
The Coal Strike of 1919 in Indiana County

Irwin Marcus, Eileen Cooper and Beth
O'Leary

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

The history of United States coal miners has received limited attention from scholars. Most work has focused on the national scene, to the neglect of district and local level developments. In dealing with the period immediately following World War I, most authors emphasize the coal strikes of 1919 and 1922, the rise of John L. Lewis as president of the United Mine Workers, and the battles for power between Lewis and his chief rivals.¹ In several instances historians have produced studies of western Pennsylvania coal miners.² This article draws on that scholarship and attempts to contribute new elements to the story by looking at a neglected geographical area and underused archival sources.

David Montgomery, in *The Fall of the House of Labor*, links the aftermath of World War I, including the coal strike of 1919, to the events of the first half of the 1920's. He describes the factious leaders and rebellious members of the United Mine Workers whose activities provoked almost continuous strikes from 1920 to 1923. This national picture had its counterpart in Indiana County, where similar struggles for union power and social change occurred. This story forms part of the subject matter for Alan Singer's scholarship. Singer depicts a battle between a working-class conscious rank and file, particularly in Cambria County, and the national office of the United Mine Workers. Their decade-long battle resulted in a victory for Lewis and his supporters, but in the process of struggle the miners forged a program which called for the unionization of unorganized miners, the creation of a progressive political party, and a more democratic union. In the 1920's the miners in District 2 conducted a two-front war against the operators and their political allies as well as against John L. Lewis. In Singer's analysis the coal miners appear as activists rather than as pawns in a leadership struggle.³

This article offers a new framework for examining the period 1919 to 1921. Instead of highlighting the changes inaugurated in the early 1920's, it emphasizes some of the continuities, notably how the coal strike of 1919 left an unfinished agenda which coal miners and some of their leaders attempted to address. The unresolved issues provoked strikes and internal struggles within District 2 over programs and power. This approach created a linkage between the major coal strikes of 1919 and 1922 and demonstrated the persistence of rank and file radicalism in a generally conservative decade. This perspective found a voice in the speeches and activities of Dominick Gelotte, who offered an alternative to John Brophy, President of District 2, as well as to John L. Lewis.

CONFLICT IN INDIANA COUNTY

World War I brought important changes to Indiana County coal miners. Federal government planners strove to keep the mines in constant operation by increasing the supply of railway cars and reducing the chaos of shipping patterns. In 1917 Congress passed the Lever Act which gave the President the authority to control the distribution of food and fuel. The United States Fuel Administration was established pursuant to this act, with Harry Garfield as its administrator. He supported wage increases and the Washington Agreement of 1917. This settlement encouraged the spread of unionization. However, problems arose as price increases exceeded the wage gains provided by the agreement. The desire of miners for a better life linked their interest in wage demands with ambitious social and political goals. These issues assumed a special character in District 2, where John Brophy, the district President, clashed with John L. Lewis, the President of the United Mine Workers. Lewis was at this time strongly emphasizing nationalization of the coal mines.⁴

By early 1919 several national developments began to impinge on labor developments in Indiana County. Coal miners faced a downward pressure on their standard of living which resulted from a combination of increasing prices and the wage stability provided by the Washington Agreement of 1917. A new public opinion also emerged as the "Bolshevik issue" became more central to the concerns of middle class Americans. The new fears associated with the 1919 Seattle General Strike fueled the politician's and the public's fear of radicals. The issue briefly became a national obsession. The contagion reached Indiana County by April, hit a high point on May 1, 1919, and remained a presence in the early 1920's. Public officials fearful of disorder on May Day convened mass meetings, aroused public enthusiasm for patriotism, supported newspaper ads which condemned Bolshevism as treason, recruited deputy sheriffs, and requested the dispatch of a state police unit to help maintain "law and order."⁵

In the case of Coral, a small town seven miles south of Indiana, the "Bolshevik issue" lasted longer than in other places in the county and overlapped with the coal strike of 1919. The strike began in April, 1919, when the Potter Coal and Coke Company failed to recognize the United Mine Workers. The radicalism issue became entwined with the strike in Coral when public authorities, including a post office inspector, pinpointed Coral as the site of radical agitation. More specifically, Lindo Brigman, Post Office inspector for Indiana County, brought charges against R.E. Mikesell, Postmaster at Coral, "for openly defending Bolshevik outlawry." This allegation brought a response from Peter Ferrara, a leader of District 2, who wrote to William B. Wilson, Secretary of Labor of the United States, to answer charges which Brigman brought against the miners and the postmaster. Ferrara denied that the union miners were Bolsheviks, and he called for the reinstatement of Mikesell. According to Ferrara's explanation of the incident, Mikesell's dismissal resulted from "the propaganda instituted by the Potter



John Brophy, Mineworkers Union Leader in Indiana County

Coal and Coke Company and its agents, for the purpose of humiliating and annoying the said R.E. Mikesell at the expense of the United Mine workers local at Coral, Pa.”⁶

Two other special elements contributed to the complexity and heightened the emotional level of the struggle at Coral. The strikers suffered eviction from their houses in April, and many of them spent the next year living in tents. To compound the problems of the union and the strikers, Judge Jonathan Langham of the Indiana County Court of Common Pleas presided at a court case involving the local strike leaders. An indictment charged the defendants with interfering with the operations of the company and with those workers who wanted to continue to work. In early July Judge Langham issued a broad injunction which prohibited strikers from engaging in activities which impeded production. By the end of the month the defendants had been convicted of contempt of court and sentenced to jail.⁷

The multiple offensive directed against the Coral strikers and the United Mine Workers placed a heavy burden on their limited resources. Nevertheless, they undertook actions which prolonged the conflict, although the company and its political allies eventually won the struggle. John Brophy and the District 2 leadership, aided by John L. Lewis, provided tents for the dispossessed miners. Delegates to the District 2 convention in 1919 raised money to buy shoes for the children and wives of the strikers and also undertook a clothing drive in their behalf. John Brophy dispatched a corps of District 2 organizers to assist the Coral strikers. Brophy also sought intermediaries who would reach the officials of the Potter Coal and Coke Company and arrange for a negotiated settlement. All these efforts ultimately proved unsuccessful as the superior resources of the company and its allies prevailed over the endurance of the miners and the aid of District 2. On April 23, 1920, the District Executive Board decided to discontinue the strike.⁸

Although many Indiana County coal miners and leaders of District 2 expressed an ongoing concern about developments in Coral and provided some aid to the strikers, by September, 1919, most leaders and members of the United Mine Workers, including those in Indiana County, shifted their attention to the proceedings of the national convention at Cleveland. Delegates supported a major wage increase, a shorter work week, and nationalization of the mines. Lewis, on the other hand, took a more cautious stance, and debates between leaders and insurgents marked the convention proceedings. The convention also provided an opportunity for local unions to offer resolutions. Several Indiana County locals responded. For example, Local 601 in Clymer demanded a closed shop, the end of car pushing, and a thirty-hour week with a sixty per cent wage increase. The car pushing issue involved the compensation to coal miners for pushing cars from side areas of the mine to the main track where mechanical power moved the coal cars. More impressive, however, were the resolutions presented by Local 831 in Ernest. These occupied ten pages of the convention proceedings. Local 831's resolutions reiterated the demands of the Clymer local, but included other proposals as well. Some of their demands focused on the workplace, while others emphasized the community. Proposals included a closed shop, better safety conditions, and improved premium pay. For its community Local 831 demanded pure water and a small hospital. They also condemned company eviction policies, the use of armed force against women and children, and compulsory use of the company store. However, the major decision of the delegates was their authorization of John L. Lewis to call a strike on November 1st if their demands for higher wages, shorter hours and nationalization could not be achieved by collective bargaining.

The operators refused to engage in serious bargaining and by early October collective bargaining broke down and the federal government entered the conflict. This intervention hurt the coal miners because President Woodrow Wilson condemned the planned strike as unlawful. Judge A. B. Anderson issued an

injunction against the strike, troops were placed on alert, and the Bureau of Investigation mobilized secret agents. Nevertheless, the United Mine Workers and the miners followed through with their plans. On November 1, 1919, about 400,000 miners struck nationwide, including 50,000 in District 2 according to John Brophy's estimate. This proved to be a crucial event for the fortunes of coal miners in the next decade.⁹

In Indiana County all of the miners at the organized mines struck and some of the unorganized miners also walked out. At the Rochester and Pittsburgh Coal Company, the dominant producer in the county, all of its mines closed and 4,500 miners walked out. At the Clearfield Bituminous Coal Company, another major producer, almost all of its miners struck.

Leading Rochester and Pittsburgh Coal Company officials saw the strike as a long term opportunity, although they realized it would result in immediate production and profit losses. The letters of B. M. Clark, President of the Rochester and Pittsburgh Coal Company, emphasized the possibilities opened by the strike. The changed climate of opinion gave operators a chance to end the abuse they had suffered at the hands of organized labor. The injunction prevented union officials and organizers from communicating with their members and offering them financial aid. The Lever Act, with its penalty clause fining miners \$1 per man per day for strike activity, placed a powerful weapon in the hands of the operators. In the Iselin mine alone the clause mandated \$6,300 in pay deductions by early November. It also induced some miners to return to work. The operators also maximized deductions from store accounts and rents. Clark wrote that because the miners had struck and allowed the public to freeze, their misconduct justified actions by the operators "in giving them a little dose of their own medicine and allowing them to freeze also."¹⁰

The operators also boasted about the powerful weapon of government support. The strike placed the miners in contempt of court and thereby produced a fight between the government and the United Mine Workers. The federal government intervened in other ways as well. The Department of Justice stationed secret agents in the Indiana region to watch the United Mine Workers' leaders and to act on any violation of the restraining order. B. M. Clark received a telegram which advised him to report all disturbances and unlawful conduct to the Governor of Pennsylvania, who would then forward the information to the War Department. In one case, two miners were arrested for interfering with the operation of a non-union mine in Indiana County. The Department of Justice handled the case by sending the U.S. Marshal to take them to Pittsburgh to answer charges in the U.S. District Court. B. M. Clark sought to restart a mine because if this action provoked trouble, he expected to "secure United States government soldiers." More specifically, Clark wanted to restart the Iselin operation because "we are prepared to put in some Indiana local soldiers in uniform at the town of Iselin."

Aid from the federal government also came in another form. An official in

Courtesy of Indiana University of Pennsylvania



Pennsylvania soft-coal miners, ca. 1918. Man at top right may be owner of the company, perhaps on an "inspection" tour.

charge of the coal branch of taxation affairs stated that he would put two members of his staff on the coal company cases "with the hope that we could figure out results to our benefit." The National Coal Operators Association appropriated money to employ two or three men "to work with the Treasury Department to figure out results beneficial to the coal operators under the years 1917 and 1918. They expect to work out principles that will produce a tax refund."¹¹

The Rochester and Pittsburgh Coal Company also had influence with the state and local governments. For example, B. M. Clark referred to the Lieutenant Governor as a personal friend. In another case, his intervention, a trip to Harrisburg, led Governor William C. Sproul to place "a small detachment of State Constabulary at Indiana which will patrol the various mining districts in that section. This detachment will be increased as rapidly as possible." Beyond that Sproul "perfected plans for putting in reserve forces very promptly. Confidentially the state authorities have already in their possession a large amount of firearms to meet any necessity that may arise." At the local level, coal companies benefitted from the sympathetic attitude and decisions of Judge Jonathan Langham, who issued the injunction in the Coral strike of 1919 which led to the jailing of the local strike leader and his close associates. Sheriff Boggs offered to aid the Clymer miners who decided to return to work. He also issued a proclamation which prohibited gatherings which posed a threat to property and public order.¹²

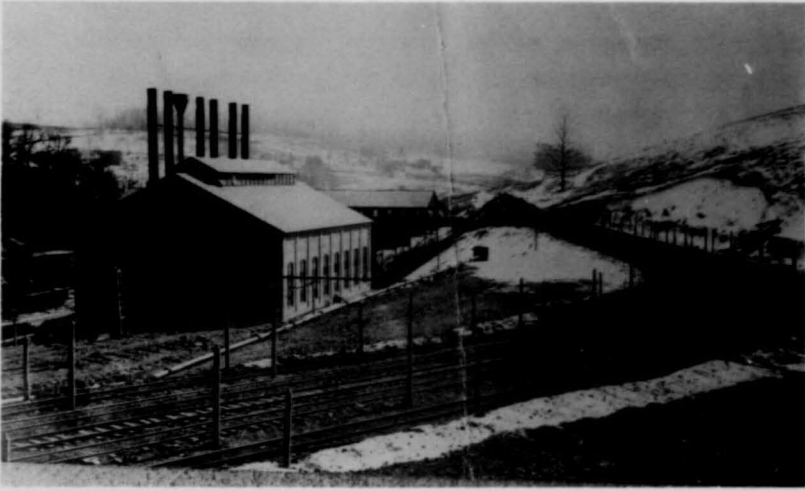
Pressure also built at the national level as Judge A. B. Anderson issued a sweeping injunction against the strike on November 8th. In his ruling Anderson described the strike as illegal, and cited union leaders as parties barred from all aspects of strike action. Lewis responded to this threat by convening an emergency meeting of the union's executive board on November 10. At Lewis's behest, its members voted to comply with the injunction, but under protest. In District 2 John Brophy made no effort to get the strikers back to work, and they remained at home. District Secretary Richard Gilbert declared that cancellation of the strike must come from the local unions.

The strike dragged on into December with unionized miners standing firm and an impasse in negotiations prevailing. The federal government increased its pressure on the miners and the union as the Wilson administration threatened to deploy troops to reopen the mines. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer mounted an anti-radical and anti-labor campaign and a federal court issued contempt citations against union officials. At this point Lewis intensified his effort to convince the miners to accept the proposal for a fourteen percent wage increase and the appointment of an investigatory commission to continue the exploration of the wage issue. The Executive Board concurred with this initiative and the United Mine Workers issued a circular, signed by John L. Lewis, John Brophy and other officials, which called on the miners to return to work. Indiana County miners received these instructions by December 11 and John Brophy

expected a speedy return to work by the miners. However, press reports reflected some exceptions to the immediate back to work movement. An article published on December 24 reported that miners at the Lucerne Works had not yet returned to work.¹³

In a formal sense, by 1920 the coal strike of 1919 was over. Yet many of the issues raised by the strike played a major role in the developments of the early 1920's. Labor-management relations in the coal industry of the 1920's were affected by intra-coal industry competition as well as power struggles within the leadership of the United Mine Workers and the pressure on profits exerted by the competition of other fuels such as oil and natural gas. Under these conditions some coal operators sought a more flexible wage scale which would allow unionized coal companies to respond to the pressures of competition from nonunion districts. Coal operators in the Central Pennsylvania district argued that they needed wage cuts in order to be competitive. This argument was presented by Thomas H. Watkins, president of the Pennsylvania Coal and Coke Corporation and a prominent official of the Central Pennsylvania Coal Producers Association, who contended that union operators could not compete with the lower labor costs in non-union mines, especially in West Virginia. Therefore, miners should accept lower wages in order to retain jobs. A specific concern was expressed earlier at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Central Pennsylvania Coal Producers Association at which the members expressed the fear that the railroads, the largest single purchaser of bituminous coal, would reduce their purchases from higher priced suppliers and increase orders from the lower priced districts. Watkins published a pamphlet in which he reiterated the case of the operators in behalf of lower wages. John Brophy responded with a pamphlet which called on management to maintain its agreement with the union and asserted that coal industry difficulties resulted from the lack of a market rather than high wage levels.

Charles Potter, former chairman of the Rochester and Pittsburgh Coal Company, offered another perspective on the issue of intra-coal industry competition. He declared that although North/South wage and transportation differentials deserved examination in any investigation of the coal industry of the 1920's, they had less pertinence to Indiana County than to most other areas. In this county the key coal operators were either "captive operations" or used special markets. The Clearfield Bituminous Coal Company provided the best example of a "captive company" because its connections with the New York Central Railroad and the Rochester and Pittsburgh Coal Company depended on markets in New York, New England, and Canada. In neither case did the companies face direct competition from southern coal producers. He also noted that an excessive focus on regional competition could, for mines in several regions, mask their ownership by such corporations as U.S. Steel, Bethlehem Steel, and the Morgan, Rockefeller and Mellon interests.¹⁴



The entrance to a Pennsylvania soft-coal mine, 1915.

Unresolved tensions within the United Mine Workers surfaced at its convention in early January, 1920. Lewis pinpointed the intervention of the federal government as a key factor in the decision of the United Mine Workers' officers to accept a settlement. Philip Murray, president of District 5, moved affirmation of the report and contended that a favorable vote would prove the loyalty of the delegates to their country, their union and the officers of their organization. Numerous delegates spoke in opposition to the motion, however. A delegate from District 12, based in Illinois, presented the most detailed case for the critics. He declared that it was better to go to jail to defend one's rights, as Eugene Debs had done, than to back down on a matter of principle. He also called for the ouster of Lewis. However, he expected Murray's motion to pass because of the power of the well-oiled machine which supported it. Other critics of the motion emphasized the importance of fighting for freedom. At the conclusion of the debate the delegates supported the Murray motion by a 1639-231 vote.¹⁵

Some miners in Indiana County faced more immediate problems. In November and December of 1919 the events of the national coal strike overshadowed the developments at Coral. However, the Coral strikers persisted in their organizing drive, and the leaders and organizers of District 2 provided them with assistance. This effort suffered from several internal difficulties, including debates over the appropriate division of power among John Brophy, the district Executive Board member responsible for this territory, and the organizers assigned to Coral. Also, miners from nearby towns went to work in Coral because it offered a relatively attractive work environment consisting of a five or six day work week and "good weight" (accurate weighing for their coal). These problems, combined with an intransigent employer backed by the judicial sys-



Typical Pennsylvania coal town, ca. 1915. Houses are "doubles," providing shelter for two families. In center of picture are the company store and a small hotel for visiting engineers and company executives.

tem, overwhelmed the efforts of the strikers and the organizers. Therefore, the district Executive Board, at its April 23rd meeting decided to discontinue the strike.¹⁶

The Indiana Evening Gazette noted the parallels between the confrontation at Coral and the conflict at Valier, where some employees of the Pansy Coal Company struck in May, 1920, in order to organize the mine, counter the discharge of miners for union activities, and introduce a checkweighman to examine coal weights. The company responded to this initiative by introducing a bill of complaint in the Indiana County Court. Judge Jonathan Langham heard the testimony in the case. The counsel for the plaintiff alleged that the unlawful actions and threats of the defendants reduced the work force, although many employees wanted to work. Their campaign of terror included name calling, visits to the houses of workers and carrying picks and clubs. The counsel for the defendants responded to these charges by denying that his clients had engaged in coercion or interference. He affirmed the existence of an organizing campaign, but he denied that coercive means had been used by the United Mine Workers. Nevertheless, in early August Judge Langham issued a permanent injunction which restrained the United Mine Workers from interfering with the employees of the Pansy Coal Company. Its terms included a restraint of the United Mine Workers from assembling at or near the mine and interfering with employees going to and from the mine by the use of menaces, threats or demonstrations. The order also prohibited the defendants from annoying the plaintiff in the conduct of his business. Officials of District 2 who considered appealing this deci-

sion realized that other courts would most likely uphold Judge Langham's contention that a congregation of protesters by its nature created an atmosphere of menace.¹⁷

After the Coral struggle new battles were fought at Ernest and Valier. In these cases workers complained about discrepancies in the length of the work day of workers who earned the same wage. Some miners worked an eight hour day while other employees such as shop men, often labored for ten or twelve hours a day. Officials of Local 831 contacted Brophy about this grievance and indicated that some workers would refuse to pay dues until district officials redressed their grievance. A local union official wrote a letter to B. M. Clark in which he demanded a satisfactory scale by July 15th. When Clark failed to give them satisfaction, miners at Ernest began a strike on the 16th. After the shop men rejected the entreaties of company officials to return to work, the officials threatened to collect a fine from all of the Ernest miners. Peter Ferrara, District Executive Board member from the Indiana area, wrote to Brophy in late July that "he will not stand for it" and if they're looking for trouble "they may get it." Brophy wrote to Clark in a slightly more tempered vein, but he also conveyed his displeasure with the prospect of the company deducting a fine from the pay checks of the workers. He described such a policy as "arbitrary" and "without justification." Moreover, he feared that "it would intensify present unrest." However, the company would not budge, and union officials could do little to help the miners.¹⁸

An increasingly hostile political climate added to the woes of union officials and miners in Indiana County. The public's fear of Bolsheviks and radicals did not abate. It continued into 1921 and affected both government policy and the internal workings of District 2. In February, 1920, Federal Department of Justice and state police officials arrested nine members of the Ukrainian Branch of the Communist Party, Local 59 in Coal Run. Other officials raided the Communist headquarters in McIntyre. These efforts led to one deportation. A police raid at Sagamore, a small town just across the county line in Armstrong County, destroyed a large quantity of anarchist literature and seized a Russian for deportation. Although May Day of 1920 passed quietly in Indiana County, one incident highlighted the intense emotionalism about radicalism. A state trooper, who saw a flash of red, a color taboo on May 1, sprang into action. He tore a beautiful red flower from the lapel of a man's coat, threw the flower to the ground and told "the foreigner" to keep going. This incident paralleled a 1919 case involving Davis A. Palmer, a prominent western Pennsylvania socialist and merchant. In his case the wearing of a red flower led to an altercation with a state trooper on May 1 and brought him into Judge Jonathan Langham's courtroom.¹⁹

The comparative solidarity of union leaders and miners illustrated by the Coral, Valier, and Ernest struggles did not pervade all aspects of the activities of

District 2 in 1920 and 1921. In other cases debate often turned into division as power struggles were reinforced by ideological differences. These conflicts had their roots in external and internal factors. The concern about radicalism led to raids and repression and helped to create a climate of antagonism inside the union. However, racial and ethnic factors mitigated divisiveness in District 2. Prior to the 1922 strike relatively few blacks worked in Indiana County coal mines. Thus, racial tension played a less prominent role in this area than in southern West Virginia and District 5, the region south of the Pittsburgh, where there were more black coal miners. Ethnicity was a more divisive element than racial division, but worker solidarity was generally substantial, given the stakes of the conflict with coal operators. To the extent that ethnicity became the focus of attention, Italian-Americans were usually in the spotlight. They provided a core of supporters for the aspiring labor leader Dominick Gelotte.²⁰

Gelotte's activities generated the most concern among top leaders of District 2. Although he boasted an impressive record of service to the UMWA, including three years as a national organizer, four years as a district organizer and activity as a liaison with the Johnstown steel workers in the Steel Strike of 1919, his ideology, flamboyant debating style, and popularity among foreign-born miners made the leaders of District 2 uneasy. Gelotte's dismissal as a special organizer in March, 1920, added to the tension, although the District leadership explained the move as motivated by financial difficulties. Union leaders remained concerned about Gelotte's activities, and Brophy worked to counteract a circular and other statements by Gelotte. In the circular of Local Union 1386 of Nanty Glo, signed by Gelotte, its authors condemned Brophy for accepting a wage-scale agreement which did not deal with car pushing. Brophy, meanwhile, viewed the results of the special convention at DuBois as a rebuff to Gelotte.²¹

Union officials called the convention because of the failure of mine members of the scale committee to sign the agreement negotiated with the operators in April, 1920. Its critics denounced the inadequacy of the wage increase and the scale's failure to eliminate the penalty clause and car pushing. Its defenders, led by Union Vice President James Mark, described the agreement as the best scale obtainable under the circumstances and chastised its opponents for their failure to suggest how to get a better agreement. The critics, led by Gelotte, directed most of their attack against the penalty clause which impeded the freedom of action of the miners and left unfulfilled a promise made by Brophy in his 1916 election campaign. Gelotte, who gained the right to speak but not to vote after a lively debate, declared that approval of the scale would be equivalent to an endorsement of using injunctions to break the coal strike of 1919. He told the delegates that their comrades who died in France protested from their graves and told miners to "turn it down, turn it down." Nevertheless, the delegates approved by an overwhelming vote the scale which provided for a 27% wage increase.²²

This decision did not end dissatisfaction within the district, however. The operators refused to reopen negotiations, but offered the miners a wage increase

which they rejected. The District 2 Policy Committee demanded a greater wage increase, an end to car pushing, and abolition of the penalty clause. The convention, which met in September, focused on the wage issue, with John Brophy supporting a modification of the original demands. A strong minority, led by Dominick Gelotte, favored the original wage demands. Gelotte's rationale emphasized the prevailing cost of living, company profits and coal prices. The convention decided to submit the strike issue to a membership referendum rather than a vote of the convention delegates. The operators rejected the demands of the District 2 convention with the expectation that the membership would reject the strike option. The results of the referendum confirmed their expectation. Their decision earned them praise from both the *United Mine Workers Journal* and the *Indiana Evening Gazette*. The *Gazette* explained the issue as an attempt by the "radical element" to force a strike and applauded the efforts of cooler heads.²³

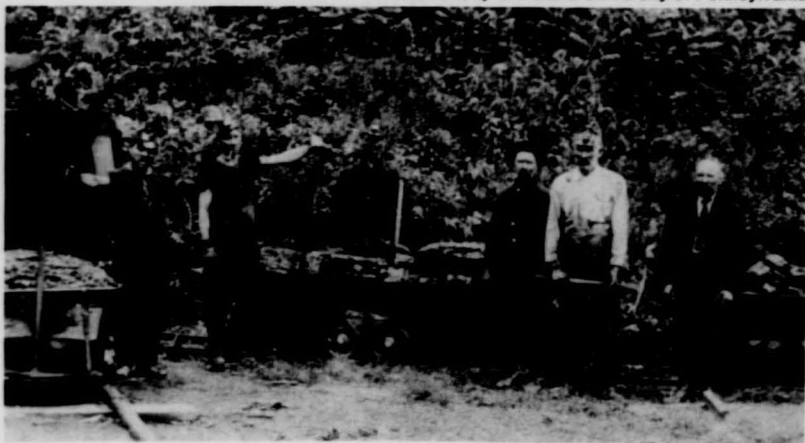
Concurrent with the battles over wages and other issues between the miners and the operators was a struggle for offices in District 2. Both John Brophy and James Mark faced opposition in the 1920 election. Dominick Gelotte, one of the strongest debaters in the district, faced James Mark in the race for vice president. Gelotte explained his motivation for seeking the office in a letter announcing his candidacy.²⁴ He noted the encouragement of his friends, his long experience in the labor movement, and his desire to have a more direct opportunity to fight for the rights of his class. If elected he promised to defend and aid the workers. He viewed his eighteen years of activity in the labor movement as the best testimonial to his abilities. Gelotte concluded his letter by noting that he lacked the support of both national and district administrations and that he ran as the "candidate selected by actual working brothers" and if elected to office would "be under obligation to the rank and file and to no others." The election results produced decisive victories for Mark and Brophy and indicated general satisfaction with their policies. Gelotte and his supporters could offer cogent critiques of the policies of the district leadership but they lacked the organizational and financial resources and the broad-based popular following to mount a major challenge to the Brophy team.²⁵

Ideological conflict as well as power politics characterized the struggle between the officers of District 2 and "more radical elements." The resolutions of a special convention of territory 6 of District 2 which met in December, 1920, illustrated the outlook of some dissidents. One resolution condemned the blockade of the Soviet Union endorsed by the United States government and criticized the American government's role in support of the invasions of the Soviet Union. The delegates also called for establishing communications with the Lenin regime so that Russia could purchase supplies in the United States and thereby reduce unemployment.²⁶ More threatening to District 2 officials was a Council of Action Convention held at Altoona in February, 1921. The convention participants included Ben Legere, George Speed, and Dominick Gelotte. Legere was a

national organizer for One Big Union (a less threatening designation for the Industrial Workers of the World), while Speed had a long record as a labor activist on the West Coast, in the South, and the Middle West. Speed's organizational activities for the Industrial Workers of the World including organizing timber workers in Louisiana and Texas, involvement in the Akron Rubber Workers Strike of 1913, and organizing the North Dakota wheat field workers. Legere, also a leader of the Altoona General Workers Union of the One Big Union, called for all labor unions in Central Pennsylvania to unite. Gelotte declared that all workers should join one big organization. In addition to hearing speakers, the fifty-five delegates, a majority composed of miners from District 2, chose a fifteen member Council of Action and passed a series of resolutions. One resolution demanded the immediate release of all labor and political prisoners. Another resolution endorsed One Big Union. The delegates also passed a resolution criticizing the prosecutor in Sacco-Vanzetti Case. In the long period between Sacco and Vanzetti's trial and their eventual execution, their supporters depicted them as victims of chauvinism and conservatism. The resolution described their conviction as a frame-up and called for support to "save the innocent workers from the electric chair." Delegates raised money for Sacco and Vanzetti and resolved to publicize their resolutions.²⁷

Mainstream leaders of District 2 viewed these developments as dangerous and mounted a counterattack. In mid-March, Peter Ferrara, a district Executive Board member from Indiana, wrote to John Brophy informing Brophy that he had sent information to Richard Gilbert, secretary of District 2, about United Mine Workers locals which had sent delegates to the Altoona Convention. Ferrara also reported the presence of an Industrial Workers of the World organizer

Courtesy of Indiana University of Pennsylvania



Miners outside the entrance of a soft-coal mine, 1915.

in Indiana who had spent three weeks recruiting members for the One Big Union. He noted that Gelotte had visited the Indiana area often, highlighted by a trip to Homer City about which Ferrara surmised, "I suppose to organize his Bolshevikii friends." One Big Union circulars were also being sent to the Indiana area from Chicago. More dangerous, however, according to Ferrara, was the support and sympathy of some local union officers for this cause. He advised Brophy to begin the process of removing such officials. To deal with these problems Ferrara requested that other union officials come to Indiana and assist him in handling the situation. In April Brophy received another letter from Ferrara about Gelotte and the One Big Union. Ferrara mentioned a report he had received from an organizer who had seen Gelotte mailing letters at the Indiana Post Office, which Ferrara assumed was part of Gelotte's campaign in behalf of the One Big Union. He then expressed his belief that Gelotte was "employed by the One Big Union and is working in their behalf." Brophy wanted positive evidence that District 2 members belonged to the One Big Union or worked for the One Big Union before taking action against them. In another letter to Ferrara, Brophy stated that he had dispatched an organizer to assist him and presented the case to be used in discussing the One Big Union. This presentation emphasized the failures of the One Big Union District 18 (Northwest Canada), the One Big Union's attempt to disrupt the shop union of railway workers in Altoona, and the value of the District 2 program. In April, an organizer, who earlier in the year had received reports about Gelotte, wrote to Brophy that the One Big

Courtesy of Indiana University of Pennsylvania



Five Pennsylvania soft-coal miners, ca. 1915. The danger board was posted to block entry from work spaces containing either an explosive, a mixture of gases, or insufficient oxygen.

Union had made some inroads in the Six Mile Run area, but he had found someone to inform him "if anything dangerous springs up."²⁸

The character of the dissidents surrounding Dominick Gelotte is difficult to pinpoint. The limited information about them indicates that they were not numerous, a fact made evident in the District 2 election in which Gelotte suffered a decisive defeat. However, Gelotte likely had a larger group of sympathizers who looked to him as a useful critic of the national and district leadership of the United Mine Workers. Miners perceived him as a voice calling for a more democratic, assertive, and progressive union. The ethnic background of Gelotte's supporters is not clear. But recent immigrants, especially Italian-Americans, were more likely than other miners to support him. The clearest evidence of community support for Gelotte came from Nanty-Glo, a Cambria County stronghold of the United Mine Workers. In this town Gelotte not only gained support from his local union, but he also built a political base which earned him victories in several local elections. In this coal town, miners were an integral part of the community.²⁹

In addition to the activities of Dominick Gelotte, other expressions of radical sentiment came from District 2 members. Local union 1957 at Waterman submitted several controversial resolutions to the United Mine Workers Convention at Indianapolis in September, 1921. Resolution No. 497 called on the convention to form into One Big Union and to stop interfering with the radical movement. Resolution No. 499 contained several parts. It described the American Federation of Labor as a menace to the United Mine Workers and called on the United Mine Workers to withdraw from its ranks. The American Legion was described as an enemy to organized labor and the local called on the United Mine Workers to begin the process of suspending members of the American Legion from the United Mine Workers. Finally, it condemned the editor of the *United Mine Workers Journal* for publishing anti-Soviet propaganda and called for his suspension, while recommending that the Convention endorse U.S. recognition of the Soviet Union.³⁰

Many district dissidents and others stood behind Alex Howat, President of District 14 in Kansas, a leading critic of John L. Lewis. Howat condemned Lewis and his associates for their allegedly dictatorial tactics in running the union and their supposed laxity in battling the coal operators. Howat ran for Vice President of the United Mine Workers in 1920 and did well in District 2 in his race against Philip Murray. His conflict with Lewis came to a head at the 1921 convention, where a majority of the delegates voted to suspend him from office for violating a contract with the operators. Howat responded by appealing to the rank and file for their support and by raising the banner of labor solidarity. This appeal resonated in District 2 and sparked numerous resolutions by local unions against Lewis and the actions of the convention. The extent of the opposition led the *Punxsutawney Spirit* to editorialize that Howat "seems to have the support of the majority of miners of this section."³¹

Other signs of tension between John Brophy and John L. Lewis also emerged. A letter to Brophy in October, 1920, conveyed a rumor concerning the presence of twenty national organizers in the district who engaged in electioneering activities rather than doing organizing work. The letter asked Brophy for his assessment of the accuracy of the rumor. Brophy replied that national organizers seldom informed him about their presence in the district. However, he was aware that some organizers had arrived recently, but he did not know how many there were nor the object of their visits. These tensions would escalate later as result of differences between Lewis and Brophy over the conduct of the 1922 strike and the nationalization of the coal mines issue.³²

However, demands on employers brought solidarity into UMWA ranks. The resolutions submitted to the 1921 convention by Local 831 at Ernest embodied this unifying element. They demanded a six hour day for five days a week at the same pay as well as the elimination of both the penalty clause and car pushing. The eviction issue produced the most emotional resolution. In its preface miners described a war, waged by coal barons against them and their families, which led to evictions when the miners struck. The resolution declared that the operators should have no power to remove workers from so-called company houses.³³

Employers also presented their demands, which increasingly focused on wage reductions. In their appeals for public sympathy and political support they turned to the emotional issue of radicalism as a key weapon. The Central Pennsylvania Coal Association demanded relief from the union as essential to maintain their market share in the face of competition from cheaper producers. Without this adjustment they predicted catastrophe for the district. However, according to the operators, District 2 officers not only remained oblivious to this impending disaster but engaged "in extending propaganda for the nationalization of coal miners and for the control of the industry by the miners. In other words they are busily engaged in an attempt to Sovietize the Central Pennsylvania field."³⁴

The formal settlement of the coal strike of 1919 left many issues unresolved for Indiana County coal miners. They channeled some of their discontent into localized strikes which they fought at Coral, Valier, and Ernest. The "Red Scare," which peaked in 1919, not only affected local politics and public opinion, but it intruded into the affairs of District 2. Some union officials used this issue against their critics. Thus, ideological differences and power struggles factionalized District 2 miners. Some of the more radical miners rallied around Dominick Gelotte. He and his supporters advocated a more democratic union, a more assertive policy toward coal operators, and a more open attitude toward cooperation with radical labor organizations. In these struggles John Brophy occupied a middle position between Lewis and Gelotte supporters. Ironically, Brophy who mobilized anti-radical sentiment to cement his position in District 2, would later suffer from the "red baiting" of both the coal operators and John L. Lewis.³⁵

Notes

1. Philip Foner, *Postwar Struggles, 1918-1920* (New York, 1988), pp. 141-148; Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, "John L. Lewis and the Triumph of Mass-Production Unionism," in Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, eds., *Labor Leaders in America* (Urbana, IL., 1987), pp. 189-193.
2. See, for example, Carl I. Meyerhuber, Jr., *Less than Forever: The Rise and Decline of Union Solidarity in Western Pennsylvania, 1914-1948* (Selinsgrove, Pa., 1987), pp. 42-93.
3. David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge, Eng., 1987), pp. 385-99; Alan J. Singer, "Which Side Are You On? Ideological Conflict in the United Mine Workers of America, 1919-1928" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 1982), pp. 100-132; Alan J. Singer, "Class-Conscious Coal Miners: Nanty-glo versus the Open Shop in the Post World War I Era," *Labor History*, 29 (Winter 1988): 56-65.
4. John Brophy, *A Miner's Life* (Madison, Wis., 1964), pp. 139-140; John Brophy Memoir, Columbia University Oral History Project, pp. 322, 324-325.
5. Alexander Trachtenberg, ed., *The American Labor Yearbook, 1919-20* (New York, 1920), p. 256; *Salisbury Press*, May 1, 1919; *Indiana Evening Gazette*, April 21, 1919; *Indiana Weekly Messenger*, April 24, May 1, 8, 1919.
6. Peter Ferrara to William B. Wilson, October 13, 1919, "Communist Activities, 1918-26," Box 90, 20/580, Record Group 174, National Archives. The authors thank Stephen Keller for providing a copy of this letter.
7. *Johnstown Democrat*, April 21, 1919; *Indiana Evening Gazette*, April 21, 22, 23, 26, 1919.
8. John Brophy to Warren Pippin, May 29, John Brophy to John L. Lewis, June 19, Lewis to Brophy, June 19, 21, 1919, District 2 UMWA Papers, Coral Folder, Indiana University of Pennsylvania Archives; *Indiana Evening Gazette*, October 22, 1919; Proceedings of the Twentieth-seventh Consecutive and Fourth Biennial Convention of District No. 2 UMWA, October 21, 1919, pp. 389-92; John Brophy to Peter Ferrara, August 5, John Brophy to Max Laskoski, August 5, 1919, Coral Folder; Warren Pippin to John Brophy, July 25, August 25, August 1, John Brophy to Warren Pippin, July 26, August 7, 1919, Coral Folder; Report of the District Executive Board Meeting, April 23, 1920, Coral Folder, IUP.
9. Proceedings of the Twentieth-seventh Consecutive and Fourth Biennial Convention of the UMWA, September 9, 1919, pp. 223-224, Statement of Local Union 831, Ernest, District 2 Papers, 1919, Folder 4. Proceedings of the Twentieth-seventh Consecutive, pp. 410-420; *Gazette*, November 1, 4, 1919; *Indiana Democrat*, November 5, 12, 1919.
10. B. M. Clark to A. Iselin Co., November 8, 1919, Rochester and Pittsburgh Coal Company Papers, Folder 16, IUP Archives.
11. B. M. Clark to Lucius W. Robinson, October 29, November 4, December 15, 1919; B. M. Clark to A. Iselin Co., November 8, 1919; R & P Papers, IUP Archives.
12. B. M. Clark to Cyrus T. Lloyd, February 10, 1919; B. M. Clark to Lucius W. Robinson, R & P Papers; Indiana County Court of Common Pleas, Equity docket Book, No. 4, 8, 86-88; *Messenger*, November 6, 1919.
13. *United Mine Workers Journal*, November 15, 1919; "Brophy Memoir," pp. 381-386; *Gazette*, December 11, 12, 20, 1919; *Democrat*, December 24, 1919.
14. "Operators Committee on Reorganization of the Bituminous Coal Industry," Chicago, IL., December 5, 19, 22; John Brophy, *A Miner's Life* (Madison, Wis., 1964), p. 178; Minutes of the Tenth Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Central Pennsylvania Coal Producers Association, Volume 1, folder 2, January 20, 1919, p. 1 IUP Archives; Interview with Charles Potter, former chairman of the board of directors of the Rochester and Pittsburgh Coal Company, by Eileen Mountjoy Cooper and James Dougherty, February 8, 1989.
15. Proceeding of the Twentieth-seventh Con-

secutive and Fourth Biennial Convention of the UMWA, January 5-7, 1920, pp. 21, 23, 25-26, 50, 157.

16. Steve Chungo to Brophy, January 29, Brophy to Chungo February 3, 1920; Hudzinski Committee Report; Max Laskoski to Brophy, March 11, Brophy to Peter Ferrara, March 27, Report of the District Executive Board Meeting, April 23, 1920; District 2, UMWA Papers, Coral Folder, IUP.

17. M. S. Blose to Brophy, May 30, 1920, Copy of Injunction, June 8, 1912, Smith and Smith to Brophy, September 16, 1920, John Brophy Papers, 1920, District 2 Papers, *Messenger*, August 5, 1920, *Gazette*, July 15, 1920.

18. Brophy to Dan DeVirgilio, April 19, F. O. Patterson to Brophy, May 3, Brophy to F. O. Patterson, May 7, Ed Wagle to B. M. Clark, July 7, Ferrara to Brophy, July 23, Ferrara to Brophy, July 27, 1920, Brophy to B. M. Clark, July 29, Territories 4, 5, 6, 1920, R & P Folder, District 2 Papers, IUP.

19. *Messenger*, February 19, 1920; *Gazette*, February 19, April 5, 15, May 3, 1920.

20. Andrew Ednic to John Brophy, March 21, 1920, John Brophy to John Ghizzoni, March 24, 1920, James Murray to John Brophy, October 29, 1920, John Brophy Papers, Territories 7-9, 1920, IUP Archives.

21. Circular of Local Union 1386, Brophy to Correspondence, 1920, Folder 2, District 2 Papers; Brophy to Dominick Gelotte, March 1, 1920, Brophy, General Correspondence, 1920, District 2 Papers, IUP.

22. Brophy to Lewis, May 5, 1920, Brophy General Correspondence, 1920, Folder 5, District 2 Papers; *Gazette*, May 20-24, 1920, *Punxsutawney Spirit*, May 20, 22, 1920; *DuBois Courier*, May 20-24, 1920; *Messenger*, April 29, 1920. The *Courier* praised the miners' vote.

23. *Courier*, September 18, 20, 22, 1920; *Spirit*, September 4, 9, 12, 17, 20, 29, October 22, 1920; *Gazette*, September 20, 29, October 7, 25, 1920.

24. Gelotte to Brophy, November 15, 1920, Brophy to Gelotte, November 19, 1920, Brophy General Correspondence, 1920, Folder 2, District 2 Papers, IUP.

25. Dominick Gelotte's Letter of Candidacy,

Brophy General Correspondence, 1920, General Material Folder, District 2 Papers, IUP; *Gazette*, December 9, 1920, *Spirit*, December 10, 15, 16, 1920.

26. Minutes of a Special Convention of Territory 6, District 2, December 12, 1920, Territories 4-6, 1920, Folder 17, District 2 Papers, IUP.

27. Philip S. Foner, *The Industrial Workers of the World* (New York, 1965), pp. 24, 118, 216, 276, Minutes of the Council of Action Convention, Unnumbered Box, District 2 Papers, IUP; *Altoona Mirror*, February 8, 22, 23, 25, 1921.

28. Ferrara to Brophy, March 18, Ferrara to Brophy, April 12, Brophy to Ferrara, April 16, Brophy, General Correspondence, 1921, Territories 4, 5, 6, Folder 4, District 2 Papers, IUP; Brophy to Ferrara, March 29, 1921, Folder 5; Brophy to George Boytien, March 29, 1921, Folder 7; Arthur Taylor to Brophy, February 20, Taylor to Brophy, April 15, 1921, Brophy, General Correspondence, 1921, Territories, 4, 5, 6, District 2 Papers, IUP.

29. The Nanty-glo story is presented in Alan J. Singer, "Which Side Are You On?," pp. 207-227. See also Alan J. Singer, "Class-Conscious Coal Miners," pp. 56-65.

30. An article in the *Journal* (March 1, 1921, 14) discusses a strike in Waterman which began earlier in the year; resolutions referred to the Twentieth-eight Consecutive and Fifth Biennial Convention of the United Mine Workers of America, September 20, 1921, 352-353.

31. *Spirit*, December 16, 17, 1920, December 23, 29, 1921, January 18, 1922.

32. T. P. Dolan to Brophy, October 20, Brophy to Dolan, October 28, 1920; Territories 4-6, 1920, District 2 Papers, IUP.

33. Resolutions, Twentieth-eighth Convention, pp. 62-64.

34. *Gazette*, January 13, February 3, 25, June 22, 1921.

35. Readers interested in another example of such struggles can consult John H. M. Laslett, "Swan Song or New Social Movement? Socialism and Illinois District 12, United Mine Workers of America, 1919-1926," in Donald T. Critchlow, ed., *Socialism in the Heartland: The Midwestern Experience 1900-1925* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1986), pp. 167-214.