

The Ludlow Massacre

A Bicentennial moment With American Miners

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This article is the third in a series of counter-bicentennial pieces dealing with the more sordid and less-acknowledged incidents in America's 200-year-old history.

The era from 1865 to 1919 signaled an important, pivotal development in America's economy. It was a period in which the dominance of individual, agrarian-based capitalism, often characterized as "rugged individualism," was overthrown by the organized forces of corporate monopoly capitalism, bringing about irrevocable economic and social transformations in the lives of millions of people.

It was an epoch in which corporate consolidation created massive industrial empires linking the major industrial processes of production and manufacturing with primary business functions, all within the same organizational confines. By 1900 the giant corporation had become the dominant force in American industry. By 1919, corporations employed 86% of all workers and produced 87.7% of the total value of all products.

Among the business giants of the time there were two overpowering financial groups or "supertrusts," as they were called. The smaller of the two was the J. P. Morgan group, which controlled such huge enterprises as the steel and shipping trusts, the electrical supply trusts, the rubber trust and many smaller trusts.

The larger of the supertrusts, recognized as "the real fathers of the Trust idea in this nation" was the Rockefeller group headed up by John D. Rockefeller Jr. The controller of the most successful trust of all, the Standard Oil Company, the Rockefeller group totally dominated the oil industry, national and international, as well as gaining control over the copper and smelter's



Ludlow miners, 1914

trusts and identifying closely with the steel, tobacco and national services.

Out of the formation of corporate capitalism also came the advent of the mass strike. The American worker, sick to death of being mistreated and ignored as a wage slave, began to fight back with the most readily accessible weapon at hand—the strike.

Although strikes were nothing new in American labor history, the enormity and violence of the mass strike was. Beginning with the “Great Upheaval of 1877” against the nation’s railroads, the American industrial wage earner—a new breed of worker possessing no business interest of his own—began to revolt by every means available, including the localized strike, the nation-wide general strike, seizure of industry, sabotage and urban guerrilla warfare.

One of the most violent, bitter and bloody strikes in American labor history, one which coincidentally involved John D. Rockefeller Jr., was the Ludlow Mine Camp Massacre of 1914. It originated in the coalfields located in the foothills east of the Rockies in a region surrounding Trinidad, Colorado—an area geographically isolated from the social and industrial life of the rest of the state.

Developed in Southern Colorado in the 1880s through 1890s, the coal industry became the state’s major source of revenue. Companies which included the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CFI—the Rockefeller interest), the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company and the Victor-American Fuel Company among others hired workers primarily of Greek, Italian, Slavic and Mexican descent and constructed towns near the coalfields for them.

Naturally the companies assumed all the functions of civil government and regulated the workers’ social activities to boot.

Dissatisfaction with the political, economic and social autocracy of the coal companies led to strikes by the miners in 1883, 1893 and 1903, but all were quickly put down by a combination of armed guards, expulsion of strikers and importation of strike breakers. None of the three attempts had been as much a struggle for material gains as for workers’ rights.

The strike against the Colorado coal companies from 1913 through 1914 was another matter entirely. Aside from its coal field interests, the CFI alone owned twelve towns in the region—lock, stock and worker. For the miner, life in these towns was next to intolerable. No land or building could be occupied without the permission of the Company.

All food, clothing and supply shops were owned by the Company, as well as the local saloon. The houses were Company-owned also—shabby, small, ugly and disease-infested. Even the school and church were Company property and teachers and ministers were supervised and selected by the Company much the same as everyone else.

Only the threat of discharge kept the worker under the Company’s thumb. Through the use of spies, the Company kept close watch on its employees. Rights of free speech, free press and free assembly were suppressed. An army of deputy sheriffs maintained the Company policy. The miners had absolutely no one to appeal to as even the civil authorities were under the control of the Company.

Political control by the coal companies allowed them to virtually ignore state laws intended to safeguard the interests of the workers. It also prevented unfavorable legislation by the state or county and controlled the coroners and judges, thus preventing injured workmen from collecting damages.

Although the death rate of workers in Colorado was twice that of the rest of the United States, few victims ever received compensation. Out of 98 verdicts involving 109 deaths, only one held that the company was at fault and 85 charged the victim with “negligence and carelessness.”

The two principal grievances in the strike in 1913 through 1914, a strike which lasted fifteen months, were the ignorance and lack of responsibility of the coal companies and their denial of the miners’ right to organize. Discontent reached its peak in the summer of 1913 and the United Mine Workers (UMW) sent in organizers of its own in hopes of gaining a foothold.

As the tension grew, the UMW requested Governor Ammons to attempt to set up a conference with the mine operators, but the companies outright refused. Anticipating a strike, the operators flooded the area with armed guards and detectives. One union organizer had already been ambushed and killed and the union feared that widespread bloodshed was close at hand.

Fed up, the miners held their own convention in Trinidad on September 15, 1913 and compiled a list of seven demands.

The demands were: the recognition of the union; a 10% increase in tonnage rates and a day scale corresponding with Wyoming; an eight-hour day; payment for all narrow and dead work; the election of check-weighmen without company interference; the right of the workers to trade at any store they pleased as well as choosing their own doctors and boarding houses; and the enforcement of mining laws of the state and the abolition of the Company guard system. Were their demands not recognized, the miners called for a strike on September 23.

On September 23, 9,000 miners struck (from 40 to 100% in various camps), making good their threat. Tent colonies were established, the Ludlow camp among them, and benefits were received from the UMW strike fund as much as possible.

The companies refused to be a part of any collective bargaining with the workers. It was to be an open shop or nothing. John D. Rockefeller Jr., who owned 40% of Colorado Fuel and Iron's stocks and bonds and dictated policies of practice to all the coal companies in Southern Colorado, especially came out against any collective bargaining, and he had influential backers.

General Superintendent L.M. Bowers of the U.S. Commission of Labor Relations agreed with Rockefeller. Bowers wrote that he felt the workers' demands were "numerous requirements that practically take away the mines from the control of the owners and operators and place them in the hands of these, in many cases, disreputable agitators, socialists and anarchists."

Bowers also wrote Rockefeller that he was "fighting a good fight, which is not only in the interest of your own company, but of the other companies in Colorado and of the business interests of the entire country and of the laboring classes quite as much."

On September 23, the day the strike began, the bloodshed began as well. First a marshal attempting to arrest four miners was shot. Then, on October 7, detectives exchanged gunfire at the Ludlow camp. On October 9, the Ludlow camp was attacked and one worker was killed. On October 17, the "Death Special," a machine gun mounted on an armored car, was brought in and yet another worker was killed. Finally, on October 28, Governor Ammons called out the state militia to protect the mining properties and the men who were willing to return to work.

A proposed conference arranged by Secretary Wilson of the Department of Labor fell through due to the coal companies' refusal to negotiate and General John Chase, the head of the militia, assumed absolute command of the strike zone, issuing a general order which suspended all civil law. Strikers were arrested and held, incommunicado, without bail. The situation was akin to martial law.

While the militia was on guard, quartered and fed by the coal companies, its conduct became so questionable that eventually an investigative committee was formed at the request of the Colorado State Federation of Labor.

In its investigation, the committee found that the militia cooperated fully with Company guards, threatened strikers and denied them their rights, refused to allow strike breakers to leave, insulted town women and stole from its citizens. Governor Ammons refused to listen or act upon any of the committee's recommendations.

After a quiet February and March, the majority of the militia was recalled, leaving only Company B and Cavalry Troop A at the Ludlow camp. Then, on April 20, without warning, the militia occupied the hill overlooking the camp, mounted its machine gun and exploded two dynamite charges (later explained away as having been a signal from Company B to Troop A).

Remembering a similar situation at a neighboring camp, the Ludlow strikers seized their rifles and took up their own position. A shot was fired (from which side no one knew) and bullets rained down upon the camp for the next twelve hours, killing one boy and three men.

On orders, militiamen doused coal oil over the strikers' tents and set them afire. In one pit eleven children and two women were suffocated or burned to death. The militiamen took three prisoners and shot them dead while unarmed and under guard.

As the news of the massacre spread, strikers from surrounding districts armed themselves and marched to avenge the deaths. There was open warfare against all civil authority—militia, guards and operators— and armed strikers surged into mine after mine setting fire to company buildings.

By April 22, the strikers had occupied the field between Ludlow and Trinidad. Workers from all over volunteered their services.

Governor Ammons wired President Wilson for federal troops to put down the workers' uprising and on April 30 six troops of cavalry stormed in and ended the fighting. Thirty were dead, both strikers and militiamen, aside from the twenty-one who died at Ludlow.



Mother Jones and the children of Ludlow

the bloodshed.

In another attempt at a whitewash, authorities in Southern Colorado instituted legal proceedings against those strikers who fought against the militia. In August, 1914 in Trinidad, a grand jury hand-picked by the sheriff of Las Animas County was opened.

The jury returned 163 indictments, mostly for murder, against 124 strikers and union officials. No indictments were handed down against deputy sheriffs. Militia officers brought up on court martial charges were all acquitted except for one, who received a slight demotion.

Disturbed by the Southern Colorado uprisings, President Wilson set up a commission to arrange plans for a settlement. The plan formulated called for a three year truce in which there would be enforcement of the Colorado mining and labor laws. The plan also called for a three year outlawing of strikes. A convention of strikers at Trinidad accepted the plan, but the companies rejected it as an interference in their right to manage.

Rockefeller, meanwhile, hired W.L. Mackenzie King, the former Canadian Minister of Labor, to conduct through the Rockefeller Foundation an inquiry through which "closer personal contact" and "more friendly cooperation between capital and labor" could supposedly be developed.

The solution, which came to be known as the Industrial Representation Plan, allowed for the election of two men to represent the miners at each mine; enabled coal camps to be organized into five districts; set up joint committees to discuss health, sanitation, mine safety, recreation and education; and agreed upon periodic tours by company representatives to insure the maintenance of harmony.

The U.S. Labor Commission saw King's role as devising "specious substitutions for trade unions that will deceive, mollify and soothe public opinion while bulwarking the employers arbitrary control."

Unfortunately, while these various schemes were bantered around, the strike was steadily being crushed and finally, on December 10, 1914, the Policy Commission of strikers called off the fifteen-month-old strike altogether.

On January 19, 1915 a convention of employees and management in Denver cast their votes in favor of the Rockefeller Plan. The company union was now a reality and the spirit of independent labor had been dealt a severe blow.

Aside from somewhat restoring Rockefeller's public image and disemboweling the Colorado labor movement, the Industrial Representation Plan set the stage for unionization.

In 1933 the CFI negotiated the first genuine collective bargaining agreement with the United Mine Workers and in 1935 the Wagner Act outlawed the company unions. The counter-revolutionary union movement had now begun in earnest.

After the massacre, Rockefeller became the chief target of critics for his failure to negotiate with the strikers before the bloodshed began (six decades later Nelson Rockefeller recalled the past as he turned his back on prisoners at Attica).

Upton Sinclair, one of the leading social critics of the day, called upon the Socialist Party to join the picket movement against all Rockefeller properties, but they refused.

Angered at all the public criticism, Rockefeller issued a statement that the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company had already voluntarily granted concessions demanded by the strikers and only the obstinacy of the strikers had produced the violence at Ludlow. When that didn't work, he hired Ivy L. Lee, a publicity agent for the Pennsylvania Railroad, to "educate" the public. He wanted it known that "well-paid" union agitators, not mine guards and the militia, were responsible for

As for Ludlow and Southern Colorado, nothing changed. The mining strikes continued and the workers continued to be ground underfoot by their corporate capitalist oppressors.

Suggested Supplementary Readings

The Capitalist Revolution by John Tipple, Pegasus Books, 1970;

Strike! by Jeremy Brecher, Fawcett Premier, 1972;

American Labor Struggles by Samuel Yellen, S.A. Russell Publishers, 1956;

The Great Coal Field War by George S. McGovern and Leonard F. Guttridge, Houghton Mifflin, 1972.

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