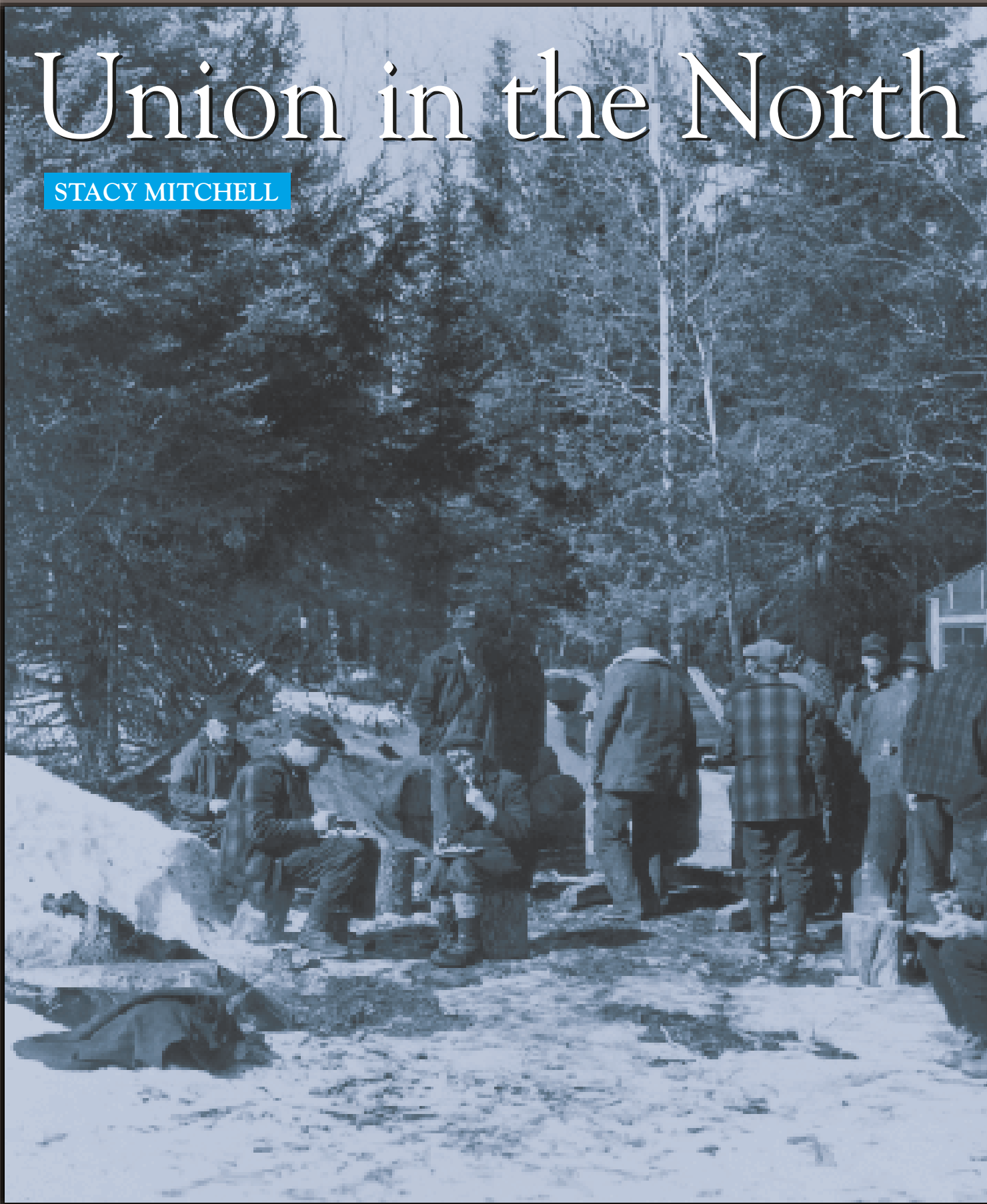


Union in the North

STACY MITCHELL



Timber workers eating lunch in Carlton County, about 1937



Woods

THE TIMBER STRIKES OF 1937

“We are the Minnesota Lumberjacks . . . the most exploited group of workers in the state,” wrote Fred Lequier of the newly formed Minnesota Timber Workers Union in January 1937. “The lumber barons of the Northwest have dealt with us as ruthlessly as they laid waste our great natural resource, the Minnesota forests. Never receiving a living wage from the lumber industry, never earning enough to maintain a home and raise a family which is the right of every man . . . neglected and unorganized, [we] have been forced to migrate, ‘following the woods’ in abject pauperism, homeless and disinherited.” Concluding his appeal for aid in the *Minneapolis Labor Review*, he announced a surprising turn of events: “Unable to endure these conditions any longer, we have gone out on strike.”¹

In an industry difficult to organize and long ignored by the mainstream labor movement, Minnesota’s timber workers launched two successful strikes in 1937. Despite daunting circumstances, they achieved union recognition for the first time in their history as well as unprecedented improvements in wages and living conditions. Their success arose, in part, from a collective resolve to gain some control over the conditions of their lives. As one timber

Stacy Mitchell is a researcher for a nonprofit public policy organization. She studied history at Macalester College in St. Paul.

worker put it, "We lumberjacks are not going to let them break our union. . . . It's better to die than to live like we've been living for all these years." In addition, the jacks' struggle was strengthened by a growing, militant national movement of unskilled workers and by the election in Minnesota of Farmer-Labor Party politicians sympathetic to their plight.²

Most significantly, the timber workers' success was built on solidarity with other financially impoverished people in northern Minnesota. Lumber companies owning vast tracts of the north woods had exerted enormous power over the region's development, and after exhausting the forest and reaping its profits, they were rapidly moving their large operations to the Pacific Northwest. As a result, northern Minnesota's economy collapsed, prompting the National Resources Committee in 1939 to describe the region as "one of the Nation's most critical social and economic problems."³ In particular, farmers, who had purchased "cutover" land from lumber companies but discovered that the soil produced only meager crops, identified the timber workers' struggle as their own and played a decisive role in its success.

SINCE LUMBERING BEGAN in northern Minnesota in the 1880s, timber workers had labored long hours for little pay in an industry that posed significant threats to life and limb.⁴ Working the woods was a winter occupation that required iced sled tracks for pulling logs out of the forest to river banks and railroads. In summer, woods workers, who were often immigrants, moved on to farm fields and mines for more seasonal employment in marginal jobs.

During its heyday just after the turn of the century, the industry employed 15,886 woods workers in 329 camps in St. Louis, Itasca, and Beltrami Counties alone and probably more than 20,000 in the state as a whole. Economic collapse was well underway by the early 1920s, and during the 1930s the number employed declined from some 7,000 to 4,000. Lumber production in 1929 was only 15 percent of 1899 levels, and three years later production had dropped to 2.6 percent of the peak level.⁵

The ancient white pines that had once dominated the industry, frequently growing more than a hundred feet tall, three or more feet in diameter, and producing strong, clear lumber, had virtually disappeared. In their place grew smaller, less useful varieties—aspens, birch, and poplar. Though these trees made poor lumber, they could be processed for paper, railroad ties, and other manufactured wood products that accounted for

more than half of the forest industry's production in the years after 1932.⁶

The intense logging that had reduced the north woods to barren, stump-filled cutover or meager second-growth forest precluded a sustainable lumbering economy. Poverty and seasonal unemployment made timber workers especially vulnerable to poor working conditions and low pay. As deforestation pushed lumbering onto increasingly marginal lands, employers developed new piece-rate wage systems and other practices to keep costs down while logging poorer strips of timber.

In the 1930s the major lumber companies operating in Minnesota's north woods included General Logging, a Weyerhaeuser enterprise; International Lumber, later International Paper; North Star, a division of Kimberly-Clark; and the Minnesota and Ontario Paper Company, the largest corporation in the state. While these companies continued to operate some large, traditional camps employing hundreds of men in one location, deforestation had led to an increased reliance on subcontractors, called "jobbers," who managed small logging operations on land leased from timber companies or from the U.S. Forest Service.⁷

Large camps employed people in a variety of jobs, though most workers were engaged in felling trees and sawing logs. Loaders oversaw the piling of logs onto horse-drawn sleighs, steam-powered caterpillar haulers, or railroad cars. Engineers operated pulley-and-cable systems powered by horses or steam to load the logs. Teamsters drove horses; railroad track layers and maintenance men kept the operations moving; engineers drove trains; and in the spring, river drivers kept logs floating downstream, although by the 1930s river drives were rapidly becoming obsolete. Lumber camps also employed support workers such as blacksmiths, carpenters, saw filers or sharpeners, and cooks.

Although \$60 a month, less \$1 a day for board, was the standard woods-worker's wage for a 60- to 70-hour week in the 1930s, few workers actually received this sum. According to Ilmar Koivunen, a Finnish logger from the Mesabi Range and union organizer, "If you made the slightest delay . . . they fired you. There was always one or two men waiting to take your place, waiting in line to get your job." All new hires had to be made through employment agencies, which split the fees paid by workers with company foremen. Workers were laid off every few weeks when employment sharks sent in new crews. Koivunen recalled, "Any time they'd feel that a man's earnings went a little beyond what he should have in his pocket, they'd fire him. He'd have to go into town on company transportation and [they



Load of large first-growth logs, Carlton County, 1899

would] charge him an exorbitant amount and then when he'd get to town they'd hire him back."⁸

In the 1930s only a minority of workers were paid a standard monthly wage, as the companies increasingly used a piece-rate system to lower their costs. Piece workers, who rented their tools and horses from the company, were assigned strips of land. They also paid \$1 a day for board, forcing some to work long hours scavenging the last sticks of timber just to break even. According to logger and early union organizer Martin Kuusisto, company scalers routinely cheated piece workers when measuring how much wood they had cut.⁹

"The result," recalled Kuusisto, "was a lot of men were working for nothing." Testimony taken in January 1937 brought out that Archie Peters, a piece worker at Kimberly-Clark's North Star Camp #17, had been forced to cut a four-foot-wide road through the woods to get his lumber out. He was not paid for this time, and at the end of 13 days' work he had made only

\$5.43. William Torri (Torrey) worked every day from October 26 to December 6, 1936, including part time on Sundays, and after purchasing some clothes in the company store, found he owed his employer 88 cents.¹⁰

Timber workers had remained outside the country's mainstream labor movement. Skilled craft unions belonging to the American Federation of Labor (AFL) had little interest in organizing unskilled immigrants. In 1917 the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a union of the country's most exploited workers, had launched an extensive timber strike in northern Minnesota, but Wobblies, as they were known, were beaten, jailed, blacklisted, and exiled by a powerful coalition of company and state police. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s Minnesota's timber workers remained without a union. In the fall of 1935, timber workers instigated a wildcat strike in the camps of the Minnesota and Ontario Paper Company around Gheen in St. Louis County. Although the strike failed and many were



Minnesota's cutover, once-forested land stripped of all salable timber

blacklisted, workers continued to spread the message of unionism in the woods and sought a charter from the AFL. Unwilling to take an active role, the AFL nevertheless granted the jacks a charter to form Local 2776 of the Timber Workers Union, a subsidiary of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, under which timber workers in the Pacific Northwest had recently unionized.¹¹

LEADING MINNESOTA'S organizing drive were militant left-wing activists, many of whom were first- or second-generation immigrants with strong family traditions of socialism and union participation. Ilmar Koivunen, whose father had been blacklisted during miners' struggles on the Iron Range, was a member of the Communist Party and had earlier organized workers at a Minnesota Civilian Conservation Corps camp. In his 22 months with the CCC, he had led seven strikes culminating in the formation of a workers committee, perhaps the only one of its kind in the country, that negotiated wages and conditions with CCC officials. Other organizers included long-time IWW members Joe Liss and Oscar Rissberg, Duluth-born radical Irene Paull, her husband, attorney Henry Paull, and Fred Lequier,

a part-Native American organizer with the unemployed movement in Bemidji.¹²

Many of these activists were affiliated with the Communist Party. During the early years of the Great Depression, when economic hard times and the AFL's narrow focus on skilled workers had reduced the ranks of the mainstream labor movement, Communists remained aggressive, militant, and persistent in their efforts to mobilize the poor. Throughout the early 1930s, they organized unemployed and relief movements in logging and mill towns across the country. Meanwhile, the AFL, according to Kuusisto, "didn't give a darn" about the 1935 wildcat strike in the north woods and "couldn't care less about the unorganized, unskilled workers."¹³

Throughout the fall of 1936, union activists hoping to build up Local 2776 discussed grievances with workers and developed a core of support in a handful of northern Minnesota's larger camps operated by General Logging and International Lumber. In December they presented these companies with a list of demands, including a minimum wage of \$4 a day for eight hours of work, no more than \$1 a day for board, pay twice monthly in U.S. currency rather than "time checks" that could be cashed only for a fee, and, finally, recognition of the union. The jacks also demanded improvements in camp sanitation, "shower baths and wash houses with tubs in all camps," and single, instead of shared, bunks.¹⁴

Still loosely organized and representing only a portion of the thousands of woods workers scattered throughout northern Minnesota, the budding union found that its demands were met with little more than ridicule by company officials. Then, on January 4, 1937, Local 2776 resolved to strike. Hundreds of timber workers walked off the job each day, as word of the strike spread like wildfire from camp to camp. Jacks around Gheen near Lake Vermilion and in Superior National Forest just north of Two Harbors were the first to quit, and within two days strikers numbered 2,500. By the end of the first week, the union's numbers had swelled to more than 4,000. Heartened union representatives declared the strike statewide, and, much to the surprise of lumber-company officials, logging ceased throughout northern Minnesota.¹⁵

AT FIRST WORKERS CONDUCTED a sit-down strike, remaining in camp but refusing to work. As camp supplies ran short and it became apparent that the strike was spreading statewide, however, strikers headed for the nearest towns—International Falls, Duluth, Gheen,

Ely, Cloquet, and Virginia. To maintain cohesion and communication, the union employed eight “squad cars” to relay information and reach isolated timber camps still unaware of the strike. The union also relied heavily on existing ethnic networks and community organizations that provided both material and moral support. Finns were well represented among northern Minnesota’s jacks, and Finnish social halls served as union meeting places and shelters for striking workers. Working-class newspapers such as Hibbing’s *St. Louis County Independent* and the Finnish paper *Työmies*, which published a special English-language section throughout the strike, spread information among workers in scattered lumber towns.¹⁶

Providing food and shelter in the dead of winter for the strikers, who often had no place to call home but the camps they had now abandoned, presented a continuing struggle for the union. In Duluth strikers picked an abandoned hotel, and in towns across northern Minnesota Local 2776’s strike committee set up relief kitchens that fed more than 1,200 men in the first few days of the strike. Desperately short of resources, the union immediately appealed for state aid. On January 8, 1937, a delegation of 200 timber workers led by executive committee member Joe Liss called on the St. Louis County relief administrator to demand food for the strikers. They were told that they could apply for relief, but the transient nature of logging meant that many did not meet the county’s residency requirement.¹⁷

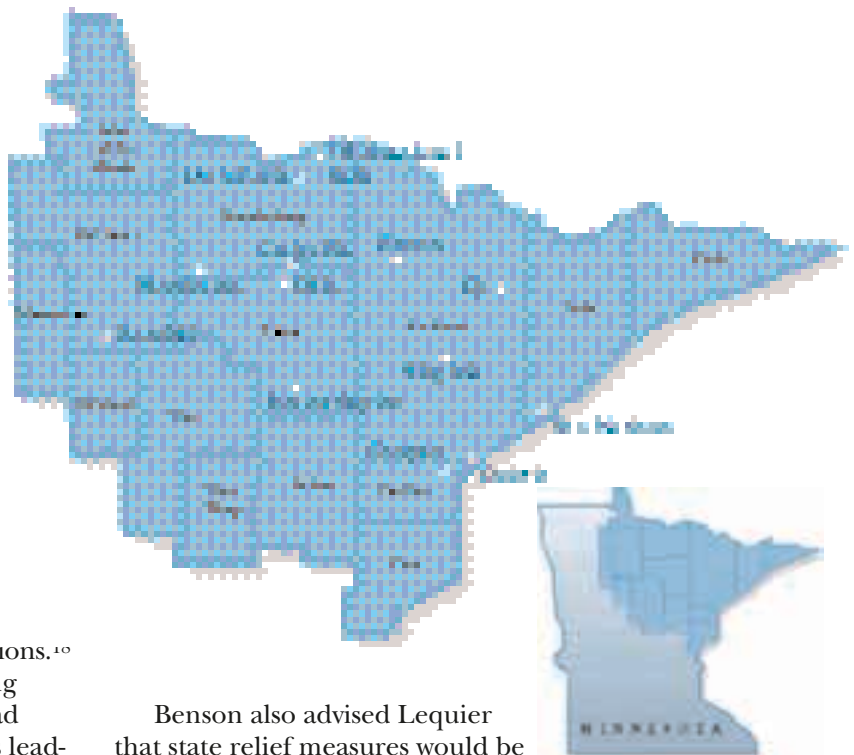
On January 8 and 9, union leaders also met with representatives of Kimberly-Clark, operators of the North Star camps, but made little progress toward an agreement. No other companies approached the union to negotiate a settlement. On January 12, Minnesota strikers were joined by lumberjacks in Ontario, Canada: when 2,000 employees of Shevlin-Clarke Company, J. A. Mathieu, Ltd., walked off the job. Although organized under their own union, the Canadian jamanded similar improvements in wages and conditions.¹⁸

In an effort to prevent trucks from transporting already cut logs to processing facilities and railroad depots, the union organized picket lines on roads leading into Duluth and other towns. When the pickets occasionally resorted to dumping truckloads of wood in order to maintain the blockade, Duluth’s police chief issued an order prohibiting strikers from stopping trucks within the city limits.¹⁹

The strike’s effect on workers who had long been poor, often homeless, and kept on the margins of

society was dramatic. Labor writer Irene Paull later recalled, “I remember the letters we used to get at *Midwest Labor*. They used to write that the union gave them a sense of personal dignity.”²⁰ Minnesota’s timbermen were also becoming part of a national movement of unskilled laborers. Extensive, industry-wide drives by unions affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) were organizing unprecedented numbers, especially in the auto and steel industries.

The working class was also making significant progress politically. In Minnesota the election of Farmer-Labor politicians, particularly Governor Elmer A. Benson, proved invaluable. Local 2776 president Lequier boldly wrote to Benson just two days after the strike began: “We ask you to put pressure on the authorities for relief for the strikers. We also ask you to have an



Benson also advised Lequier that state relief measures would be available for strikers. In another unprecedented move, he ordered the Minnesota National Guard and the state highway patrol to assist strikers, unlike 20 years earlier when the guard had been used to crush the IWW-led lumber strike. In Duluth the armory was opened to homeless workers, and the National Guard helped distribute blankets and

other supplies. As promised, the state's Emergency Relief Administration provided food, shelter, and medical care in Gheen, Ely, Virginia, Duluth, and International Falls. With union resources drained in the first few days of the strike, this assistance proved vital.²²

Governor Benson also quickly appointed a committee to investigate camp conditions. This, according to Lequier, "helped us a great deal to bring our cause into the open and put pressure on the operators for a quick settlement."

Testifying before the committee, woods workers brought to light their living conditions. Most camps were crowded, forcing workers to sleep two to a bunk. Blankets and bedding were infested with lice, and most camps had no washing facilities for the men or their clothing. Bunkhouses were poorly ventilated and insulated, kitchens were unsanitary, and the food was often poor in quality. Workers also complained bitterly of being forced to buy supplies from camp stores that charged double the going rate.²³

Benson's strong stand on behalf of the timber workers prevented local officials, who had played a central role in crushing the IWW two decades earlier, from interfering with pickets and breaking the strike's momentum. Union organizer Koivunen later maintained, "If it hadn't been for Benson stopping the state police and the influence he had as governor, stopping the county sheriffs' office and these different police departments from harassing the pickets and the strikers, why, it would have been a difficult struggle."²⁴

Benson's actions on behalf of the timber workers came as quite a shock to many strikers, particularly to members of the IWW, who believed that political action was useless in working-class struggles. To Benson, Irene Paull wrote: "All through the timber strike the workers could scarcely believe it possible that for once in their experience a Governor had not turned tear gas and guns against them. . . . It should be a thrill to you to know that because of you they have taken hope for the first time in their lives in 'political action.'"²⁵

Throughout northern Minnesota, Farmer-Labor clubs sent letters and telegrams to Benson commending his active participation in the strike. The wide-



Worker solidarity cartoon from the *Timber Worker*

spread poverty generated by the rapid clearing of the north woods had caused many residents to turn against lumber companies and to identify with the timber workers. As the *St. Louis County Independent* put it, lumber companies used workers "as ruthlessly as they have exploited one of Minnesota's most important natural resources."²⁶

For decades timber companies had successfully promoted the cutover as ideal farmland.

By the turn of the century,

lumbermen had established colonization companies that published booster literature about the advantages of buying acreage in northern Minnesota and conducted land sales. This not only assisted the industry in disposing of now useless land but altered perceptions of logging by reassuring people that removing the forest would make northern Minnesota into a robust agricultural region. With most farmland in southern Minnesota already settled, the cutover was sold to native-born farmers who could not afford better land elsewhere and to recent immigrants, including Finns and other eastern Europeans, who knew little about Minnesota's growing conditions.²⁷

As it turned out, earning a profit from a northern Minnesota farm was nearly impossible. Clearing stumps and rocks cost farmers hundreds of hours of labor and limited the amount that could be planted in a given year. Secondly, the sandy, acidic soils of the pine forest never produced more than meager food crops. The short growing season and distance from large markets added problems. As the numbers of lumber workers declined, so did the modest nearby markets for produce. Between 1924 and 1935, the average yearly farm income in the 14 northeastern timber counties was \$335, compared to a state average of \$1,371, or four times as much. Between 1925 and 1930, 12 percent of the region's farms failed, with St. Louis County losing a third of its farms.²⁸

Low farm income meant that many families could not pay property taxes and were forced to abandon their land. By 1931 the northeastern counties were burdened with almost 7 million tax-delinquent acres, or 48 percent of the taxable land, at a time when the state-

wide average was only 16 percent. Among those who were able to retain their farms, few could support their families through agriculture alone. In 1934 some 63 percent of northern Minnesota's farmers required additional income, and many reluctantly turned to woods work. Intimately aware of the conditions suffered by timber workers and the painful contraction of the economy, many northern farmers offered material and moral support to the striking lumberjacks.²⁹

WITH DEMONSTRATIONS of extensive public support for the strikers, a governor determined to protect workers' rights, and lumber needing to be skidded out of the woods before the first snow melt halted operations for the season, the timber industry decided to negotiate an end to the strike. On January 21 a state committee successfully arranged meetings in Duluth with both sides and within two days reached an agreement granting timber workers most of their demands. It was soon ratified by a vote of union members. The contract provided for an eight-hour day, union recognition, increases in piece rates, and improvements in camp sanitation, to be overseen by the state industrial commission. Rather than \$4 per day, workers settled for \$70 per month with the daily cost of board not to exceed \$1. On the same day, workers in Ontario settled their strike, winning increased wages and union recognition.³⁰

The truce in Minnesota, however, was brief. Three days later workers went back on strike, contending that timber companies failed to abide by the terms of the agreement. Bargaining began anew, although lumber officials complained that they wanted to negotiate with a representative of the AFL instead of local union leaders. Finally, on January 29, the two sides reached an agreement that provided significant concessions to the union but would expire on September 1, 1937, the beginning of the next lumbering season.³¹

For the first time in their history,

Minnesota's timber workers had won union recognition and the right to collective bargaining as Local 2776 of the Timber Workers Union. Although the contract did not meet all of the workers' demands, the *Duluth News Tribune* described the strikers as being "pretty well pleased." The contract increased wages and piece rates by 10 to 18 percent, instituted the eight-hour day with time-and-a-half for overtime and double time for legal holidays, and gave seniority in hiring and layoffs. The agreement also established a closed shop (meaning timber workers had to join the union), a committee to negotiate workers' grievances with management, and improvements in camp conditions to be enforced by the state's industrial commission. Large lumber companies including Kimberly-Clark,

International Lumber, and General Logging, as well as many small operators, signed the agreement, and the strikers went back to work on February 1, 1937.³²

Buoyed by the successful strike, workers elected job stewards in every camp, and the union hired full-time agents to maintain communication between camps and union leaders. The union also launched its own newspaper, *The Timber Worker*, later renamed *Midwest Labor*, with Sam Davis, an experienced labor reporter from the Minneapolis Building Laborers Local 563, as editor. His cousin Irene Paull contributed a regular column under the name Calamity Jane, as she was known among the lumberjacks, and took over as editor in 1938. While *Työmies* and several issues of the independently published *Lumberjack* had provided valuable assistance during the strike, the union believed that its own, ongoing publication was necessary to sustain cohesion among the remote timber camps. Early issues also served as an important education tool for workers new to unions, with articles covering such topics as rights under the new contract, the role of union stewards, and grievance procedures.³³

In the ensuing months, the timber workers conducted a number of short strikes to enforce com-

Governor Elmer A. Benson,
a strong supporter of the
timber-worker strikes



pliance with the contract and to unionize new camps. At Little Fork Landing (Koochiching County), for instance, workers struck for a half day to force the company to pay union wages. In Cass Lake, sawmill workers went on strike April 2 to secure union recognition. By April 27 they were back at work with a closed shop, an eight-hour day, and a wage increase from 19 to 35 cents an hour.³⁴

International Lumber Company's preparations for a river log drive came to a standstill that April when it refused to meet union wages and conditions. The company then attempted to recruit struggling area farmers

to work the drive. In response, timber-worker representatives immediately tried to explain the situation, and at the Farmer-Labor county convention, farmers overwhelmingly endorsed the union. International Lumber capitulated, and that spring the first-ever eight-hour-shift log drive took place in northern Minnesota. Workers received 60 cents an hour, with time-and-a-half for overtime.³⁵

Looming over the union that spring and summer was the approaching contract expiration in September. Central to achieving a new agreement, the timber workers believed, was a unified regional front. President

Minnesota's newly unionized timber workers supported these strikers in Marenisco, Michigan, 1937



Lequier challenged the workers at the state convention in March, “You know as well as I do that to the extent the Michigan, Wisconsin, and Canadian workers are organized . . . we win greater concessions for ourselves.”³⁶

To this end, Minnesota workers began establishing union locals in Park Falls, Wisconsin, and Ironwood, Michigan, donating scarce financial and personnel resources to the organizing drives in those states. On May 11 jacks at one Michigan camp walked off the job, instigating a dramatic and frequently violent 16-week strike involving 4,000 workers. From the beginning, Minnesota activists including Joe Liss and Irene and Henry Paull were heavily involved. The strike in Minnesota had been relatively peaceful, but in Michigan, unsympathetic citizens joined mobs, terrorized and beat strikers, raided strike offices, and left two men dead. Local officials were at best passive observers of the violence and at worst direct participants. The Michigan strike finally ended on September 3, with the union winning higher wages, the eight-hour day, and improved conditions from 77 small operators; large firms, however, would continue to run their camps and mills as they pleased. A highly publicized conflict, it inspired timber workers across the country. Looking to the future, Michigan organizer Matt Savola declared, “We are now getting our house in order and just as no amount of terror could break our ranks, so now, nothing can stop our organization drive.”³⁷

ALTHOUGH THE AFL had granted charters for timber locals in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, it had done little to aid the woods workers, who were only grudgingly accepted by the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners. According to organizer Kuusisto, the carpenters were put off by the timber workers’ militancy. The carpenters had invited timber delegates to attend their convention on the West Coast in 1936 but had not allowed them to vote. To their protests, the general secretary of the carpenters had responded, “Do you want to stay with the United Brotherhood or do you not? We have done more for you than you have done for us. . . . Go on out of the Brotherhood, and we will give you the sweetest fight you ever had in your lives.”³⁸

During the January 1937 strike in Minnesota, the carpenters union had dispatched Andrew Leaf from Indianapolis to settle the strike without conferring with local leaders. In secret negotiations with lumber-company officials at the Spalding Hotel in Duluth, Leaf was apparently working out an agreement that would have sent strikers back to work without union recognition. When word of the deception spread to strike



Marooned AFL wood worker looking to rescue by CIO industrial unionism

headquarters on the corner of Michigan Street and Sixth Avenue in Duluth, workers immediately marched to the hotel and escorted Leaf across state lines to Superior, Wisconsin, telling him to “keep on moving.”³⁹

While the AFL neglected and sometimes undermined unskilled workers, the CIO was winning major victories in heavy industries, demonstrating that its organization of industrial unions offered a viable alternative to the AFL. On July 15, 1937, in Tacoma, Washington, the national timber-workers movement voted to cancel its affiliation with the AFL and join the CIO. Minnesota workers proved to be solidly behind the move, voting 1,700 to 29 in favor of becoming Local 29 of the International Woodworkers of America.⁴⁰

MEANWHILE, LUMBER COMPANIES had also been organizing. After being caught off guard by the January strike, industry leaders believed that a unified front and a single negotiating body were necessary to sustain their interests. And so on April 22, 1937, they formed the Minnesota Timber Producers Association (MTPA), a powerful group representing 85 percent of the state’s lumber production.⁴¹

In August the association and the timber union began negotiations for a new contract. For seven weeks, MTPA led Local 29 to believe that its workers would

retain the provisions of the original contract with some increases. On October 16, however, lumber companies “made a complete flip-flop,” according to *Midwest Labor*, refusing the negotiated contract and instead offering an agreement that ignored many gains won in the first strike. On October 16, 17, and 18, union representatives traveled from camp to camp to take a strike vote. The tally was nearly unanimous in favor, and within a few days some 4,000 Minnesota woods workers again walked off the job.⁴²

Piece workers, about four-fifths of woods laborers, were at the center of the conflict. The union demanded a ten-day guarantee, meaning that at the end of ten days’ work, they could choose to be paid 42½ cents an hour instead of the piece rate. For regular workers, the union sought a minimum wage of \$83.20 for a 26-day month and an eight-hour day. Also included in their demands were a closed shop and union hiring halls to replace the employer-controlled employment agencies. The contract offered by timber producers would have given piece workers no guaranteed minimum wage, converted additional job classifications to piece work, and eliminated the eight-hour day for some types of work.⁴³

Lumber companies were far better prepared for the October strike than for the one in January. Through a sophisticated public-relations campaign, they attempted to convince the public that they were proposing a reasonable contract. Fred W. Bessette, secretary of the MTPA and a former state legislator from St. Louis County, told the *Duluth News Tribune* that timber workers were being offered “a general increase of 33 per cent over wages a year ago.” What he failed to mention was that this increase did not apply to most workers, who were paid on a piece rate. “Such an arrangement would make it possible for an employer to exploit hundreds of men to clear poor strips of timber at little cost to himself,” reported the union’s *Midwest Labor* on October 22.⁴⁴

In addition, the 33-percent proposed increase for regular workers failed to meet the 40-cents-an-hour minimum demanded by the union. Ilmar Koivunen, the new union’s business agent, responded, “We had such slavery conditions to come up from that percentages of increases are meaningless. The fact is that the timber barons, who have made millions upon millions of dollars by robbing Minnesota of its forests, are forcing us into a strike because they refuse to pay a wage of 40 to 42½ cents an hour.”⁴⁵

The timber producers also insisted that the demand for a union hiring hall was unreasonable. The sympathetic *Two Harbors Chronicle* noted, “Under this provi-

sion, producers would have to take men sent by the union and could not discharge them for incompetence or failure to do the work without a hearing before union officials.”⁴⁶ This and other articles made no mention of the reasons for the workers’ demands: eliminating the unfair employment fees and the collusion between hiring agencies and company foremen that kept the laborers trapped in a hired-and-laid-off cycle.

Another timber-producers strategy was to weaken Governor Benson’s support for the strikers by turning relief into a political controversy. The state was again providing food and shelter for striking jacks and had opened CCC camps to rural strikers. In response, the *Two Harbors Chronicle* scathingly reported in early November that “food cards are being given out in Duluth and \$8.50 tickets for two weeks’ fare are bringing \$6 cash on the bowery for those who prefer their corn in liquid form. Jacks who kick on the fare where their three kinds of meat and cake are on the table in camp are panhandling on the bowery in Duluth for a dime with which to buy a bowl of soup.”⁴⁷

When mainstream newspapers published full statements from lumber-company officials but refused to print letters from union officers, the strikers took their cause directly to the people. They organized public meetings in many towns, met with farmers’ groups and other unions, distributed handbills and copies of *Midwest Labor*, and even obtained time on a Duluth radio station to explain their cause. Solidarity among the strikers was so strong, claimed the union paper, that there was “very little for the picket cars to do except to make occasional tours of the camps.” Timber workers in Michigan and Wisconsin stood solidly behind the strike, lending as much assistance as they could, as the Minnesota jacks had done during the Michigan strike. Iron-ore miners in Minnesota, who credited the jacks’ success with inspiring their own organizing drive, showed great interest. Duluth’s CIO Industrial Council voted unanimously to support the strike and appeared before the Duluth City Council with a representative of the AFL truck-drivers union to back the timber workers and to demand that the city not interfere with pickets.⁴⁸

Using a divide-and-conquer strategy, the MTPA attempted to convince struggling area farmers that the union threatened their livelihood. MTPA secretary Bessette urged people to think carefully about this dependence:

Everyone in northern Minnesota has an interest in the timber business because it provides an annual payroll of nearly \$7,000,000 and contributes to the

to shake down both the employer and the working man." In a November radio address, he commented on the union's leadership: "First of all comes Sam Davis [editor of *Midwest Labor*]. He is the brains of the organization. Mr. Davis is a Jewish Communist . . . Other officers of the Union are Indians, none of whom, so far as I can learn, have any business experience and certainly cannot claim to be farmers."⁵²

Disgusted with Ronkainen's hostility, one timber worker responded in the union paper:

He calls us a bunch of floaters. People who don't own property and pay taxes. Funny, isn't it? First you rob a man and then you swear at him because he hasn't any money . . . Wonder if the Republican Party behind Ronkainen thinks we like to live like that . . . following the woods from camp to camp . . . wherever there's work . . . sleeping in filthy bunks lousy with bedbugs . . . a rotten, stinking kind of living . . . going to town with nothing to do but get crazy drunk . . . and back to the woods . . . Never make enough money to marry and settle down and raise a family. Men weren't meant to live like that . . . it ain't living.⁵³

THE EFFORTS BY RONKAINEN and the timber producers were aimed not only at defeating the union but at dividing the Farmer-Labor Party and weakening support for Benson. According to *Midwest Labor* on November 25, the MTPA sought to "deliver the final thrust of death to the heart of the Farmer-Labor Party." Much of the industry's attack on the governor centered on providing relief for strikers, which, Ronkainen wrote Benson, encouraged workers to live in "idleness at the expense of the state." Never shy of gross misrepresentation, Ronkainen commented, "We may well hang our heads in shame at the disgraceful spectacle of mob rule and rioting by men fed and housed by the state at the order of Elmer A. Benson."⁵⁴

Most farmers, however, refused to believe the claims of the Farmers Protective Association. Those who worked the woods off-season or who logged timber on their own land were themselves grossly underpaid by the same companies the union was fighting. Indeed, the timber producers' attempt to divide farmers and the union seems only to have ignited the ire of farmers groups, ethnic associations, and other residents of northern Minnesota. They sent dozens of letters and telegrams to Benson declaring their solidarity with the timber workers and their willingness to join the picket lines. One letter with 82 signatures read:

We, farmers from Kettle River, Cromwell, Wright, Lawler, Mahtowa, East Lake gathered into a meeting

at the Farmers Hall, Nov. 14, 1937, have discussed the timber workers strike and feel that their demands are just and we are ready to help them out in every possible way. We are confident that you as our governor also will do everything possible to make the strike a successful one to the timber workers.⁵⁵

Following a series of radio addresses by Ronkainen, farmers in a number of towns held protest meetings, and one group from Brevator in St. Louis County wrote to Benson, "We believe that there is a common Bond of interest between the workers & farmers and we hereby pledge our support & unity to the timberworkers and against Ronkainen or any other operator posing and assuming to speak for us farmers."⁵⁶

In early November, after a meeting of more than 300 farmers in Cloquet in which nearly unanimous support for the timber workers was declared, farmers' representatives met with the strike committee to coordinate efforts. One issue of concern to farmers was the pulpwood they cut from their own land. By placing picket lines on highways throughout northern Minnesota, the strikers were preventing farmers, as well as timber companies, from shipping wood to processing facilities. At a second meeting on November 15, farmers' representatives and the strike committee agreed that the union would issue hauling permits to farmers but stop all other lumber shipments until a contract had been settled upon.⁵⁷

By early November, *Midwest Labor* reported, pickets had brought lumber hauling to a standstill in Duluth, Virginia, Hibbing, and International Falls. On November 17, however, a tense situation began unfolding 19 miles west of Duluth on Highway 61 between Scanlon and Cloquet. A caravan of 17 trucks loaded with lumber spent the day in a standoff with a picket line set up to block shipments to mills in Cloquet. The trucks finally retreated when state patrolmen refused to escort them through the line.⁵⁸

Two days later 19 timber trucks again met the picket line, this time blockading the entire highway, the main paved road connecting Duluth with Cloquet and Minneapolis-St. Paul. Hundreds of motorists, many on their way north for the opening of hunting season, were stranded in Scanlon or forced to take long detours on gravel roads. The truck drivers, led by Ernest Anderson of the Farmers Protective Association, claimed to be farmers selling pulpwood. Fred Natus, chairman of the Cloquet-area strike committee, however, said that "most . . . are not independent farmers. They are year-around timber jobbers, who do a little farming as a sideline. . . . Any farmer who makes his

livelihood by farming, with an occasional sale of pulpwood for extra money, will be allowed through this picket line.” To generate negative publicity for Benson and to force the highway patrol to break through the line, the timber haulers continued to challenge the pickets for the next six hours. At 9 P.M., with tensions escalating, union officer Koivunen arranged for the trucks to pass in order to avoid violence.⁵⁹

The stand-off, however, resumed the next day. Amid demands for a declaration of martial law by Carlton County officials, Benson visited the area that afternoon and assured workers that the highway patrol would not break their picket line. The governor was headed to Duluth to join strike negotiations, already underway for two weeks because of pressure from a U.S. Department of Labor mediator and two officials of the state’s industrial commission. Attorney Henry Paull represented the union, while attorney Thomas S. McCabe negotiated for the timber producers. While pickets stood their ground in Scanlon and huddled around bonfires for warmth, negotiations continued through the night. At dawn on November 21, word reached the strikers that an agreement had been reached.⁶⁰

The final contract, a decided victory for the union, was ratified in the next few days by votes taken at strike headquarters throughout northern Minnesota. Most importantly, the union had won the ten-day guarantee for piece workers, as well as an 18 percent increase in piece rates. Regular workers settled for a raise from \$70 to \$75 a month, rather than the \$83.20 they had originally proposed. The eight-hour day and 48-hour work week were retained, and, although the union hiring hall was defeated, workers would no longer have to pay their own employment fees. The agreement, scheduled to remain in effect until September 1, 1938, when the next cutting season would begin, also provided for a closed shop and forbade discrimination against strike participants.⁶¹

“THESE MEN WERE the most exploited of all workers, but today they are the most militant and progressive,” declared *Midwest Labor* shortly after the strike ended.⁶²



Blocked highway and logging trucks near Duluth, November 19, 1937

Indeed, Minnesota’s timber workers had accomplished what few thought possible: they had organized a poor, unskilled, and widely scattered work force in an industry that for decades had dominated its workers. Essential to their success was their strong commitment to collective action, their efforts to communicate their issues to the people of northern Minnesota, Governor Benson’s unwavering support for the strikers, and the outpouring of public sympathy they received.

Although the timber workers had improved their circumstances, there was little they could do in the face of decades of short-sighted resource extraction. “Cut and get out” had been the policy that had guided logging in the north woods for half a century. Natural regeneration of the forest was marginal at best. The great white pine forest did not return, and large areas of northern Minnesota remained entirely barren for years. Timber companies had already shifted most operations to new stands in the Pacific Northwest and Southeast.

While Local 29 endured, many timber workers lost their jobs in the years after 1937. Small logging crews continued to harvest Minnesota’s remaining forest for pulpwood to make paper, railroad ties, and other wood products, but the era of big lumber had come to a close. Some workers followed the timber west in search of work, bringing with them the lessons and experience of organizing a union. Others, especially elderly jacks, spent their last days in state-run shelters and transient



Man (at right) and mountain of pulpwood for making paper, International Falls, 1913

camps or eked out an existence in dying lumber towns surrounded by what Governor Benson called “the graveyards of once magnificent forests.”⁶³

For those who continued working in the north woods, however, the struggles of 1937 made a difference. For the first time in their history, Minnesota’s timber workers boasted a strong bargaining structure with a degree of control over their living and working conditions, better wages, and a voice for their grievances. It had been a long time coming. □

NOTES

The author thanks Peter Rachleff for commenting on a draft of this article.

1. *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Jan. 15, 1937, p. 8.
2. *Duluth Timber Worker*, May 14, 1937, p. 3, microfilm, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul. For other strike accounts, see Bill Beck, “Radicals in the Northwoods: The 1937 Timber Workers Strike,” *Journal of the West* 35 (Apr. 1996): 55–63, and Debra Bernhardt, “Ballad of a Lumber Strike,” *Michigan History* 66 (Jan./Feb. 1982): 38–43.
3. National Resources Committee, “Final Report: The Northern Lake States Region,” June 1939, p. 1.
4. Agnes Larson, *History of the White Pine Industry in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1949), 265–88; see also accident and fatality statistics, *Biennial Reports*, Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry, Minnesota State Archives, MHS.
5. Larson, *White Pine Industry*, 367; George B. Engberg, “Labor in the Lake States Lumber Industry, 1830–1930” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1949), 23; Ilmar Koivunen, interview by Irene Paull, Coos Bay, Ore., Aug. 1968, transcript, 9, MHS; American Forestry Association, *Minnesota Lands: Ownership, Use and Management of Forest and Related Lands* (Washington, D.C.: Livingston Publishing Co., 1960), 22.
6. Tri-State Forestry Conference, “Problems, Plans, and Programs of Using Forest Lands in the Lake States,” final report, St. Paul, May 20–21, 1938, p. 81, MHS; Committee on Land Utilization, *Land Utilization in Minnesota: A State Program for the Cut-Over Lands* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1934), 119.
7. Kirk Jeffrey, “The Major Manufacturers: From Food and Forest Products to High Technology,” in *Minnesota in a Century of Change*, ed. Clifford Clark (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1989), 227–28.
8. Koivunen interview, 15, 36; Beck, “Radicals in the Northwoods,” 60.
9. “1928 Report,” Frank H. Gillmor Papers, MHS; Martin Kuusisto, interview by Irene Paull, Oct. 1968, transcript, 5, MHS; Charlotte Todes, *Labor and Lumber* (New York: International Publishers, 1931), 113.
10. Kuusisto interview, 5; Archie Peters and William Torri testimony, meeting of state relief officials and strike representatives, Duluth, Jan. 21, 1937, p. 4, 23, in Executive Letters, 1937, Governors Records, Minnesota State Archives.
11. John E. Haynes, “Revolt of the ‘Timber Beasts’: IWW Lumber Strike in Minnesota,” *Minnesota History* 42 (Spring 1971): 162–74; Kuusisto interview, 2; Fred Lequier, testimony, meeting of state relief officials and strike representatives, 2, in Executive Letters, 1937, Governors Records.
12. Koivunen interview, 14, 17; Kuusisto interview, 11.
13. Peter Rachleff, “Labor: Three Key Conflicts,” in *Century of Change*, 206; Kuusisto interview, 3.
14. Kuusisto interview, 10; Lequier, testimony; *Duluth News Tribune*, Jan. 6, 1937, p. 1.
15. Koivunen interview, 16; *Duluth News Tribune*, Jan. 6, 1937, p. 1, Jan. 12, 1937, p. 1; Timber Workers Union Local 2776, *Convention Bulletin*, Mar. 26, 1937, p. 1, on *Timber Worker* microfilm, MHS.
16. *Duluth News Tribune*, Jan. 6, 1937, p. 1; *Timber Worker*, July 23, 1937, p. 1; Timber Workers, *Convention Bulletin*, 2.
17. L. P. Zimmerman, State Relief Agency Administrator, to Elmer Benson, Feb. 2, 1937, p. 11, Exec. Letters; *Duluth News Tribune*, Jan. 9, 1937, p. 1.

18. *Duluth News Tribune*, Jan. 9, p. 1, Jan. 12, p. 1, Jan. 13, p. 3—all 1937.
19. *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, Jan. 16, 1937, p. 1, Jan. 22, 1937, p. 4.
20. Koivunen interview, 42.
21. Lequier to Benson, Jan. 6, 1937, Benson to Lequier, Jan. 11, 1937, Exec. Letters.
22. Jerry Lembcke and William M. Tattam, *One Union in Wood: A Political History of the International Woods Workers of America* (New York: International Publishers, 1984), 47, 48; Zimmerman to Benson, Feb. 2, 1937, p. 1, Exec. Letters.
23. Timber Workers, *Convention Bulletin*, 2; testimony, governor's committee investigating camp conditions, reprinted in *Timber Worker*, May 14, 1937, p. 3.
24. Koivunen interview, 25.
25. Irene Paull to Benson, Feb. 5, 1937, Exec. Letters.
26. "Timber Strike" folder, Exec. Letters; *St. Louis County Independent* (Hibbing), Jan. 15, 1937, p. 1.
27. "Northern Minnesota: A Land of Opportunities for Men of Moderate Means" (St. Paul: Great Northern Railway, 1911), MHS; Hazel H. Reinhardt, "Social Adjustments to a Changing Environment," in *The Great Lakes Forest: An Environmental and Social History*, ed. Susan Flader (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 209.
28. The 14 counties are Aitkin, Beltrami, Carlton, Cass, Clearwater, Cook, Crow Wing, Hubbard, Itasca, Koochiching, Lake, Lake of the Woods, Pine, and St. Louis; H. C. Moser, *Idle Lands, Idle Men* (St. Paul: Forestry Committee of the Minnesota State Planning Board, 1938), 10; Oscar Jesness and Reynolds Nowell, *A Program for Land Use in Northern Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1935), 104.
29. Committee on Land Utilization, *Land Utilization*, 17; Jesness and Nowell, *Program*, 116, 205; Moser, *Idle Lands*, 8; Timber Workers, *Convention Bulletin*, 2.
30. *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, Jan. 21, 1937, p. 1; *Duluth News Tribune*, Jan. 23, 1937, p. 1.
31. *Duluth News Tribune*, Jan. 26, 1937, p. 9, Jan. 27, 1937, p. 9.
32. *Duluth News Tribune*, Jan. 30, 1937, p. 1; "Agreement between Employers and the Timber Workers Union Local 2776," Jan. 1937, in Exec. Letters; *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, Jan. 29, 1937, p. 1.
33. Timber Workers, *Convention Bulletin*, 2; *Timber Worker*, Apr. 2, 1937, p. 4.
34. *Timber Worker*, Apr. 2, p. 4, Apr. 9, p. 1, Apr. 30, p. 1—all 1937.
35. *Timber Worker*, Apr. 23, 1937, p. 1.
36. Timber Workers, *Convention Bulletin*, 3.
37. Kuusisto interview, 11–12; Lembcke and Tattam, *One Union*, 48; *Midwest Labor*, Sept. 3, 1937, p. 1; *St. Louis County Independent*, July 16, 1937, p. 5.
38. Kuusisto interview, 12; Walter Galenson, *The CIO Challenge to the AFL: A History of the American Labor Movement, 1935–1941* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 384–85.
39. *St. Louis County Independent*, Jan. 29, 1937, p. 1; Irene Paull, *The Selected Writings of Irene Paull* (Minneapolis: Midwest Villages and Voices, 1996), 80; *Timber Worker*, July 23, 1937, p. 1; Kuusisto interview, 10.
40. Galenson, *CIO Challenge*, 385; *Timber Worker*, July 23, 1937, p. 1.
41. Bill Beck, "Fifty Years of MTPA History," *Timber Bulletin*, Aug.–Sept. 1987, p. 18; *Midwest Labor*, Sept. 10, 1937, p. 1.
42. *Midwest Labor*, Sept. 9–Oct. 15, 1937, Oct. 22, 1937, p. 1.
43. "Statement of the Executive Board of Local 29," Oct. 1937, p. 1–3, Exec. Letters.
44. *Duluth News Tribune*, Oct. 21, 1937, p. 1–2; *Midwest Labor*, Oct. 22, 1937, p. 1.
45. *Midwest Labor*, Oct. 22, 1937, p. 2.
46. *Two Harbors Chronicle*, Oct. 28, 1937, p. 1.
47. *Two Harbors Chronicle*, Nov. 4, 1937, p. 1, Oct. 28, 1937, p. 1.
48. *Midwest Labor*, Oct. 22, 1937, p. 2, Oct. 29, 1937, p. 1, 2.
49. Timber Producers Association, "Bulletin No. 6," Nov. 1, 1937, p. 3, MHS.
50. Frank T. Ronkainen to Benson, Jan. 14, 1937, p. 1, Exec. Letters.
51. Ronkainen, *Two Harbors Chronicle*, Nov. 18, 1937, p. 6; "Farmers of Northern Minnesota," signed Frank T. Ronkainen, undated handbill, Exec. Letters.
52. *Two Harbors Chronicle*, Nov. 18, 1937, p. 6.
53. Ronkainen to Benson, Apr. 18, 1937, p. 1–2, Exec. Letters; Ronkainen, *Two Harbors Chronicle*, Nov. 18, 1937, p. 6; *Timber Worker*, May 14, 1937, p. 4.
54. *Midwest Labor*, Nov. 25, 1937, p. 4; Ronkainen to Benson, Jan. 14, 1937, p. 2, Exec. Letters; Ronkainen, *Two Harbors Chronicle*, Nov. 18, 1937, p. 6.
55. *Midwest Labor*, Nov. 5, 1937, p. 2; October Timber Strike folder and letter to Benson, Nov. 13, 1937, Exec. Letters.
56. *St. Louis County Independent*, Nov. 19, 1937, p. 1; undated letter to Benson, Exec. Letters.
57. *Midwest Labor*, Nov. 5, 1937, p. 2, Nov. 19, 1937, p. 1.
58. *Midwest Labor*, Nov. 5, 1937, p. 2; *Duluth News Tribune*, Nov. 18, 1937, p. 1.
59. *Duluth News Tribune*, Nov. 20, 1937, p. 1, 3; Koivunen interview, 27; *Duluth Herald*, Nov. 20, 1937, p. 1.
60. *Duluth News Tribune*, Nov. 21, 1937, p. 1, Nov. 22, 1937, p. 1.
61. *Midwest Labor*, Nov. 25, 1937, p. 1, Dec. 3, 1937, p. 2; *Duluth News Tribune*, Nov. 22, 1937, p. 2.
62. *Midwest Labor*, Nov. 25, 1937, p. 2.
63. Elmer A. Benson, "Conservation and the Lumberjack," *American Forests*, Aug. 1937, p. 382.

The images on p. 268 and 271 are from The Timber Worker, June 4 and June 25, 1937, p. 1, respectively; on p. 269, from Minneapolis Labor Review, Jan. 1, 1937, p. 1; on p. 266, from R. N. Cunningham, Forests of Minnesota, 1940 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1940), p. 94; on p. 275, courtesy Minnesota Timber Producers Association, Duluth. All the other images, including the telegram, which is in Executive Letters, 1937, Governors Records, Minnesota State Archives, are from the MHS library. Map drawn by Lois Stanfield.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).