

Reflections on Lattimer: A Complex and Significant Event

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Although the Lattimer Massacre is reasonably well known, it is still important to put it in context. Once that's done, we'll realize it is not as well known as it ought to be. As with so many notorious events, the occurrences surrounding the Massacre are stark – nineteen dead and perhaps fifty wounded in a crowd of several hundred immigrant mineworkers marching peaceably on a public road. Indeed, the Massacre of Friday, September 10, 1897 is so horrific that people are likely to learn of it first because of its shock value and only then turn to the context. This differs fundamentally from the way we commonly approach historical events: by examining particular national, regional industrial, or social contexts, and, in the process, finding events that exemplify the specific context that captures our interest.

The temptation is to place the Lattimer Massacre in the most significant context possible: the unionization of the anthracite coal region which resulted from the industry-wide strikes of 1900 and 1902. This context gives the satisfaction that the victims' martyrdom was not in vain. At the very least, viewing the Massacre as one step in a progressive march of events to that significant achievement makes it easier to understand.

However, such a yearning for significance does not match our knowledge of the Massacre and its aftermath. Indeed, the strikes that preceded it were so chaotic, the role of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) so problematic, and the outcome of the strikes so inconclusive that a year-and-a-half after the Massacre the anthracite industry seemed further away from unionization than it had been for many years. Although not a crucial link in a chain of events leading inexorably to unionization, the Massacre claims even greater importance in and of itself. Juxtaposed to the much more well-known Homestead Steel Strike, which occurred five years earlier near Pittsburgh, Lattimer emerges as deserving an equally significant place in the history of American labor. Furthermore, the reasons for the comparative neglect of the

Massacre tell an important story about what events tend to capture the attention of historians.

The area in and around Hazleton in the middle or the Lehigh coal region experienced little labor protest after a failed strike that lasted from September 1887 until March 1888.¹ Workers there had not responded to the short-lived organizing efforts of the UMWA in the fall of 1894. Then the union brought perhaps five thousand workers from the southern or Schuylkill coal region into its ranks. But by the beginning of 1897, only a few hundred of them still belonged, giving the Schuylkill region little more organization than either the Lehigh field or the Wyoming (northern) coal region. John Fahy, the union's organizer and president of its only anthracite district at the time, had gradually abandoned organizing and decided to lobby for state legislation in Harrisburg. His most notable success, one that would have considerable significance for the strikes that would unfold into the Lattimer Massacre, was the passage of a tax on employers of three cents per day for each unnaturalized alien they employed. The tax could be deducted, however, from employees' earnings.² As of August 1897, not only were the mines around Hazleton unorganized, but the only man who could have changed this had given up, instead seeking to discourage the employment of immigrants, who were increasingly dominating the work force in the Lehigh region, as well as in the other coal fields. The area around Hazleton. As Fahy put it in the *United Mine Workers Journal* in July 1897: "What a world of good this law would do to the American citizens who try to earn their living in the coal mines if the tax were one dollar per day."³

The initial stirring of protest that would eventually result in the fatal confrontation at Lattimer came from an unexpected source: young workers. No record exists of the ethnicity of the thirty or so mule drivers who walked off their jobs four weeks before the Massacre, although it is reasonable to assume they were either eastern European immigrants or their children. Nor is there a record of their ages, but if they were typical of mule drivers throughout the coal industry, most were in their teens. The young workers confronted Gomer Jones, superintendent of the Lehigh and Wilkes-Barre Coal Company, whose cost-cutting meas-

1. Harold W. Aurand, *From the Molly Maguires to the United Mine Workers: The Social Ecology of an Industrial Union* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1971), 121-130; Perry K. Blatz, *Democratic Miners: Work and Labor Relations in the Anthracite Coal Industry, 1875-1925* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 41-42.

2. Blatz, *Democratic Miners*, 45-54.

3. Quoted in *ibid.*, 54.

ures included consolidating stables for the mules, thus requiring the drivers to walk further to get and then return the animals. This initial dispute blossomed into a series of strikes, as more workers left their jobs at this and other companies. The precipitating factor for strikes in the other mines, especially the strip mines where immigrants dominated the work force, appeared to be the tax on aliens, since those walkouts began shortly after the tax was deducted from their wages beginning on August 21.⁴

While there is no need to recapitulate Michael Novak's detailed account of the strikes,⁵ it is important to note their spontaneous, even chaotic, nature. Workers at various mines would strike, return to work, and then walk out again. They cited grievances ranging from unequal pay for the same work to being forced to deal with the company store to experiencing abuse and discrimination from supervisors. However, amidst the chaos arose a strain of solidarity. For example, on August 25 at the A S. Van Wickle Company's Coleraine mine, the youngest workers—the slate pickers who were generally pre-teens – struck, accusing their company of paying them less than workers at the surrounding mines. The bosses brought immigrant workers from a nearby strip mine to replace them, but the immigrants refused and surrounded the superintendent's office. Within two days workers had struck there as well and next marched to Minersville, several miles away, to persuade those men to join the strike.⁶

The curious role of the UMWA and organizer John Fahy is just as important as the spontaneous nature of the strikes in leading to the Massacre. If any situation was ripe for a labor leader to shape inchoate worker militancy into vigorous demands, it was that in the Hazleton area in the late summer of 1897. But given his lack of interest in organizing and negative attitude toward immigrants, Fahy's measured response was predictable. While he moved quickly to organize UMWA locals where strikes were in progress, he made no effort to provide centralized leadership. Nor did he encourage the workers from different companies to unite around a common set of demands, or even to discuss doing so. He pointedly attempted to discourage workers from marching from one mine to another to expand the strike. This tactic, spontaneously adopted again and again despite Fahy's warnings, caused the walkouts to spread. As they did, Sheriff James L. Martin of Luzerne

4. *Ibid.*, 55-58.

5. *The Guns of Lattimer: The True Story of a Massacre and a Trial, August 1897–March 1898* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

6. Blatz, *Democratic Miners.*, 55-58.

County deputized some one hundred citizens to block the marches. The Lattimer Massacre took place when strikers from the Harwood Mine, owned by Calvin Pardee, marched toward his mine at Lattimer to bring their fellow workers into the strike Friday afternoon, September 10.⁷

While eight thousand workers left their jobs before the Massacre to be joined by two thousand more after it, the outcome of the strikes must be termed inconclusive. This makes it all the more difficult to classify the Massacre among landmark events in the history of American labor. If some workers achieved limited gains, most returned to the status quo. At several mines, workers did not even have the chance to formulate grievances. On the other hand, there are no reports of widespread firings or blacklistings. While some twenty-five hundred Pennsylvania National Guardsmen arrived shortly after the Massacre, they did not have the effect they had elsewhere, most notably at Homestead, of allowing employers to bring in large numbers of strike breakers. In any event, after the Massacre practically all the mines were operating within two weeks of September 10.⁸

To complicate the Massacre's outcome still further, Fahy succeeded in organizing several thousand mine workers in and around Hazleton. By keeping his distance from the strikes that led to the Massacre, he and the UMWA escaped blame for it. They could proudly deny charges made by Calvin Pardee that he had "stirred up" the men.⁹ Early in 1898, the locals around Hazleton were gathered into a new anthracite District Seven with its own officers, men who had been more prominently involved in the 1897 walkouts than Fahy.

Nevertheless, these local gains did not extend to the rest of the anthracite region with its workforce of more than 150,000 in the Wyoming field to the north. District Seven did not play the leadership role it might have in the Massacre's aftermath. In 1898 and 1899 the district faced a struggle to survive as its ranks thinned.¹⁰ In December 1898, Benjamin James, secretary of District Seven, offered the following indictment of his fellow workers' apathy in the *United Mine Workers Journal*: "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 which can be imparted severe enough to teach you that you are powerless as individuals?"¹¹

7. *Ibid.*, 59; Novak, *Guns of Lattimer*, 52-56, 88, 96-99, 109-110.

8. Blatz, *Democratic Miners*, 59.

9. *Ibid.*, 59-60.

10. *Ibid.*, 62.

11. Quoted *Ibid.*, 63.

On the other hand, by the spring of 1899, a tight labor market, worker militancy, and UMWA efforts had led to vigorous organization in the Wyoming field. None of these elements had anything to do with the Lattimer Massacre. The influx of help from the UMWA's national headquarters was made possible by dues flowing in from the bituminous coal fields under the check-off granted in the epochal Central Competitive Field contract of 1898. Nor is there evidence that the northern anthracite miners depended on or were inspired by the workers and events of District Seven. Indeed, there was almost no District Seven left to inspire them, for by the end of 1899 it was the least successful district in the anthracite region, enrolling only 341 members, less than four percent of UMWA workers in the anthracite fields.¹²

The story of the Lattimer Massacre and claims for its significance first came to prominence among professional historians in Victor R. Greene's pathbreaking study *The Slavic Community on Strike: Immigrant Labor in Pennsylvania Anthracite*, published in 1968.¹³ His work offered a vital lesson for American labor historians: that Poles and other immigrants from southern and eastern Europe could be as militant if not more so than ethnic groups who had lived in America for a longer period of time. Lattimer was a powerful instance of that militancy, and the organization of District Seven proof of their eagerness for unionization. But Greene pushed his point too far, perhaps because it made perfectly good sense to do so. First, he viewed the strikes around the Massacre as generally successful. Second, he believed that the UMWA District Seven, created as a result of those strikes and played a steady, strong role in the unionization of the anthracite region from that point on. He even made John Fahy a minor hero in the drama.¹⁴

Greene's larger point – that recent immigrants and their militancy were critical to union success in 1900 and 1902 – is undeniable. But to focus on Lattimer, it had little direct impact on the unionization of the Wyoming and Schuylkill regions, where real progress only occurred in 1899 while the union continued to languish in the Lehigh field. In the tightening labor market of those years, mine workers, many of whom were immigrants or their sons, undertook militant action in numerous localities across the anthracite fields. The UMWA took advantage of

12. *Ibid.*, 63-78; for membership figures, see 286.

13. Published by the University of Notre Dame Press, chs. 7-9 and conclusion.

14. On Fahy's role in the aftermath of Lattimer, see Blatz, *Democratic Miners*, 282. Novak shares with Greene both a positive view of Fahy and the view that the path from Lattimer to unionization resulting from the 1902 anthracite strike was uninterrupted (*Guns of Lattimer*, 245).

that militancy to organize. The strikes that surrounded the Massacre may well have been the first occasion when worker militancy in the anthracite region spurred organization by the UMWA. As significant as that is, that single episode neither induced legions of anthracite mine workers to commit to the union nor did it in any way frighten employers into accepting unionization. Indeed, the combination of more sustained militancy and strong organizational backing that arose first in the Wyoming region in 1899 only heightened the owners' resistance to the union. Indeed, the combination of militancy and strong organizational backing heightened the owners' intransigence.

To be sure, eventually, militancy, organization, and President Theodore Roosevelt's insistence that they accept the Anthracite Coal Strike Commission in 1902 did force employers to deal, however grudgingly, with the union. To get to that point, workers had to confront their employers and other authorities on numerous occasions, albeit with less dramatic and violent results than at Lattimer. By doing so, the workers generated their own solidarity, which provided the UMWA with the opportunity it needed to organize.¹⁵ We can only speculate as to when a critical mass of militancy and organization had gathered sufficient momentum to enable the UMWA to achieve its success in 1902. What is clear, however, is that no such critical mass formed in the wake of the Lattimer Massacre.

While we can readily understand that in an age before electronic media the impact of Lattimer on workers in the region could be quite limited, we might expect that the Massacre should have provided an effective lesson for the UMWA. It seems plausible that the strikes and Massacre must have made it clear to Fahy and his colleagues that immigrants were both militant and interested in unionization. But even though half of the workers in anthracite were first- or second-generation immigrants, the precedent of Lattimer did not immediately energize the UMWA to organize them. Fahy, for one, soon abandoned Lattimer and seemed reluctant to organize at all for the next three years.¹⁶

Perhaps it is a bit naïve to expect Fahy or other union veterans to have their attitudes entirely transformed, even by an intense experience like Lattimer. The expectations a union organizer has of workers must be paradoxical. Of course, workers need to show militancy at some point, or they will have no interest in a union. But once that spirit appears, the

15. Blatz, *Democratic Miners*, 66-140.

16. *Ibid.*, 66-67, 75, 181, 282,

organizer needs to be able to control it. Fahy certainly doubted his ability to exercise that control over anthracite mineworkers, so many of whom were first- or second-generation immigrants, and so did John Mitchell on occasion. Indeed, Mitchell inveighed vigorously, but unsuccessfully, against the decision of the rank-and-file to strike in 1902.¹⁷

To be sure, the UMWA was far more willing to organize immigrants than most American unions. Years after the 1890s, organizers in other industries would echo the UMWA's and Fahy's stance before Lattimer: that American workers should not have to compete with foreigners. Their reluctance, like that of UMWA organizers, was tied to their fears about trying to control the immigrants, rather than to a belief, which Lattimer and other instances of immigrant militancy shattered, that immigrants would not resist their employers. Sooner or later, the unions that saw more and more immigrants working at the occupations they represented would realize that they had little choice but to try to organize them.¹⁸

In the anthracite fields, the social distance between a great many organizers and immigrant workers remained long after Lattimer and after the industry-wide strikes of 1900 and 1902. On several occasions thereafter, the anthracite fields had to be reorganized as many men let their dues lapse and new workers who had entered the industry had to be persuaded to join. In the town of Pittston, for example, the continued immigration of Italians and the reluctance of union leaders to organize them led to strikes in which the UMWA had no part. Several attempts to enroll the immigrants had little success, and when large numbers finally joined the union, their militancy sparked a series of insurgent movements in the 1920s tore the northern anthracite district apart.¹⁹ The spontaneous militancy of Lattimer was a powerful example of the intensity of worker protest, but throughout the twentieth century, such militancy would become more and more burdensome to union leaders.

The significance of the Lattimer Massacre, then, is less to be found in the events that emerged from it and more in the event itself. Enough people were killed and wounded, and in a sufficiently horrifying way, that it should receive greater attention from historians. A comparison

17. *Ibid.*, 103, 209.

18. See Robert Asher, "Union Nativism and the Immigrant Response," *Labor History*, 23 (Summer 1982), 325-348.

19. Blatz, *Democratic Miners*, 171-264.

with one of the best-known strikes in the history of the United States, the Homestead Steel Strike of 1892, shows just how badly historians have neglected Lattimer. The Homestead strike has always been a reliable example of the context of labor-business conflict in turn-of-the-century America. By contrast, I must confess that I had never learned of the Lattimer Massacre until I began to study labor relations in the anthracite coal industry for my doctoral dissertation. To give a bit more shape to my impression that the Lattimer Massacre is neglected, I examined six college-level United States history survey texts. I could not find any mention of Lattimer in any of them, while most devoted more than a paragraph to Homestead.²⁰

In comparing the details of the Lattimer Massacre and the July 6, 1892 "Battle of Homestead," the death toll surely does not relegate Lattimer to insignificance. Eight lost their lives at Homestead, nineteen at Lattimer. If we look at the number of strikers involved, about four thousand walked out at Homestead compared with eight to ten thousand at Lattimer. The Homestead strike went on far longer than the month at most that workers were on strike around Hazleton. But the durations are deceptive. Many men went back to work at Homestead long before the union officially abandoned the strike after four-and-one-half months. Both strikes brought in the state militia, although some eight thousand troops were sent by Governor Robert Pattison to restore authority in Homestead and only twenty-five hundred were sent by Governor Daniel H. Hastings to do so at Lattimer.

Another interesting comparative element is that of solidarity—the extent to which the walkout spread to other communities. This occurred briefly, but significantly, for the Lattimer strikes, as a relatively small dispute expanded into a much larger one. Homestead presented a different situation in which sympathetic strikes occurred in a limited way before falling apart after a short while. Finally, the legal system did little to resolve either episode, thus raising many questions regarding American justice. Only workers and their leaders were tried for their

20. American Social History Project, *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture, and Society* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 2: 132-137; James West Davidson et al., *Nation of Nation: A Narrative History of the American Republic*, 3d ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1997) 2: 630; John Mack Faragher, et al., *Out of Many: A History of the American People* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1994), 2: 626-629; James A. Henretta et al., *America's History* (New York: Worth, 1993), 2: 572; Arthur S. Link, et al., *the American People: A History* (Arlington Heights: AHM, 1981), 513-514; James K. Martin, *American and Its People: A Mosaic in the Making*, 3d. ed. (New York: Longman, 1997), 669, 695. Page references are to discussion of Homestead. Davidson and Link have only a brief reference while the others have several paragraphs.

participation in the Homestead battle, and they won acquittal. At Lattimer, the deputies who mowed down the marchers were tried, but acquitted.²¹

This cursory comparison shows that there is nothing the basic facts of each episode to justify why Homestead should be viewed as more significant than Lattimer. Homestead, has long been perceived as one of the central events in American labor history while Lattimer, at best, rates a footnote. Behind that presumption of significance are a variety of attitudes that tell us a good deal about how we look at labor history. First, the story of Homestead is far easier to tell because it has a clear beginning and conclusion. The strike and the corporate opposition were planned in ways that Lattimer and the surrounding strikes never were. The fact that the Homestead strike failed gives it significance as a dramatic symbol of the fate of American labor in the 1890s, a decade when labor won few victories. Failure adds a poignant touch to the Homestead story, and the fact that the Battle of Homestead was an armed confrontation between the people of Homestead and the Pinkertons who were summoned to take control of the mills by Henry Clay Frick adds yet another element of drama. In contrast, it is not at all clear how much success workers gained from the walkouts around the Massacre, because the goals and the the walkouts are hard to explain.

Perhaps there is even a residue of anti-immigrant prejudice in historians' refusal to give Lattimer the place it deserves in American history. Eastern European immigrants led the march to Lattimer; they were merely faces in the crowd at Homestead. One might think that the poignancy of people marching peaceably on a public road, only to be fired on by local authorities, would draw great attention to Lattimer, but it has not. Of course, and here is perhaps the most important factor, Homestead was acknowledged at the time as an event of greater significance, intensively reported in the national press, far more than Lattimer.²² Homestead engaged two of America's best-known business leaders, Frick and Andrew Carnegie, in one of the nation's leading urban areas. The strike dragged on through the presidential election of that

21. On Homestead, see Arthur G. Burgoyne, *the Homestead Strike of 1892*, rept. ed. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979) and Paul Krause, *The Battle for Homestead, 18801-1892: Politics, Culture, and Steel* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 286-263.

22. A brief examination of the *New York Times Index* shows more than 150 articles concerned with the Homestead strike in the latter half of 1892 as opposed to fewer than 20 on Lattimer in the latter half of 1897. See *New York Times Index for the Published News of 1890-93* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1966), 797-798 and *New York Times Index to the Published News of 1894-98* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1966), 911.

year and was seen as playing a role in the defeat of President Benjamin Harrison's re-election bid. In addition to the "celebrity appeal" of a violent confrontation caused by Frick, and through him Carnegie, the attempted assassination of Frick by anarchist Alexander Berkman seized the nation's attention once again, two-and-one-half weeks after the battle had occurred. In contrast, the fate of immigrant mineworkers in a semi-rural part of Pennsylvania received less attention then and even less now. The Lattimer marchers were faceless to the public, far more so than the union leaders at Homestead. The corporate leaders who urged Sheriff Martin to deal with the strikes surrounding Lattimer were just as faceless compared to Carnegie and Frick.

There is little for historians to be proud of in their treatment of Lattimer, which shows that historical significance may not be determined with much greater care than our contemporaneous ranking of events. What it should make clear, at the very least, is that Lattimer deserves greater attention. Because the episode was so complex, it has a great deal to tell us, perhaps more than Homestead. It brought immigrants from eastern and southern Europe onto the center-stage of American history as few other events have done.

Nearly all of those killed were from either the northern foothills of the Carpathian Mountains in Galician Poland or the southern foothills populated by Slovaks and Ruthenians, all under the control of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Their lives, and the reasons they first came to America and gathered to march to Lattimer, can tell us a great deal about America's immigration and labor history. Even the lack of organizing success immediately after Lattimer holds important, if complex, lessons about the American labor movement, its struggles then, and even its fate today.

Yet the Lattimer Massacre may never get the attention it deserves. Most people had little patience for complex stories in the 1890s, and I do not see any greater patience for them today. One of the few ways to gain attention for America's industrial past is to view it condescendingly as exemplifying "bad old days" about which we can feel chronologically superior. This approach makes history meaningful only as nostalgia, robbing it of any deeper significance. We can avoid that trap only by plodding through the fullness of detail, which despite the burdensome nature of that arduous process, is the only path toward that impossible yet laudable goal – a genuine understanding of the past.