Anthracite Mining Unionism and the UMW: An Oral History

The following is an edited transcription of a panel discussion held Saturday, October 6, 1990, at Eckley Miners' Village. The Moderator was James Abrams, Folklife Coordinator of America's Industrial Heritage Project. Abrams produced the original transcript of the discussion. It was subsequently revised by Pennsylvania History editorial assistant Kevin B. Sheets.

JAMES ABRAMS: This conference is intended, in part, to be a birthday celebration for the centennial of the United Mine Workers of America. We thought that it was only fitting that we invite people in who worked within the mines and who worked with the unions, so that they could explain the history of the union from their own perspectives. The men at the table all were or are coal workers, and together they represent thousands of coal miners in the anthracite region—district 25—coal miners across the country, in Canada, and around the world. Together their accumulated experience in the mines and with the union represents scores of years. So we are fortunate to have these dedicated men with us today, and some of them are here on some pretty short notice.

There are many ways to learn lessons about the past. One is by reading books, of course, about labor history. Another is by listening to the types of stimulating presentations that we heard this morning. And still another is by listening to people who have lived through the experience that... is described in labor history books. Just a short anecdote in this regard: A couple of nights ago I went down to Heckscherville in Schuylkill County and met with a friend of mine, Joe Hughes. Joe is ninety-five years old and he is the only person that I know whose father actually fought in the Civil War. Well, when I mentioned this conference to him, he immediately told me about how when he was a young kid in Heckscherville eighty-five years ago the teachers in his school taught him about the times when Johnny Mitchell came into the area and about how they taught him a lot about history, and especially about labor history as related to the area. He even sang a song about Johnny Mitchell for me the other night. It's called "Be Sure and Stick to Mitchell." It goes:

Be sure to stick to Mitchell boys
Your faithful president
For he's the one who won for you
The gain of ten percent
He made Truesdale, Baer, and Morgan
Come down from their high stand
And arbitrate with the working man
Who holds the winning hand.
That was a song that Joe learned eighty-five years ago when he was a school kid. I wonder how many school kids today would recognize the name Johnny Mitchell, or John Siney, or even Richard Trumka for that matter. Unfortunately, most kids don’t learn about labor history in school anymore.

The members of the panel up here learned about mining from their families, from their communities, and by working in the industry. The conversation that we are about to have will simply be an attempt to get at their personal experiences—the perspective of mining, the perspective of living in a mining community, and working for the union from within their own personal experiences.

I would like to introduce the members of the panel. I’m going to be introducing them from my left to right, from your right to left. We have Mike Semko down at the end here, who is the former president of District 25 in the anthracite region, and a former international executive board member. Mike lives in Coaldale. Tom Supey has 34 years in the mines and is from the Scranton area. Today he works as an underground coal mine tour guide. Bill Ray, sitting next to me, is the current international executive board member for District 25. Joe Janowski is president of local union 2578 in St. Clair. And finally down on the end is Bill Bachman who was actually born in Eckley in 1908. . . . He was a member of Eckley’s local union and he served as a state representative in Harrisburg. O.K., as I said, we will start with Mike down at the end. . . . Mike, was your family in mining?

Mike Semko: Yes, my father came to this country shortly after the 1902 strike. He served in the Prussian army under Emperor Franz Joseph from 1898 to 1901. He was in the mines then for approximately forty-five years, from 1902 to 1947. It may not have been the deepest mine in the anthracite but, it certainly was one of the deepest. It consisted of eight levels of two hundred and fifty feet. It’s in Coaldale, Pennsylvania. It was called the Coaldale Colliery Number 8. It was under the Lehigh Navigation Coal Company. The people that worked in the deepest parts on the seventh and eighth levels, those people that I know. . . . I’ve seen the worst cases of miners’ asthma of anybody that I ever was in contact with. And, I was on workmen’s comp[ensation] cases, so I do know what I’m talking about there because I represented them.

Abrams: Why did your parents decide to settle in Coaldale?

Semko: Well, my people came from Austria and, of course, like many Middle and East Europeans they had a primitive life over in Europe—it may have been a happy life in some senses—but they felt that they were going to have a better life here in America, so they came here. I guess in many instances many of the immigrants who came over at that time would be in touch with their fellow countrymen. They would move to that area where others found employment in this country, and that’s probably one of the reasons. I also had a brother work in the deep mines. It was probably the last so-called “deep mines” in Panther Valley. I also had
another brother work in the strip mine area.

**Abrams:** Your father worked in lots of different types of mining, didn’t he?

**Semko:** Yes, in Coaldale Colliery they had a system there, what they called “company mines.” They were the only people that were just developing before they actually started running coal. They would get what they called “company wages.” Then they had “consideration miners.” That was where a whole section of miners would group together. Maybe one group of miners wasn’t running coal for a certain period of time and others were in that particular section. They would even the pay out, which they called “consideration wages.” They weren’t up to “contract mining,” which was the highest paid down there. In contract mining they got paid for each car of coal—individual miners. They worked in sets of two. . . . And that was the different types of pay that they received. When they worked on contract mining they did quite well but, when they were on company the wages were quite low.

**Abrams:** Do you know about what they were getting paid?

**Semko:** They were getting approximately $1.35 an hour and it was less than that prior to the 1930s. I can relate that as late as 1972 as an oiler and a shoveller I receive $2.86 an hour, and that’s when we went into the 1972 negotiations.

**Abrams:** Because you were from a mining family, Mike, was it just expected that you would go into mining yourself?

**Semko:** . . . There’s not that much industry in this area and it’s sad because no matter where you go, our people, when you go into other areas, they say our area comprises some of the best workers that you’ll find anywhere. But it’s because of the lack of diversity of industries, and that’s all you knew was to go in the mines. In many instances prior to the child labor law, there was people going into the breakers and so forth at very early ages—maybe at ten, twelve years old they were in the breakers, before they were old enough to go into the mines itself. But that’s one of the reasons, because there wasn’t other work here in this area.

**Abrams:** How did you get into mining yourself?

**Semko:** . . . In February 1946, I walked up to the strip mine, maybe about two or three miles, everyday until September of 1946. That’s when I entered the coal industry—September 7, 1946. . . .

**Abrams:** How did you begin your union activities?

**Semko:** Well, when I started in the strip mines, there was a period of time when I started attending meetings because I always had an interest in the union. My union days relate back to before I entered the Navy. I was in the ship workers local in Baltimore, Maryland. In the late 50s I was laid off and I was trying to get employment, and I just felt that I wasn’t being properly represented so I decided to go out on my own. I started getting active in the union more, and after being auditor in the local, I became a committee man and then was elected to subdistrict 2 repre-
sentative in district 25. Following that I worked on . . . compensation cases, that's on your silicosis and black-lung cases, and accident cases. Then I returned to the mines in 1979 for Bethlehem Mines Corporation and I drove truck[s] there for two years before I was elected as district president. In 1985 I was elected to the international executive board. Then I took their accelerated retirement at the end of 1988. I was called in on negotiations this year for the two contracts that were negotiated here in the anthracite area, one for the Anthracite Association, and one with Lehigh Navigation Coal Company, the successors to Bethlehem Mines Corporation. Lehigh dates back to the beginning of the century. . . .

Abrams: Thank you very much Mike. We are going to move on to Tom Supey now. Was your family in mining and how did you get into it?

Tom Supey: Yes. My father came from Austria, the same place Mike's father came from, and I guess for the same reasons. They all came over for the same reason. He worked around the mines, he was a miner, a brick layer. . . . Finally when he got up to forty-eight years old he couldn't do anything, and that was in 1940. That's when I graduated high school and I had to take the responsibility of the family. We had five in the family. So, there was no other work around, the only thing was the mines. I got stuck in the mines and I never got out. The only time I got out was when I went to the service for two years. When I came back there was nothing—back in the mines again. Finally I worked myself up to miner, assistant foreman, mine foreman, superintendent. And now I'm a tour guide. [Audience laughs] I did mine up until 1974. After that I worked for the government flushing in Central City, Scranton.

Abrams: What do you mean by flushing?

Supey: Flushing is where they take the impurities that comes out of the coal—these rock piles around the breakers. They grind that up and they mix it with water, and they send it down in underneath the ground in the voids. . . . That stuff that would come in there would act like black top, it would hold the pillars, to keep the pillars from flushing. Do you know what I mean by flushing the pillars? The pillars would peel. A lot of the pillars peel like bananas or like bacon, see. But if you have something in there to hold that, it stabilized the surface. . . .

Abrams: You said that you went from being a laborer, to a miner, to an assistant foreman, to a mine foreman. What was it like for you when you went from miner to assistant foreman level?

Supey: Well, if I had it to do over again I would have stayed a laborer.

Abrams: Why?

Supey: Because you don't have nothing to worry about. All you got to do is shovel. You don't have to catch no hell from nobody. If you're a miner you get hell from the foreman. If you're an assistant foreman, you get hell from the mine foreman. The mine foreman gets hell from the superintendent, see. And, you got to worry
not only about the safety of the men, you have to worry about the production. If you don’t get the coal at the end of the day, then you got to have the answer for it.

Abrams: I notice that you have a blue stripe across your nose. How did you get that?
Supey: One time I was examining a place and I looked up. Just as I looked up a chunk of coal come hit me right across the nose. So I went down to the hospital. I remember a Japanese cleaned it out, stitched it up. Back to work I went. Now, whenever you get cut with a piece of coal, there’s a lot of carbon in hard coal, they got to brush that out with soap and water. He never did it. All he did was sewed it up. This happened maybe thirty-five years ago. So it’s a trademark for the job that I have.

Abrams: Your son . . . was a miner too, right?
Supey: Yes. . . . The boy worked with me for about twenty years. . . . Now he’s in charge up there, and I’m only his helper. [Audience laughs] But he got the experience through me, being with me all the time.

Abrams: O.K. Tom thanks very much. Let’s move on to Bill. . . . [Y]ou’re a second generation miner?
William Ray: No, I’m a third generation miner.

Abrams: When their family came in, did they come into the Hazleton area?
Ray: Well, they came into the Harleigh area. I’m originally from Harleigh.

Abrams: Now, you’re the international executive board rep[resentative] from District 25. How did you get into union activity?
Ray: Well, when I first got out of high school I went to work, it was called Nutmeg. It was a fabric processing plant. Both my grandfathers, and my dad, they were involved with unions all their life. So, I guess it was bred into me.

Abrams: What did you do as an IEB rep?
Ray: Whatever the membership wants. Mainly we represent them, take care of arbitration, contract negotiations. . . .

Abrams: One of the things you did last year was to go down to Pittston. Is that right?
Ray: Yes.

Abrams: How important was the Pittston strike for the United Mine Workers last year?
Ray: The Pittston strike, I see it as the turning point for labor for the next century, the next decade. The Pittston strike, what that did in my eyes, and I’m sure a lot of others, and I’m sure history is going to prove it, that the Pittston strike woke up organized labor. The miners that were on strike at Pittston, they had their cause, but they seen the bigger picture. They knew that if they lost that strike over health benefits, health care, pensions, that it wouldn’t stop with them, that it was going to
have the domino effect. And every labor organization in the country was going to experience the same thing the miners at Pittston did. They stayed though, they put everything they had—their homes, their families, their children—on the line, and they stood fast. And I could honestly and proudly say that every labor organization in the world, not only in this country, in the world supported those Pittston miners and we won.

Abrams: O.K. Joe, you’re from the southern fields down in Schuylkill County. You are what, a second generation miner?

Joe Janowski: Third.

Abrams: Third. Same questions for you, how did your family get into mining and how did they get into Schuylkill County?

Janowski: Well, my father came over from Poland when he was eleven years old, that would be 1911. He came over with his older sister. His mother and father was already over here. . . . So when he came over he went to work in the breaker picking rock. And I guess when he was about thirteen he got working inside, he was a young man, and there was an explosion, and he was inside when this explosion took place. And they stuck him out so nobody would know that they had a teenager working in there . . . And his father was in his forties at the time, and he was finished working already.

Abrams: From what?

Janowski: He has miners’ asthma. So after that he had his leg crushed in a fall. Another time he was closed in for about two days inside the mine, and at forty-three he was finished up with black lung. He was a contract miner all his life.

Abrams: Growing up in a mining household the way you did, was it expected that you would go into mining?

Janowski: Not really. When I came out of the Navy in ’46 I was really knocking around . . . I went to work in an independent colliery . . . First I drove a mule in the gangway. Then I started working with a miner in an inside slope, driving. So after about a year I got working in a union place in a rock tunnel drilling holes. Then I got on with a mucking crew. At that time I weighed about 195 pounds, and six foot one, thinking I was pretty strong. The men I worked with, they were about six four, two fifty, and at the end of the day when I went home, I hit the kitchen floor and I laid there for about five hours. My daughter would say, “Mom, is Dad dead?” [Audience laughs]. . . . So I worked at that mucking for about a year and got on to mining engineer at the Little Colliery . . . That was seven levels down and then . . . an inside slope that went for four more levels . . . It was twenty-nine hundred feet below sea level.

Abrams: Now you work as president of the local?

Janowski: Yes, as president and financial secretary.

Abrams: What was [the local] when it was at its height?

Janowski: At its height? We had about four hundred working there at one time.
Today, I guess there's about fifteen at the most.

Abrams: O.K, Joe, thanks. Let's move on to Bill Bachman here. Now Bill grew up in Eckley, didn't you Bill?

Bachman: Yes.

Abrams: And how did your folks get here? . . .

Bachman: My... great grandfather... was a Welsh miner. Now, they were starting these mines out in Eckley and who knows anything about mining. They had to go over and get the Welsh miners to come into the town. He was one of them. . . . I have black lung, I worked in the mines, rock tunnels, and the strippings. I was fireman on a shovel when I was twenty years old, on the old steam shovel . . . down what we called number 7. But I think I will look for a job. You know I used to work for $4.58 a day and now they're getting $94. I think I should go back and look for a job, what do you think? [Audience laughs]

Janowski: A lot of the retired men when they come in to pay their dues, they tell me the same thing—they want to come back.

Backman: . . . We have the United Mine Workers here. I'm going to ask them a question. Did they ever hear of John L. Lewis' eleventh commandment?

Janowski: I've heard of it but, I don't remember it.

Ray: I'm going to be honest, I never heard of it.

Bachman: John L. Lewis' eleventh commandment was: "if you don't blow your own bugle, who in the hell is going to blow it for you?"

Abrams: You said that you worked in the rock tunnels and that you were part of the union here in Eckley.

Bachman: Well, when I worked in the rock tunnel, [to Janowski] you were getting $18.75. I was getting $6.50. They paid a little bit more than miners.

Janowski: This was already '47.

Bachman: This was in the '30s—six and a half a day—and boy did I get the dust. We're dealing with jack hammers and trying to go into the main tunnel, in rock. I couldn't even see my buddy.

Janowski: Our hammers were all with water already. . . .

Abrams: What local union activity took place here in Eckley?

Bachman: . . . We were always going out on strike. The whistle would blow and mean no work the next day. But in those days, you see, the coal companies owned everything. They owned the mine bosses. They would tell them how to vote. . . . They owned the Pennsylvania state legislature.

Abrams: After you left the mines you went into politics, is that right?

Bachman: Yes, I went into politics and I had to leave the mines. . . .

Abrams: When you were in Harrisburg did you work on any union legislation?

Bachman: Of definitely. I was a co-sponsor of that miners' asthma bill where we wanted to give a miner who was incapacitated one hundred dollars . . . a month. . . .
Audience member: Could you kindly explain what the structure of the UMW executive board is? How does it work? Is it truly international?...
Ray: There's twenty-one districts in the United Mine Workers. Each district has one international executive board member that sits on it, along with the president, vice-president, and secretary-treasurer of the international union. And it is a policy making board between conventions.
Audience member: How is it international?
Ray: There are two districts in Canada....
Audience member: Can anyone explain what is the present status of the anthracite industry today, as far as employees goes?
Ray: We have approximately eight hundred and seventy-five workingmen and women in the United Mine Workers of America District 25. We got a whole bunch laid off and we got approximately six thousand pensioners. It's going to come back strong with this acid rain legislation, I really believe; because we have a low sulphur, clean burning product.
Audience member: How many are laid off right now?
Ray: Well in 1981 there was about twenty-five hundred working.
Semko: In 1983 there was twenty-one hundred and fifty. That's when it started going bad.
Ray: That was the high point for this decade.
Semko: May I add, on the local level, my local union 4004, we have the most working. We have over two hundred out of those eight hundred in my local union. That went back to the name of the Lehigh Navigation Coal Company. They're adding on to the cleaning plant down there for the fine coal. They haven't done too much development as yet but we're hopeful that is a good sign.