Local Leadership and Local Militancy: 
The Nanticoke Strike of 1899 
and the Roots of Unionization in the 
Northern Anthracite Field 

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The anthracite coal strike of 1902 is one of the best known episodes in the history of American labor. Some 150,000 mine workers from northeastern Dauphin County through the counties of Schuylkill, Northumberland, Carbon, Columbia, Luzerne, and Lackawanna to the southeastern corner of Susquehanna County stayed away from work for more than five months under the leadership of John Mitchell, president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). They returned only after President Theodore Roosevelt intervened by encouraging the corporate leaders who operated the mines to accept arbitration—as the UMWA had long been willing to do—before a commission appointed by the President. While the union did not receive official recognition from the employers, it did win substantial wage increases for its members and, by surviving, insured that it would play a central role in the industry's battles for decades to come.

Somewhat less well known, but perhaps of equal strategic significance for the unionization of the anthracite fields, is the industrywide strike of 1900. In that walkout, about as many mine workers struck for six weeks to win a wage increase of 10 percent that corporate leaders were pressured to offer by Senator Marcus Alonzo Hanna, President William McKinley's confidante and campaign manager in his November re-election bid. Hanna and McKinley wanted to end the industrial turmoil of that year quickly, lest it disturb the rather dubious, but widely held impression, that Republican rule had returned the nation to prosperity.

The solidarity that made these strikes possible did not arise magically as UMWA leaders called on the mine workers to leave their jobs. It had been built piecemeal in one small strike after another, walkouts which generally concerned grievances over work rules and involved only one or several mines. Anthracite mine workers had struck over local issues on a great many occasions, but for most of the 1880s and 1890s, no union had been ready to support and organize their militancy. The UMWA itself was not really strong enough to provide substantial support to anthracite mine workers until after its unprecedented victory in the nationwide bituminous strike of 1897. As a result of that walkout the union won
recognition from a great many of the nation’s bituminous coal operators, in particular those located in the so-called Central Competitive Field stretching from western Pennsylvania to Illinois.3

Armed with that triumph, the UMWA still faced a difficult task in trying to organize the anthracite fields. Unions had experienced some success there, most notably the Workingmen’s Benevolent Association from 1868 until its demise in the “Long Strike” of 1875. However, that union displayed its greatest strength in the southernmost or Schuylkill field of the anthracite region, less strength in the middle or Lehigh field, and very little in the northern or Wyoming field. Union weakness there also killed the next major effort to organize the anthracite mines, as the Knights of Labor and the Amalgamated Association of Miners and Laborers failed in their strike in 1887-88 which was restricted to the Lehigh and Schuylkill fields.4 By the 1890s, the Wyoming field had come to produce more than half of the coal with more than half of the mine workers. Still, mining there continued to be dominated, as it had been as early as the 1830s, by transportation corporations like the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company; the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad; and the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR), which had proved again and again their willingness to go to extraordinary lengths to prevent unionization.5

But the Wyoming field did unionize, and throughout 1900 its workers militantly urged their southern brethren into the industrywide strike of that year. On the eve of the strike of 1902, the UMWA district for the Wyoming field reported a total of some 45,005 members, making it the largest in the union.6 The key to the unionization of Wyoming, and thus to the anthracite region, is to be found in the numerous small strikes which spread across the field from the spring and summer of 1899 through 1900, 1901, and 1902. Significantly, they occurred at a time in
which the mines were working more steadily than the previous year; thus workers were in a better bargaining position. Furthermore, these walkouts could not have resulted in unionization without the support of the increasingly powerful UMWA and its national leaders, like John Mitchell. But the UMWA experienced little success in anthracite before a cadre of local leaders who understood the grievances of the workers took charge. Once they had done so, they proved they could achieve especially significant victories, as they did in one of the largest walkouts among the wave of small strikes, in Nanticoke in the summer and fall of 1899.

These victories offered three vital lessons that would frame the larger battles of 1900 and 1902 for the mine workers and the railroad presidents who controlled most of the mines. First, these strikes showed the power of the ethic of solidarity at the heart of industrial unionism. One group of workers at a mine might walk out over a specific grievance, but since all were eligible for membership in the UMWA, a single grievance could summon forth a multitude of others and lead to a full-fledged strike. Second, such strikes often bred others nearby, both with and without the encouragement of union officials. Third, some of these strikes showed that organized mine workers could successfully confront a large corporation that operated mines, such as the PRR at Nanticoke. Still, at the end of 1899, neither the corporate managers, nor the workers, nor even most union leaders, could imagine the power that the UMWA would soon come to exert throughout the industry.

The UMWA's first foray into the anthracite region in the latter half of 1894 resulted in the organization of some fifty locals in the southern or Schuylkill field. These locals became UMWA District One, a designation that may well reflect that the union anticipated a strategic role for the anthracite mine workers. Soon after the first locals were organized, the UMWA sent national executive board member John Fahy of New Straitsville, Ohio to assist, and early in 1896, the district elected Fahy its president. However, the district had already begun to decline when he took over and it continued to do so under his stewardship. When the UMWA's eighth national convention gathered in January 1897, the district was entitled to only two votes, representing approximately 200 members in good standing.

At the end of 1896, Fahy informed his fellow unionists that he would henceforth focus his efforts on lobbying for favorable legislation in Harrisburg. He claimed that this approach would be "much more effective and of more lasting benefit to labor than strikes, boycotts, and such like methods, which seldom result in permanent good and usually tend to widen the breach between capital and labor."9 One of his legislative triumphs was passage of a tax which required any employer in the state who employed unnaturalized foreign-born males over twenty-one years of age to pay three cents per day for each day that such individuals were employed. Of course, the law permitted the employer to deduct the tax directly from the worker's wages.10 This law would result in a number of spontaneous walkouts near Hazleton in the Lehigh field soon after the tax was first
Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church, Nanticoke, built in 1895, was the second oldest Polish parish in Nanticoke.
deducted from immigrants' pay envelopes on Saturday, August 21, 1897. Those strikes would gather considerable momentum as workers used them to address other grievances as well. Ironically, Fahy took advantage of these walkouts to organize large numbers of immigrants, even though he made no effort to coordinate the complaints of workers at the various mines into a set of demands for the whole area. He also advised the workers against militant action like the peaceable march on September 10 of immigrant mine workers who had been using that tactic to spread the strike. That march turned into one of the bloodiest episodes in the history of American labor when it was halted by the bullets of panicky deputies, who killed nineteen mine workers and wounded approximately fifty in the Lattimer Massacre.

That tragic event may have encouraged organization in the Lehigh field, which became UMWA District Seven early in 1898. But that district, which covered the smallest of the three anthracite fields, struggled to maintain its strength through 1898 and into early 1899. Although led by local men, it had a difficult time keeping its members since a lack of demand for coal caused mine operators to offer their employees little work. Farther south in the Schuylkill field, the president of what remained of the other anthracite district was not to be found. John Fahy spent most of 1898 with his bedridden sister at her home in Ohio. The president of the UMWA at that time, Michael Ratchford, offered Fahy work at national headquarters in Indianapolis if he would resign his post as president of District One. Fahy did not accept, and as more and more inquiries from the anthracite region as to Fahy's whereabouts came across Ratchford's desk, the UMWA president kept urging Fahy to return to Pennsylvania. Although the latter's only response was that matters there did not require his attention, Ratchford could do nothing, since he had no power to force Fahy to resign.

By the end of 1898, the UMWA had not accomplished a great deal in the anthracite region in spite of four-and-a-half years of effort. In December, Benjamin James, the first secretary of District Seven who would soon become the only member of the national executive board from the anthracite region when he won election to it in January 1899, showed his frustration with his fellow workers, admonishing them:

Why stand around the street corners cursing your luck when you alone are to blame for it? In our present deplorable condition, we of the anthracite coal fields are a blot on civilization. Is there no lesson severe enough to teach you that you are powerless as individuals?

Perhaps because of its weakness there, the UMWA, at its national convention in January 1899, agreed to provide additional support for organizing in the anthracite fields. Initial success in that drive resulted in mine workers from the Wyoming field meeting in Scranton on May 23 to organize a new District One, superceding
the one led, or perhaps more accurately, abandoned by Fahy. Benjamin James, whom the convention thanked "for his earnest and indefatigable work," informed the assembled delegates that, in the three months since he had begun his work in the Wyoming field, some thirty-two locals had been established. The district elected Thomas D. Nicholls and Frank D. Miller, both from Nanticoke, as president and vice-president respectively, and C. W. Baxter of Providence, near Scranton, as secretary-treasurer.\[16\]

When he assumed the presidency of the reconstituted District One on May 23, 1899, Thomas D. Nicholls had not yet reached his twenty-ninth birthday. Born in Wilkes-Barre, he grew up in Nanticoke, began work as a breaker boy at age nine, and took a job inside the mines at age twelve. Little is known of his life from that time until he became district president, except that he took correspondence courses in mine management and passed the examination for his state foreman’s certificate in June 1897. He would provide the effective local leadership District One needed in numerous battles including the strikes of 1900 and 1902, remaining at the head of the district until 1909.\[17\] However, in 1899, he was an employee, presumably a disgruntled one, of a leading anthracite producer, the Susquehanna Coal Company (SCC).

That firm, controlled by the PRR, employed approximately 4,000 workers at its several mines in Nanticoke and Glen Lyon. The first hint of trouble there came on the evening of July 25, when miners on the night shift complained that "the toppage required on the cars" was excessive and refused to go to work.\[18\] Like most companies in the Wyoming field, the SCC paid miners a certain sum per car of coal, and the company spared no effort to insure that the coal in the cars was as clean as possible and that the cars were as full as possible. In general the procedures involved in penalizing, or "docking," miners for failing to load enough clean coal had never been calculated to breed trust among the miners. On the surface, far above them, the company’s docking boss decided whether or not miners deserved full credit for cars which moved by swiftly as their contents were dumped, disappearing into the breaker to be cleaned and sorted. For each one the docking boss had to decide: not to dock at all, to dock one-quarter of a car, one-half, or even the entire car.\[19\] Disputes over docking would prompt a great many disputes in the Wyoming field from 1899 to 1902.\[20\]

The docking boss’ decisions regarding topping (i.e., the extent to which the coal had been heaped above the level of the top of the car) might seem less open to dispute than his rulings as to the proportion of dirt and other impurities in a car. However, the process was inexact at best and at worst fraudulent. The company generally told the miner to load his cars so that each would have at least six inches of topping when it reached the breaker.\[21\] To accomplish this demanded no small amount of skill. As one miner described it, he would "take a row of chunks and put them along the top rail of the car and then fill with fine stuff or the best coal . . . for
Thomas D. Nicholls of Nanticoke, president of UMWA District No. 1.
the topping of the car." So, the six inches of topping consisted not merely of a mound in the middle of the car, but six inches around its edge, with large pieces of coal holding the smaller pieces in the car. However, since six inches of topping was required on the surface at the breaker, the miners and their laborers had to be sure to shovel several additional inches of coal on to the car. Some cars might have to travel more than a mile before they reached the surface, and throughout their journey they might be jostled over rough roads, collide with other cars, and ascend inclines. For any of these reasons, coal could settle or fall out of even the best-constructed topping.

If the docking boss saw less than the required topping, his task was to dock the car, even though the miner might well have topped it sufficiently to withstand the general run of trips to the breaker. It is easy to imagine the chronic controversy which would result, especially where autocratic bosses held sway or when companies sought to widen their profit margins. To make matters worse, in this particular case, the SCC's underground bosses also insisted that miners top their cars generously. As a veteran miner related:

The mine bosses, the fire bosses, were coming around the mines and telling us that we were not putting top enough on. I have been in my place and watched my laborer put ten inches on, and as high as a foot of topping on, and yet they said they only required six inches topping at the breaker. Things became unbearable.

During the week of July 25, the SCC ordered miners to supply an "unbearable" sixteen inches of topping in their chambers so that the company could be sure it received six inches at the breaker. After the men on the evening shift refused to comply, a committee of the company's miners met with Superintendent John H. Tonkin. When the committee informed him that it did not intend to follow the order, Tonkin ordered them to remove their tools from the mine and not to return until they had changed their minds. While it is not clear whether or not local and district leaders of the UMWA made the decision to contest the company's crackdown on topping, Nanticoke was one of the best-organized towns in the Wyoming field. Little that occurred there, or in the SCC's mines, could have escaped the attention of union leaders, especially since Thomas Nicholls and Frank Miller, president and vice-president of the district, were employees of the company. In any event, the UMWA quickly took control of the strike and formulated a lengthy list of demands, which it presented to the company on July 31.

These demands were designed to address a wide variety of grievances. Miners not only sought to resolve the conflict over topping, they also demanded a schedule of payments to cover many of the specific conditions which they had to face. No longer could they trust the largesse of their bosses by requesting allowances to compensate them for dealing with special conditions. For example, they
demanded that the company pay a specific sum, according to thickness, for the rock that they often had to blast to extract coal. Also, they called for a specific payment for each row of props which they set to support the roof above them, and additional payments for extra propping. Miners also wanted to receive an extra payment for building the road for coal cars from their chambers to the gangway. To save their energy for more remunerative labor, they called on the company to send "company men," who were paid a daily wage, to repair road as needed in the miners' chambers at a distance of fifty feet or more from the coal face. Additionally, miners wanted the SCC either to have company men clear all cave-ins on roads in chambers or to pay the miners a daily wage for doing so. Most importantly, the
miners demanded that six inches of topping be required, not at the breaker, but in the chamber, and that dockage be limited to an average of 3 percent. Moreover, this was to be an intermediate step while the company arranged to “pay by weight, rather than by the car,” in the near future. For the rest of the mine workers, the union demanded increases in wages ranging from 3.5 to 40 percent.\(^{27}\)

The company’s response demonstrates how sharply its thinking diverged from that of the mine workers. Regarding payments for blasting rock, General Manager Morris Williams held that the hardness of the rock should dictate payment and, in any event, the company had always compensated miners fairly for such work. Payment for basic propping was “included in the price paid for the car of coal,” and the company would make “due allowance” for extra heavy propping. The company also refused to countenance any changes in payments for building or clearing roads in chambers. With regard to dockage, Williams stood on what he undoubtedly saw as an unassailable principle: “The dockage must always be governed absolutely on the merit of each car loaded.” On the grievance which precipitated the strike, Williams stated that he found the demand for six inches of topping in the chamber “a strange one . . . after 25 years of compliance with an agreement to furnish six inches of topping at the breaker,” which, he claimed, had “invariably been furnished.” Any experienced mine manager had no choice but to adapt the operation of his mine to the constant changes in mining conditions. However, anthracite operators generally refused to consider any alterations in the venerable agreements made at some point in the distant past, especially those made with groups of their employees uninfluenced by the meddling of a labor organization. In the company’s view, the miners’ demands for a different rule for topping and, for payment by the car were “equivalent to a demand for an increase in wages,” which, in its current state, the anthracite coal business would simply “not permit.” Of course, the state of business likewise precluded raises for the SCC’s company men.\(^{28}\)

On August 24 and 25, at a special district convention in Wilkes-Barre, District One declared its full support for the strike. A committee was appointed whose members would station themselves at pay cars and offices around the district on pay days to solicit funds for the men of Nanticoke and Glen Lyon and their families. Also, the convention moved to halt the dissension that John Fahy had led since he lost his district presidency with the reorganization of District One. Fahy had persuaded a number of the surviving locals in the Schuylkill field to send their per capita tax payments, which should have gone to district and national headquarters, to one William Anderson, former treasurer of the old District One.\(^{29}\) Complaining that national headquarters had long slighted both him and the Schuylkill mine workers, Fahy withheld these funds for several months in an attempt to pressure UMWA President John Mitchell to send organizers into the
anthracite fields, and into the Schuylkill field in particular. However, in a confrontation at the August convention, Mitchell forced Fahy to relinquish control of the funds. In return, the men of the Schuylkill field were given permission to proceed to establish their own district. As Mitchell described it:

I can say without egotism that I gave Fahy the worst turning down that he ever received in his life. At one time I became so vicious in denunciation of his conduct that he rose and walked down the aisle toward me, many of the delegates believing that he was going to resort to personal violence, but instead he offered me his hand and practically begged for mercy. The whole thing ended by the men in the lower end (Schuylkill and Northumberland Counties) agreeing to pay all back tax to the District and National, surrender the possession of District supplies to the regularly elected officers, after which we will establish a district in the lower end.

District One also sought to concentrate its members' efforts on the current strike with the following resolution:

We earnestly urge all union men to counsel their fellow working men in their respective places to stop all agitation of local grievances until our organization has been more fully perfected within our own territory and particularly that of the SCC.

Nevertheless, this resolution did not prevent miners elsewhere in the Wyoming field from taking militant action on their own. At the Stevens Coal Company's mine in West Pittston, miners had also struck in July over excessive dockage. On September 5, strikers there confronted a foreman, driver boss, and three other men on their way into the mine to repair pumps. As a crowd gathered, including several deputies, a fight ensued and shots were fired. About a dozen men were wounded in the mêlée, some quite seriously, and many were arrested. The workers returned to their jobs at the beginning of October, after the company made a slight concession on mining rates. In October, miners at the two mines of Jermyn and Company south of Scranton, like so many of their fellow workers, struck over dockage. The miners accused the company of docking one-quarter of their total production on a single day. They also claimed that, when docking bosses failed to dock sufficiently to satisfy company officials, those officials added to the docking bosses' totals of docked cars after the tally sheets had been brought to the office. The miners returned to work after more than a month on strike when the company agreed to allow them to hire check-docking bosses to monitor the docking process.

While District One's leaders concentrated their efforts and resources on the strike at Nanticoke and Glen Lyon, others in the union continued to organize throughout the anthracite region. Benjamin James kept busy in the Scranton area. To the south, the organization in the Schuylkill field returned to life as District
Nine. On October 21, in Mount Carmel, more than 100 delegates established the new district and elected John Fahy as president. A glance at the names of the remaining officers reveals a conscious effort to maintain ethnic balance among the district's leaders: Vice-President Paul P. Pulaski, Secretary George Hartlein, and Treasurer Wilson G. Yoder. This district displayed a far less militant tone than the new District One, as evidenced by the following resolution passed at the inaugural convention: "We deprecate strikes, except as a last resort."36

As the Nanticoke strike continued, it exposed the distrust among the three anthracite fields which had traditionally sabotaged efforts to organize the industry. While the UMWA's national leaders apparently viewed the strike against the SCC as the union's best opportunity for a major victory, leaders of the other anthracite districts displayed lukewarm support or even hostility toward the Nanticoke strike. In late September, Benjamin James accused John Fahy of "trying his best to defeat the miners on strike, by advising men to withhold aid."37 Early in December, as the Nanticoke strike neared its climax, Fahy informed Mitchell of the efforts made in his district to collect funds for the strikers. However, he added:

I have often wished that this strike was over and that the men had won it, or that it had never started, because I believe that for quite a long while now it has in its effects been proving injurious to the progress and growth of the organization in other sections of the anthracite, by keeping men away from the organization through fear of strike etc.38

According to James, President Thomas Duffy of District Seven had his own reasons to fear militant action. In a letter to Mitchell in early October, James related that Duffy and one of his committee chairmen had recently been given "the best places" in the mine where they worked. In James' view this had caused many men to leave the union. He also mentioned that Duffy had been speaking at meetings throughout his district telling the men that Mitchell intended to provoke a general anthracite strike in order to provide steadier employment to the bituminous mine workers and thus insure his reelection as UMWA president. With regard to the strike at Nanticoke, Duffy had reportedly told one group "that they had no use for the miners of . . . [the] upper end."39

Meanwhile, the mine workers of the SCC showed no sign of abandoning their strike. The company had agreed to some concessions—to stop harassing workers underground for topping, and to make specific arrangements with miners regarding payment for blasting rock before such work was done, instead of the customary practice of haggling over such payments at the end of the month. However, the SCC would not consider further concessions, especially the higher wage schedule which the union had demanded for company men. So, on October 3, a mass meeting of strikers resolved not to return to work.40 On October 9 and 10, a district convention at Carbondale agreed upon a levy of one dollar per member per month
to aid the SCC strikers. Benjamin James exulted on October 14 that "not a car of coal" had been hoisted since the beginning of the walkout.

On October 19, the company posted lengthy notices, signed by Superintendent Tonkin, designed to lure the workers to return through a curious combination of carrot and stick. The notices detailed the SCC's concessions, which the company believed had not been reported properly. Tonkin also stated that the company had always paid competitive wages and was willing to investigate rates paid by companies in the surrounding area and to adjust its rates accordingly. However, the notice closed with a thinly-veiled ultimatum. The SCC would resume work when and if a sufficient number of employees informed their bosses that they desired to return. Otherwise, the company would "abandon all hope of resuming operations until April 1, 1900."

Having made its best effort to influence the strikers, the company tried to start one of its mines in Glen Lyon on October 26. To make its presence felt, the UMWA held a parade through the town at the unlikely hour of 6:00 A.M., before work commenced. At 6:30, a trolley came from Nanticoke to the mine, loaded with deputies and a few supervisory personnel. Pickets let them enter, but no substantial influx of workers followed them across the picket line. The supervisors sent several cars of coal which had been left in the mine to the breaker, and then closed the mine once again. A company spokesman told the local press that, since the SCC had opened a mine for work and had received so little response from the workers, it would keep its mines closed until the men were "ready and willing to go to work."

As the strike continued into November, some of the women in the community decided to take steps to strengthen resistance. Early on the morning of November 21, they went to several of the SCC's mines to persuade workers who had not struck—supervisory personnel, engineers, and pumpmen—not to go to work. According to Thomas Nicholls, the women, generally in groups of two, would merely take "scabs" by the arm and offer to escort them home. However, the Wilkes-Barre Record reported that some of the approximately 1,000 women at the mines threatened or attacked those who insisted on going to work. Also, women were not the only ones involved in attempting to influence those who had not joined the strike. As a crowd approached an assistant foreman who had been deputized to protect the company's property, he fired his weapon and slightly wounded a fourteen year-old boy, John Serowinski. By 8:30 A.M., a committee of strikers had persuaded most of the women to return home without further incident, and, at a meeting that afternoon, the women decided to cease their efforts.

The extent of the community support which the Nanticoke strike enjoyed becomes all the more obvious in light of the success with which the boycott had been used against some strikebreakers. By the end of November, several of those
John Mitchell, president, United Mine Workers of America, ca. 1900.
who had been dissuaded by the women from going to work on the twenty-first came to Nicholls and asked him to “intercede for them in the union meeting,” because no one would speak to them, and “they could not bear to be treated as dogs.” The local unions agreed to allow anyone who had finally quit his job “to be recognized on the street as a man,” but they would not admit any of them into the locals until “after the strike was won,” in order to “avoid getting traitors in camp.”

The solidarity evinced by the strikers gave the SCC little choice but to reopen negotiations in the last week of November, as the strike entered its fifth month. Benjamin James, whom the company did not permit to participate in the negotiations because he was not one of its employees, hinted that the union might consider calling out workers at mines near Shamokin operated by other subsidiaries of the PRR. In the negotiations, the union and the company apparently agreed to settle the question of topping along the lines of the company’s earlier proposal to end underground supervision of topping. After a series of compromises over various payments to miners and increases for some company men, only two items remained in dispute from the union’s long list of demands. These were the daily wage which drivers who drove only one mule should receive and the amount that miners should receive for laying the sheet iron they needed to slide coal out of slightly pitching chambers. The committee stuck to its original demands of $1.25 per day for the single-mule drivers and $.75 per length of sheet iron, while Superintendent Tonkin maintained that an increase for the mule drivers was not justified and that payment for sheet iron was included in the rate per car.

The fate of the engineers and pumpmen who had walked out at the beginning of the strike constituted another obstacle to a settlement. Although the company was willing to keep them in its employ, it refused to return them to their old jobs, since this would necessitate replacing the men whom the company hired during the strike. Although the UMWA committee insisted on reinstatement, on Saturday, December 12, the sixteen men in question got into contact with the committee and set up a meeting with Tonkin for Sunday. After speaking with him, they expressed satisfaction with the jobs he offered. On Monday, Tonkin relented on the demand for mule drivers and agreed to a payment of $.25 per length of sheet iron. The committee, Tonkin, and General Manager Williams signed a “Schedule of Prices and Wages” that afternoon, prompting a “noisy demonstration of joy.”

The strikers obtained many of their demands, at least partially. Although the company would continue to pay miners by the car for coal rather than by weight, the miners won “the privilege to employ check-docking bosses at every breaker.” Also, miners could rest assured that they would no longer have to argue with foremen about payments for blasting rock, but could count on receiving “$3.60 per lineal yard, one yard in thickness . . . in the Red Ash vein and $2.70 in all other
In addition, miners won several concessions regarding props, chutes, and roads. The company men did not receive all the increases which they had demanded, but many obtained raises. In particular, the mule drivers in some categories received increases approaching and even exceeding 10 percent. Most importantly, the rates to be paid for these various types of work had been agreed upon in face-to-face negotiations, and the agreement had been made public. The mine workers of the SCC had achieved the simple-sounding yet all-important goal announced by Thomas Nicholls during the strike: "We are asking that a scale be adopted (as there is none at present), in order that all men might know what they are earning, and that all may be paid alike for the same work." Thus, the SCC's workers had won firm ground from which they could resist reductions by the company or demand increases from it as market conditions changed. By striking for four-and-a-half months, they not only won concrete gains for themselves and their families, but they also brought a modicum of stability to their working lives.

This strike and others like it demonstrated the opportunity for solidarity inherent in an industrial union like the UMWA. The Nanticoke strike began over an issue of interest only to a particular group of workers, but developed into a labor dispute of far greater significance. Perhaps because most of the workers at the SCC's mines were already organized, the miners' protest concerning topping expanded into a full-scale walkout to redress grievances harbored by various segments of the work force. During a lengthy strike, this formidable coalition of workers showed an extraordinary degree of solidarity and, as a result, won numerous concessions embodied in nothing less than a formal agreement, albeit one which contained no mention of their union. Just as important, the victory over the SCC showed that, under the leadership of the UMWA, mine workers could defeat a subsidiary of a powerful corporation like the PRR. Since most anthracite coal was mined by subsidiaries or divisions of other major railroads, that lesson was undoubtedly a heartening one for anthracite mine workers and a chilling one for their employers.

Elsewhere in the anthracite fields, other mine workers learned similar lessons in their own strikes against work rules they found every bit as galling as those which had prevailed in the mines of the SCC in July 1899. By participating in numerous small strikes, frequently smaller than the Nanticoke strike, they came to realize that they too could successfully challenge the rule of management. That knowledge, when exercised within a powerful vehicle for collective action like the UMWA, allowed them to build the solidarity and strength so essential for victory, however limited, in the epic industrywide walkouts of 1900 and 1902.
Notes
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2. For a discussion of walkouts over local issues and the minuscule union presence in them in the 1880s and the early 1890s, see Blatz, pp. 102-17, 319-28.

3. For the UMWA's accomplishments in bituminous, see Ramirez, When Workers Fight, especially chapter 1. Ramirez may not be guilty of overstatement in commenting on p. 17 that "Few labor events have had as great an impact on the growth of collective bargaining in America as the 1897 bituminous coal miners' strike and the settlement that ensued." Also see Arthur E. Suffern, Conciliation and Arbitration in the Coal Industry of America (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1915), pp. 29-49 and The Coal Miners' Struggle for Industrial Status: A Study of the Evolution of Organized Relations and Industrial Principles in the Coal Industry (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1926), pp. 43-84; Chris Evans, History of United Mine Workers of America from the Year 1890 to 1900 (Indianapolis, IN: United Mine Workers of America, 1920), passim.


5. On early corporate domination in the Wyoming field see Blatz, pp. 56-57. Also see Grace Palladino, Another Civil War: Labor, Capital, and the State in the Anthracite Regions of Pennsylvania, 1840-68 (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990); pp. 19, 23-24, 34-36. On the relative production and employment of the fields, see Blatz, pp. 57-58, 375. On the determination of leading corporations in the Wyoming field to prevent unionization, see ibid., pp. 55-56, 118-55.

6. On the Wyoming district's relative eagerness to strike in 1900, see Blatz, pp. 411-38. For a different view of the relative strength of the fields in 1900, see Greene, p. 159. The figure for the membership of the Wyoming district at the end of 1901 can be found in United Mine Workers of America, Minutes of the Thirteenth Annual Convention of the United Mine Workers of America January 20-29, 1902, Indianapolis, Ind. (Indianapolis, IN: Hollenbeck Press, 1902), p. 65, John Mitchell Papers (microfilm edition), Catholic University of America, Washington; hereafter cited as Mitchell Papers.
7. Blatz, p. 230; also see United Mine Workers Journal, March 9, July 27, August 17, and October 26, 1899; hereafter cited as UMWJ.

8. For the UMWA's early years in anthracite, see Blatz, pp. 328-44; Greene, pp. 121-27; and Aurand, pp. 131-37.

9. UMWJ, December 3, 1896.

10. Wilkes-Barre Record of the Times, August 31, 1897; UMWJ, July 1, 1897. The tax was ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Circuit Court soon after it was first collected. See Record of the Times, August 31.

11. On the Lattimer Massacre and the strikes which led up to it and resulted from it, see Blatz, pp. 348-64; Greene, pp. 129-51; and Aurand, pp. 137-42. Also see Michael Novak, The Guns of Lattimer: The True Story of a Massacre and a Trial, August 1897-March 1898 (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

12. UMWJ, January 20 and February 17, 1898.

13. Ibid., April 21, May 5 and 19, July 28; October 6, December 8 and 15, 1898; January 19 and February 2, 1899.


15. UMWJ, December 15, 1898. On James see ibid., May 12, 1898 and January 26, 1899. Fahy's term on the board expired as James' began. See ibid., February 2, 1899.

16. Ibid., June 1, 1899.


18. Wilkes-Barre Record, July 26, 1899.

19. U.S., Anthracite Coal Strike Commission, "Proceedings of the Anthracite Coal Strike Commission, 1902-1903," pp. 1130-31, 2425; hereafter cited as "Proceedings." At many mines in the Lehigh and Schuylkill fields, where most coal seams were inclined substantially from the horizontal, miners were paid according to the number of yards they advanced in their mining chambers. Where this system prevailed, docking did not occur and measurement of production was less open to question, thus obviating this class of disputes. See ibid., pp. 6498, 6577-81; Blatz, pp. 15-21.

20. For examples, see below.


22. Ibid., p. 2391.

23. Ibid., pp. 2250-52.

24. Ibid., pp. 1762-63, 2391. William Mates, an employee of the Lehigh and Wilkes-Barre Coal Company, stated that after the strike of 1900 that company decided to require eight inches of topping to be measured at the foot of the shaft. The company's miners wanted the cars to be examined for topping in the chambers instead of at the foot of the shaft, but the company refused. See ibid., p. 2422.

25. Ibid., pp. 1388-89.

26. Wilkes-Barre Record, July 26 and August 1, 1899; Wilkes-Barre Record of the Times, August 8, 1899. Nicholls and Miller both signed the final agreement with the SCC as members of the employees' committee. See "Schedule of Prices and Wages Agreed Upon by the Management and Superintendent of the Susquehanna Coal Company and Committee of Employees," December 11, 1899, Mitchell Papers; hereafter cited as "Schedule." The Nanticoke strike has received little attention from scholars, and such discussions of it as are available miss some basic facts. Robert J. Cornell does not mention the Nanticoke strike, while Sharpless and Miller put it in 1898. See The Kingdom of Coal, p. 245. According to Greene in The Slavic Community on Strike, pp. 156-57, the walkout began in April; however this is evidently a typographical error, since in his note on p. 243 he states that the workers of the SCC began their strike on July 26 in Nanticoke and on August 5 in Glen Lyon. Although Michael Nash does not cite
Greene, he refers to the strike as lasting eight months. See Conflict and Accommodation, pp. 62, 81. His uncited assertion on p. 62 that “by the summer of 1899, 45,000 men, representing one-third of the anthracite coal miners, had joined the union,” is directly contradicted by the report of membership at the annual convention in January 1900. As of January 1 of that year, the three anthracite districts had a total of 8,993 members in good standing. See UMWJ, January 18, 1900.

The controversy over topping may in some way have involved changes in the work regime that Superintendent John H. Tonkin, who was appointed superintendent in April 1899, might possibly have instituted. See Susquehanna Coal Company Minute Book, April 28, 1899, Records of the Pennsylvania Railroad and Subsidiary Companies, Hagley Library, Wilmington, DE.

27. Wilkes-Barre Record of the Times, August 8, 1899.

28. Ibid.


30. John Fahy to John Mitchell, July 31, August 2 and 18, 1899; John Mitchell to John Fahy, August 8, 1899, ibid.


32. Wilkes-Barre Record of the Times, August 29, 1899.

33. Ibid., September 5, 1899.


35. UMWJ, October 26 and November 23, 1899.

36. Ibid., October 26, 1899.


39. Benjamin James to John Mitchell, October 3, Mitchell Papers. It should be noted that James seldom hesitated to criticize his comrades in the union, and some believed that his primary goal was to sow discord. For example, in November 1900, in discussing negative comments James made about Duffy at that time, Mother Jones referred to James as “a dangerous man when he will stoop to anything so base as to lie about his Brother to his Superior Officers.” See Mother Jones to John Mitchell, November 30, 1900 and John Mitchell to Mother Jones, December 3, 1900, Edward M. Steel, ed., The Correspondence of Mother Jones (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), pp. 3-4. In any event, James’ union career was brief, with accusations of opposing UMWA-approved legislation on changes in the mine inspection system in particular leading to his resignation as of July 1, 1901. See James to Mitchell, June 15, 1901 and Mitchell to James, June 17, 1901, Mitchell Papers. Also see “statement by Alfred B. Gamer,” n.d., ibid.

40. Wilkes-Barre Record of the Times, October 6, 1899.

41. Ibid., October 3, 1899; UMWJ, November 2, 1899.

42. Ibid., October 26, 1899.

43. Wilkes-Barre Record of the Times, October 24, 1899.

44. Ibid., October 31, 1899; UMWJ, November 2, 1899.

45. Wilkes-Barre Record of the Times, November 24, 1899. Apparently the engineers and pumpmen, whose primary task was to keep the mines from flooding, had been called out on strike originally. However, not all of them had walked out and the company had replaced those who did. See Wilkes-Barre Record of the Times, December 5, 1899.

46. Ibid., November 30, 1899. The extent to which UMWA leaders were involved in this episode is unclear; however, Nicholls stated that he attended the meeting on November 20 at which the women decided to act.

47. UMWJ, November 30, 1899. It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the community life of the mining towns of Nanticoke and Glen Lyon. Still, one of the central elements of that life was the
growing impact of settlement by immigrants from eastern Europe. According to Victor R. Greene, Poles first came to the Wyoming field in Nanticoke in 1870. See Greene, pp. 35-38. Also, John Bodnar has provided an interesting glimpse of these communities and the militancy they spawned in opposition to the UMWA in later years in Anthracite People: Families, Unions and Work, 1900-1940 (Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1983).

48. Wilkes-Barre Record of the Times, November 24 and December 8, 1899.
49. Ibid., November 24, 1899.
50. Ibid., December 12, 1899.
51. Ibid., December 5, 1899.
52. Ibid., December 15, 1899; “Schedule,” Mitchell Papers. The document contained no reference to the UMWA, so, regardless of the union’s intimate involvement in the strike, the company could maintain that it had in no way recognized the union.
53. UMWJ, December 14, 1899.
55. UMWJ, November 2, 1899.