this list was a demand for union recognition. "We do not ask that our union be recognized by the mining companies," said Scarlett a week later, "but are here to see that the workers are to be paid a fair living wage. We are making every possible attempt to have a committee of miners, not the so-called agitators . . . meet with the employers."

"Iron Miners' Strike on Range Assumes Alarming Magnitude," read a banner headline in the *Duluth News Tribune* on June 21, reporting a vote to strike by 1,200 miners at Hibbing's Workers' Hall. News of other mines closing in Eveleth, Virginia, and Chisholm continued to pour in throughout June. "We are now more than 5,000 strong," Tresca boasted, as the Duluth paper reported that "Hardly a shovel of ore was turned in a mine today."²⁷

At a parade of 1,500 miners in Hibbing that same day, workers refused to march without the American flag. Other banners carried read, "This Village Is Not Governed By The Steel Trust," "Citizens, We Want Your Sympathy," and "Gunmen Beware—Keep Away." Peacefulness was not the order of the day at Virginia, however. The first strike-related death was that of miner John Alar, shot in front of his home adjacent to a group of pickets demonstrating on public property.²⁸

A store owner who witnessed the affray "claimed that the strikers were very orderly and were not armed, saying that they were making requests of miners not to go to work, but were using no force to prevent them from working." A second store owner, shot in the leg,

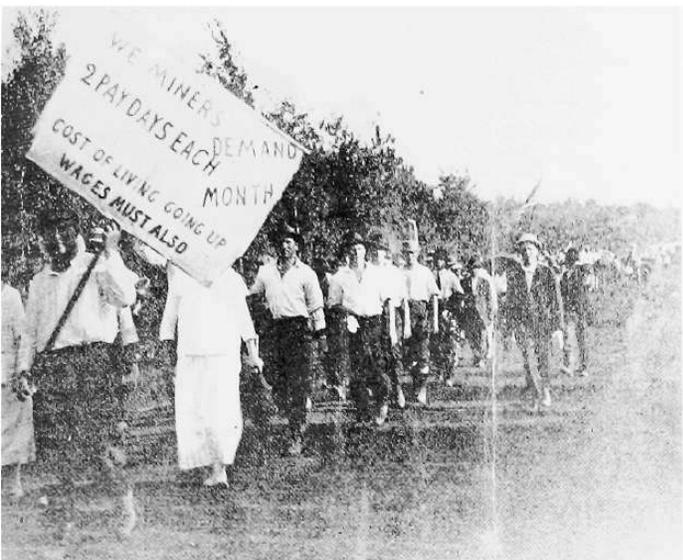
²⁴ Here and two paragraphs below, see Foner, *History of the Labor Movement*, 4:14–19, 340–343, 493; Donald G. Sofchak, "Organized Labor and the Iron Ore Miners of Northern Minnesota, 1907–1936," *Labor History* 12 (Spring, 1971): 214, 236–237.

²⁵ Harrison George, "Victory on the Mesaba Range," *International Socialist Review* 17 (Jan., 1917):429–431.

²⁶ Here and below, see *Duluth News Tribune* (hereafter cited as *DNT*), June 16, p. 1, June 24, p. 9, both 1916. Unless otherwise noted, all newspaper citations refer to 1916.

²⁷ *DNT*, June 23, p. 9. Estimates on the number of strikers vary widely, from a low of 2,000 to a high of 20,000; the latter figure exceeds the total number (18,314) of miners employed statewide. *DNT*, Sept. 12, p. 6; Department of Labor, *Biennial Report, 1915-1916*, 166. IWW historian Donald E. Winters claimed that 8,000 miners, of whom 5,000 were IWW members, took part in the strike at its peak; Minnesota Public Radio, "The Strike Is On," a tape on file in MHS.

²⁸ *DNT*, June 23, p. 9.



STRIKING MINERS, parading in the summer of 1916

alleged that “the police started the trouble by attempting to force the strikers to leave the place and in forcing them to do so . . . 60 shots were fired.” At an inquest the next day, it was determined that Alar was shot by an “unknown person.” No one was ever indicted.²⁹

Four days later, 3,000 miners attended Alar’s funeral carrying a red banner that proclaimed, “Murdered By Oliver Gunmen.” No priest would conduct burial services for the dead striker. At the graveside, Carlo Tresca asked the crowd to take an oath “that if any Oliver gunmen shoot or wound any miner, we will take a tooth for a tooth, an eye for an eye or a life for a life.” The crowd repeated the oath.³⁰

THE MINING COMPANIES and their supporters in the range towns were not inactive in the face of the growing threat. With the outbreak of World War I cutting off immigration, strikebreakers could not be supplied so readily as in the 1907 strike, and other methods for defeating the workers were sought. One tactic used was to neutralize the strike leaders by keeping them in jail as much as possible. For example, two days after Alar’s funeral, Tresca, Scarlett, Schmidt, and others were arrested for criminal libel because the banner carried at the funeral was alleged to have “defamed” and

²⁹ DNT, June 23, 24, both p. 9.

³⁰ DNT, June 27, p. 5.

³¹ DNT, June 29, p. 5.

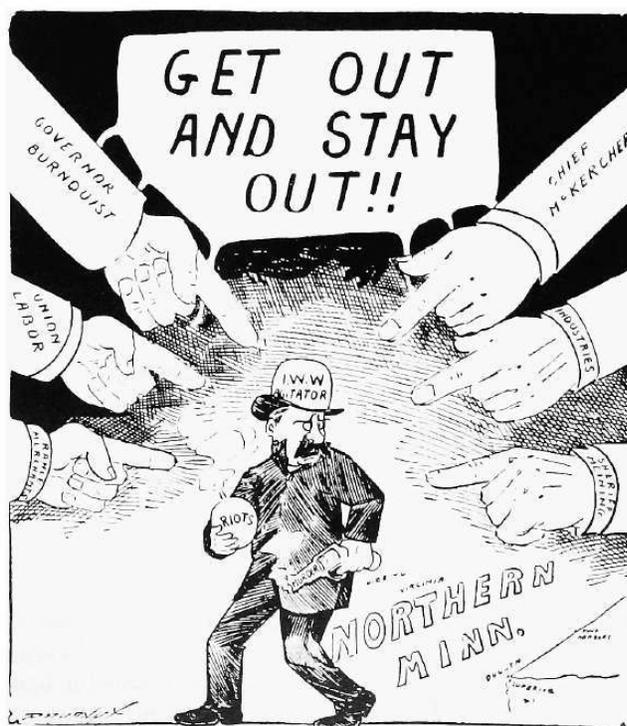
³² Ralph Stone, Itasca County attorney, to Gov. J. A. A. Burnquist, July 11, 1916, and Burnquist to Stone, July 14, 1916, J. A. A. Burnquist Papers, MHS. See also DNT, June 28, p. 10, July 6, p. 1, July 13, p. 5; Foner, *History of the Labor Movement*, 4:501.

“injured” the company. Though the men were soon freed on bail, the constant legal battles absorbed time and energy that otherwise would have been devoted to directing the strike.³¹

When another strike leader, George Andreytchine, was arrested in late June on charges of inciting a riot, federal immigration officials were brought into the case, and deportation proceedings were instituted against him. Although these efforts were later dropped, he was removed from the scene of the strike for four crucial weeks. This penchant for arrests sometimes became ludicrous. The secretary of the Duluth local of the IWW was arrested on a charge of spitting on the sidewalk in front of his own store. In Chisholm a striker was knocked senseless by a blow to the jaw from a miner he had tried to dissuade from working. According to a news report, “A policeman picked up the unconscious man and brought him to the courthouse, where upon recovery, he was arraigned on a charge of picketing and assault. He was fined \$100 or 90 days in the county jail.”³²

The second form of pressure on the strikers was monetary. Wholesale grocery houses in Duluth had previously rendered monthly statements to grocers on the range, enabling miners, who were paid only once a month, to make purchases on credit. The wholesalers now served notice to grocers in such towns as Gilbert, Aurora, Eveleth, and Biwabik that they were required to make weekly cash payments, ending credit purchases

GETTING GOOD ADVICE FROM ALL SIDES



by both striking and working miners. When the strikers retaliated by opening their own co-operative stores, pressure from the mining companies on Duluth wholesalers soon prevented them from receiving any goods. The strikers were also abandoned by charitable institutions. The Associated Charities in Hibbing and Virginia refused help to striking miners or their families.³³

Support money came from two sources. First, strike benefits were paid from funds collected by the IWW throughout the country. Second, many strikers traveled west to work the harvest or found other jobs away from the range, sending cash home to support their families and the strike.³⁴

The civil liberties of strikers were also suppressed in an effort to stop them from spreading their message and soliciting funds. The Virginia city council unanimously passed a resolution barring all demonstrations or public gatherings within the city limits. Duluth enacted a law prohibiting the distribution of handbills within the city, violation of which was punishable by a fine of \$100 or 85 days in jail. In Nashwauk, the sheriff and his deputies regularly dispersed all meetings, indoors or outdoors, picketing, and even picnics held by the strikers.³⁵

The most effective means of intimidating the strikers was through force. The day of Alar's funeral, the *News Tribune* described the measures taken by Oliver at two of its properties: "Two armored cars patrolled the Hull-Rust and Mahoning mines. Each car contained 22 sharpshooters armed with rapid fire Winchesters. At night the mines are armed with a force of 300 deputies."³⁶

After a brawl between pickets and mine guards at Hibbing in which Oliver's chief of special deputies was stabbed, the company also sought the help of Minnesota Governor J. A. A. Burnquist in containing the strike. On June 30 he wired St. Louis County Sheriff John R. Meining: "Arrest forthwith and take before magistrate, preferably in Duluth, all persons who have participated and are participating in riots in your county. . . . Prevent further breaches of the peace, riots and unlawful assemblies. Use all your powers, including the summoning of a posse, for the preservation of life and property." Meining accordingly deputized over 400 of the private mining company guards: eventually, he had a force of over 1,000 men. Meining later admitted that he made no attempt to investigate the character of the private gunmen he infused with public authority. The new deputies could now roam freely, far from company property.³⁷

SEVERAL MAYORS on the range viewed the miners' cause sympathetically. Chief executives in Hibbing, Virginia, Aurora, Biwabik, Buhl, and Chisholm had all defeated candidates supported by the mining com-

panies in the most recent elections by forging a coalition of local businessmen and the rapidly growing numbers of naturalized miners who could vote.³⁸ When these mayors sought to provide their towns with the public amenities attendant to industrialization, such as paved and electrically lighted streets, quality water supplies, and parks, they were vigorously opposed by the mining companies, who paid the bulk of municipal property taxes. The tax fights of 1915-16 further inflamed hostilities between the companies and many in the range towns.

Hibbing was the site of the sharpest conflict. The 1913 election of Victor L. Power, who had once worked as a laborer for Oliver, ended 20 years of control of most village offices by the company. In an effort to defeat Power's public works program, the company adopted several strategies. It closed the mines over the winter, took the city to court, put pressure on Duluth bankers to shut off credit to the range, refused to pay taxes, and supported the introduction of a bill in the state legislature to limit city expenditures and prohibit the city from issuing bonds to finance them. All these attempts failed.³⁹

Power's sympathy for the miners did not extend to the IWW. "I am not behind the I. W. W. as an organization," he said. "It is not organized labor. If the working men[,] however, decide that they want their conditions bettered that is their privilege." He also stated, "It is not my stand that the mining companies should recognize the I. W. W." Power was committed to being fair to both sides. Although he refused to turn over village police to the mining company and allowed strikers to march in Hibbing as long as they obeyed the law, he also announced that all miners who continued working during the strike "will be given full protection by the Village Authorities." Along with Mayors Michael Boy-

³³ *DNT*, July 3, p. 12, July 6, p. 1; *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, June 22, p. 6, June 28, p. 1, July 1, p. 1, July 3, p. 3; *Hibbing Tribune*, Aug. 3, p. 4; *Strikers' News*, Sept. 1, p. 1; "Report of George P. West," reprinted in *United Mine Workers' Journal*, Aug. 10, 1916, p. 12.

³⁴ *DNT*, July 21, 26, Aug. 4, all p. 5.

³⁵ *DNT*, June 18, p. 10, July 4, p. 9, July 6, p. 1, July 11, p. 3.

³⁶ *DNT*, June 27, p. 5.

³⁷ *DNT*, July 1, p. 1; "Report of George P. West," 13.

³⁸ *Mesaba Ore and Hibbing News* (hereafter *Mesaba Ore*), Mar. 11, 18, June 24, all p. 1.

³⁹ The conflict between range communities and Duluth was of long standing, the former feeling that the latter exercised an inordinate amount of influence on their affairs both economically and politically. In 1916 a bill to allow the range to form its own county government by separating it from the southern portion of St. Louis County (where Duluth was located) was introduced in the state legislature. It did not pass. See *Mesaba Ore*, Mar. 11, p. 1, Aug. 5, p. 3, Sept. 16, p. 1.

HIBBING MAYOR
Victor L. Power



VIRGINIA MAYOR
Michael Boylan

lan of Virginia and E. E. Webber of Chisholm, Power promised jobs to strikers evicted from their homes on mining company property.⁴⁰

The mayors saw the solution to the strike in arbitration. Accordingly, they organized a Committee of Officials of Range Municipalities to serve as arbitrators and invited the mine operators and the strikers to a meeting to begin working out their differences. The companies did not respond.⁴¹

The tax fight was also an important factor in changing the attitude of many businessmen toward the mining companies. The business community, which had formed the nucleus of the volunteer mine guards in the 1907 strike, was more neutral or even favorable

toward the strikers in 1916. A proposal to use the National Guard against the strikers failed to win a majority among Virginia businessmen. In late June, an editorial in the *Mesaba Ore and Hibbing News* claimed that businessmen were not taking sides in the strike; two weeks later the paper covered a meeting held at Hibbing, reporting "that there are some business men along the range who recognize the justice of the demands made upon the mining companies." The *Strikers' News*, a paper published by the miners themselves, reported in an article entitled "Business Men Waking Up" that solicitations for the strike among storeowners "have met with fairly good results." Like the mayors, however, most businessmen staunchly opposed the IWW.

It did not take long for the consequences of the governor's order to Sheriff Meining to manifest themselves. On July 3, four newly deputized mine guards entered the home of Philip Masonovitch, a striker in Biwabik, to arrest him for illegally selling liquor. When the leader of the deputies, Nick Dillon, an ex-bouncer at a local house of prostitution, handled Masonovitch's wife roughly, a struggle ensued among the deputies and several boarders at the home, all strikers. When the fight was over, two men were dead, James C. Myron, one of the deputies, and a soft-drink salesman whose truck was outside the house. (Three witnesses claimed to have seen Dillon shoot the soda-pop vendor.) One of the deputies later admitted in court that he fired several shots into the house from outside. No bullet marks were found in the house, but Myron, who was standing in the doorway fighting with one of the boarders, was killed by three bullets in his back and two below his shoulder, according to the autopsy report.⁴²

All those in the house, including Mrs. Masonovitch, were arrested and charged with first-degree murder. At 3 A.M. the next morning, Tresca, Scarlett, Schmidt, and four other IWW leaders were arrested in their hotel in Virginia, 12 miles from the scene of the crime, manacled, and, in accordance with the governor's order, put on a train to Duluth, where they were also charged with first-degree murder. It was claimed that their speeches were designed to stir violence and thus "caused" the killings.⁴³

The incident heightened tension on all sides. The press now reported daily acts of violence: shots fired at "scab" boardinghouses, threats made to dynamite homes of nonstrikers, even a threat to blow up the State Capitol. Meetings, picketing, and parades were roughly broken up by Meining's deputies.

Two contemporary sources challenged the press reports of numerous acts of violence. The Committee of Officials of Range Municipalities adopted a resolution denying that violence had occurred to the extent reported by the press, and the *Mesaba Ore and Hibbing*

⁴⁰ Unidentified newspaper clipping in Power's calendar book, June 28, 1916, Victor L. Power Papers, MHS; *DNT*, July 21, p. 5; *Mesaba Ore*, July 1, p. 4, July 22, p. 3; Berman, "Education for Work," 53-54.

⁴¹ Here and below, see *DNT*, July 7, p. 1; Berman, "Education for Work," 51; Sofchalk, "Organized Labor," 232; *Mesaba Ore*, July 8, p. 1, July 24, p. 3; *Strikers' News*, Aug. 4, p. 2.

⁴² *DNT*, July 4, p. 9, July 6, p. 1; Otto Christensen, "Invading Miners' Homes," *International Socialist Review* 17 (Sept., 1916): 161-162.

⁴³ Here and below, see *DNT*, July 4, p. 9, July 10, p. 7, July 11, p. 1, July 12, p. 5, July 14, p. 1, July 16, p. 4, July 20, p. 1.

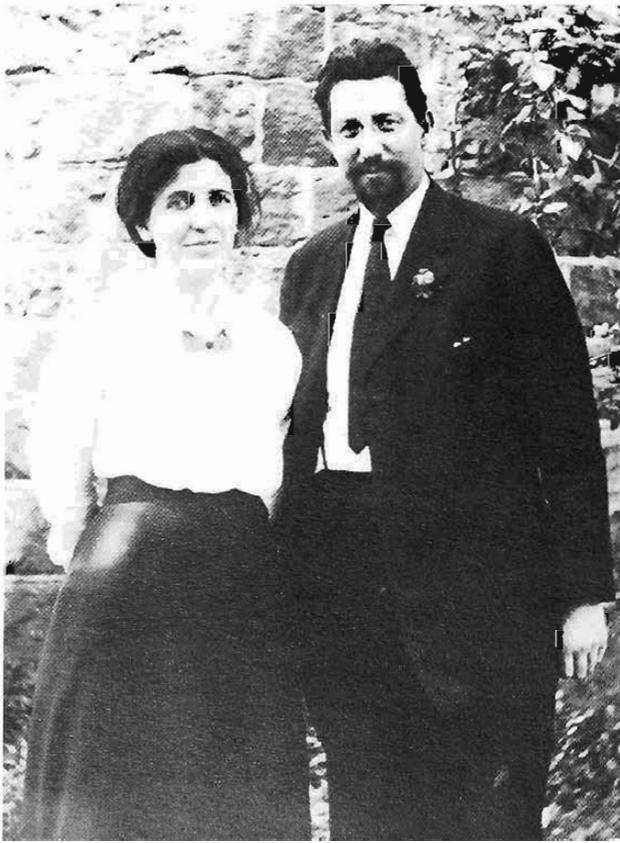
News stated, "There is every reason for believing that 'plants' have been made to give color to the mining company stories."⁴⁴

One historian of the strike arrived at the following judgment: "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. . . . At no time, however, was the union implicated in acts of violence or sabotage, and there is little likelihood that evidence linking the IWW . . . would have been overlooked by the authorities."⁴⁵

Having failed at their own efforts at arbitration, the range mayors sent a telegram to U.S. Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson, asking him to dispatch federal officials to mediate the strike. Wilson complied, and the two mediators, William Fairley and Hywel Davies, appeared on the scene in late July.⁴⁶

Also arriving in Minnesota at that time were new IWW organizers to take the places of their jailed predecessors. Foremost among them was Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. Though only 26 years old, she had been a soap-box orator for socialism and the IWW for a decade. Flynn had participated in the important IWW strikes in Paterson and Lawrence and had spoken on the Mesabi as early as 1908. She quickly began combing the range towns, providing needed inspiration to the striking miners and their families. "I read in today's paper," she said in a speech at Hibbing, "that the Steel corporation made between \$80,000,000 and \$90,000,000 in profits in the past year. The range miners have given

IWW LEADERS Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Carlo Tresca during the 1913 strike at Paterson, New Jersey



their labor and lives to help make that profit and we desire our share in the \$90 million."⁴⁷

In another talk she praised the solidarity of the ethnically diverse strikers, contrasting it with the carnage of World War I then raging across Europe. On the range there were "English, French, Austrians, Italians, Finns and a dozen other nationalities. In Europe these people are fighting like h---. Here, through the agency of the I.W.W. they are calling one another fellow workers and all co-operating to fight one big enemy—the 'Steel Trust.' "

The recent immigrant status of many of the strikers added to the tension in the range towns. A Hibbing clothing merchant complained, "It's a fine state of affairs when American-born men are prevented from working by a bunch of foreigners." *Strikers' News* recognized the contradictory attitudes of Americans toward foreign workers: "It is true that there are many foreign-born among us, but—strangely enough—we are entirely welcome when we are willing to submit to industrial serfdom. Only when we demand our 'rights to life, liberty and happiness' so gloriously pictured as American, do we become undesirable foreigners. If we work cheaply at first . . . we are cursed for cutting down the American standard of living. When we awake to our possibilities in this country and organize to demand more we are told, 'If you don't like this country, why don't you go back to your own country?'"⁴⁸

Newspaper coverage of the strike sharpened feelings on both sides. Little sympathy was shown for the miners. Indeed, the preoccupation of the press with the IWW was so great that the workers and their cause were often forgotten. As the *Mesaba Ore and Hibbing News*, the range paper most sympathetic to the miners, wrote in an editorial, "The Duluth News Tribune . . . is in a yowling frenzy over the I.W.W., but it has not a word to say that might turn the thoughts of the people to the underlying causes for the labor trouble that is present along the range. The [Duluth] Herald, too, is silent as death on that point."⁴⁹

Much of the range press attacked the IWW with vituperation, calling Wobblies "the scum of the coun-

⁴⁴ *DNT*, July 15, p. 6; *Mesaba Ore*, July 22, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Betten, "Riot, Revolution, Repression," 86, 92.

⁴⁶ *DNT*, July 21, p. 5, July 22, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Here and below, see *DNT*, July 26, p. 5, Aug. 3, p. 10.

⁴⁸ *DNT*, Aug. 3, p. 10; *Strikers' News*, Aug. 4, p. 2. The editor of the *Minneapolis Daily News*, estimating that 65 percent of the immigrant miners were naturalized, wrote that "Americanization is a popular thing among the rest; they want to assimilate"; reprinted in *Mesaba Ore*, July 29, p. 2. Mayor Boylan reported to Governor Burnquist that more than 5,000 immigrants obtained citizenship in Virginia between 1910 and 1916; *DNT*, July 30, p. 16.

⁴⁹ *Mesaba Ore*, July 15, p. 1.

try," "a menace," "a gang of cutthroats and bums," and "an outlaw organization." But the *Mesaba Ore and Hibbing News*, in contrast, stated that such anti-IWW rhetoric was merely "covering up the main issue—a decent day's wage for the laborer." The paper viewed the strike as "a thing the Oliver Iron Mining Company has brought upon itself," and declared the miners "victims of both the I.W.W. and the mining companies." While labeling the union leaders as "the roving representatives of a very much discredited organization," the editors were still able to focus on the merits of the miners' case. "[C]ommon justice would impel us to take the side of the wage-earner, and let the mining companies get rid of the agitator as best they can. The most effectual way would be to make a substantial wage increase."⁵⁰

Readers of the *Duluth News Tribune* unfolded their paper on the morning of August 2 to this headline on the front page: "REPORT MISREPRESENTS STRIKE TO HELP I.W.W. DULUTH OFFICIALS ASSERT

⁵⁰ *Mesaba Ore*, June 24, p. 1, July 1, p. 4, July 8, p. 1; *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, July 6, p. 1; *DNT*, Aug. 19, p. 8.

⁵¹ Here and below, see "Report of George P. West," 12-14.

⁵² Here and three paragraphs below, see the report by Martin Cole and Don D. Lescohier to state labor commissioner, reprinted in full in *DNT*, Aug. 17, p. 8.

FALSITY OF STATEMENTS IN DOCUMENT OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE—ALLEGATIONS ABSURD." In bold script, the paper warned its readers, "The News Tribune prints the following dispatch as an exhibit of absurd I.W.W. propaganda being sent throughout the United States, misrepresenting conditions on the Mesaba range in a futile effort to enlist support for losing cause."

This cautionary note introduced a story regarding the publication of the results of an investigation of the strike by George P. West of the Committee on Industrial Relations, a private organization headed by Frank P. Walsh, former chairman of the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations under President Theodore Roosevelt. West's strongly worded report clearly placed the blame for the strike and the violent acts that accompanied it on the company and on public officials. The strike was precipitated, the report held, not by the IWW, but by the company's policy "of treating the men like serfs, denying them any voice, herding them with the aid of a permanent force of private police, and driving them at top speed by a vicious piece rate system of payment . . . [permitting] favoritism, injustice and the extortion of bribes by the petty bosses."⁵¹

The actions of both Governor Burnquist and Sheriff Meining were sharply criticized. West's report concluded: "The story is not yet half told of the lengths to which the companies went in beating up, shooting, jailing and terrorizing their workmen . . . ; of how the Duluth newspapers, subservient to the company interest, exhorted the authorities to disregard every legal constitutional right of these organizers, and how the authorities responded. It is a story of tyrannical abuse, cruelty and persecution involving a hundred cases and a thousand details. And all to defeat any movement looking toward industrial democracy, living wages, a square deal for the men who mine the raw material for the country's prosperous and powerful corporation."

Two weeks later, a second independent report on the strike was filed, this time by two investigators from the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industries. They found that although "industrial causes underlaid the strike," and that "the strikers and I.W.W. leaders did not do any organizing before the strike was called," the IWW fanned the flames of discontent higher than they might otherwise have gone.⁵²

Regarding the strikers' grievances, the investigators had access to a large number of sworn affidavits from miners that had been turned over to the federal labor department representatives, Fairley and Davies, for further investigation. If the grievances were substantiated, the report stated, "they will demonstrate very serious abuses on the iron ranges—abuses sufficient to have justified a strike. . . . Personally, we are satisfied that the further investigation will reveal that all of the

DOWN WITH THE I. W. W. AGITATORS.



abuses complained of have existed to a certain extent.”

Of the violence and repression that occurred after the strike began, the report concluded: “[W]e are entirely satisfied that the mine guards have exceeded their legal rights and duties and invaded the citizenship rights of the strikers; that such violence as has occurred has been more chargeable to the mine guards and police than to the strikers; and that the public police departments have entirely exceeded the needs of the situation, and have perpetrated serious injustice upon the strikers.

“Numerous cases of arrests without warrant, and unfair trials . . . were brought to our attention. . . . Every shooting affray . . . has occurred on public property. In no case have the so-called riots occurred on or even near company property.”

THE EXPRESSIONS of support for the strikers’ case and condemnations of the acts of the mining companies and public officials buoyed the strikers’ morale but had little impact on the course of the strike itself. The governor took no action after meeting with the authors of the labor department report.

Daily picketing, arrests of strikers, and the mining companies’ refusal to negotiate all continued. As September began, the meager financial resources of the strikers began to dry up completely. Strike benefits ceased, and with the harvest ending, miners who had left the range for agricultural work no longer had an income with which to subsidize their families. They began to drift slowly back to work.

The strikers had repeatedly urged the federal mediators (whom they dubbed “federal meditators”) to arrange a meeting between them and the companies, to no avail. A final appeal was made by the Central Strike Committee on September 10. It, too, went unanswered. By the middle of September nearly half the mines were operating at normal rates of production. After votes were taken in each of the range towns, the strike was called off on September 17, three and a half months after it began.⁵³

Within a month after the end of the strike, according to the report finally issued by Fairley and Davies in late October, both day wages and contract rates were increased by 15 to 20 percent. The companies also promised to institute a number of reforms proposed in the report, leading its authors to conclude that “the strike was not a failure because otherwise it is doubtful

whether the position of the companies” on these issues would have changed.⁵⁴

In fact, most of the suggested reforms were put into effect. Although the contract system was not abolished, the contract rate was not to be lowered from the rate set at the beginning of the month and was to be raised if it became clear that conditions prevented a miner from earning average wages. Monthly statements outlining credits and debits were to be issued to the men. Mine captains exploiting miners were to be promptly dismissed. Finally, in November Oliver announced a 10 percent increase in wages effective December 15, on top of the previous increases.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, eight people still languished in jail for the shooting of Deputy Sheriff Myron. Financial support for the defendants came in from all parts of the United States and even from Europe. The case never came to trial. On December 15 a compromise was reached whereby three of the miners would plead guilty to first-degree manslaughter, serving a sentence of about three years, and the rest of the defendants would go free.

Though the miners won important short-range concessions from Oliver, the company’s antiunion stance did not wane. As described by one historian, Oliver’s “spy system, with its ubiquitous informers and its threat of blacklisting inculcated the miners with an obsessive fear that they would lose their jobs if they took the slightest interest in organized labor.”⁵⁶

It was more than a quarter century after the strike ended, in 1943, that Oliver finally signed a labor contract with the Congress of Industrial Organizations, bringing labor unions on the iron range to stay.⁵⁷

⁵³ Foner, *History of the Labor Movement*, 4:512.

⁵⁴ “Report by U.S. Commissioners of Conciliation W. R. Fairley of Alabama and Hywel Davies of Kentucky . . . June 2 to September 17, 1916, submitted October 28, 1916,” quoted in Foner, *History of the Labor Movement*, 4:513.

⁵⁵ Here and below, see Foner, *History of the Labor Movement*, 4:514, 515–517.

⁵⁶ Sofchalk, “Organized Labor,” 240.

⁵⁷ Marolt, “Development of Labor Unionism,” 161.

THE PHOTOGRAPH on p. 72 is from the archives of the Immigration History Research Center; the cartoons on p. 69 and 73 are from the *Duluth News Tribune*, July 6, 1916, and the *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, July 5, 1916, respectively. All other illustrations are from the MHS audio-visual library.



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