

“Radicals Not Wanted”: Communists and the 1929 Wilkes-Barre Silk Mill Strikes

Walter T. Howard
Bloomsburg University

During the late 1920s a diminutive yet resolute Communist movement in the Pennsylvania anthracite, consisting mainly of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, established a short-lived local of the National Textile Workers Union (NTWU).¹ In the Spring of 1929, as a dual labor union, the NTWU momentarily surpassed its local rival, a weak American Federation of Labor (AFL) affiliate, the United Textile Workers Union (UTWU). It did so by assuming leadership of a series of relatively small silk mill strikes involving some 500 workers in the industrial community of Wilkes-Barre. Although the strikes began in March 1929 at the Wilkes-Barre Silk Weaving Company over the firing of a NTWU organizer, the underlying causes of the walkouts were low pay, long hours, and inequitable working conditions. The Communist Party (CPUSA) assigned operative Clarina Michelson, an able young (32 years old) female organizer, to lead and direct the union and the strikes. Under Michelson's leadership, the rank-and-file textile workers — mostly the young single daughters of the hard coal miners — officially set up a NTWU local in Wilkes-Barre and sought, without success, the assistance of the powerful United Mine Workers of America (UMW) to aid their job action.

Official Communist Party policy in 1929, based on the ultra-left militancy of “Third Period” ideology, mandated the establishment of revo-

1. There are no collections of NTWU papers, correspondence, or local union records in any American labor archives. The United Textile Workers of America (UTWA) Collection at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in Madison contains almost nothing in the segment dating from 1929, the year of the Wilkes-Barre strikes. Vera Buch Weisbord, *A Radical Life* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1977), 169; Paul Buhle, “Textile Workers Unions,” in *Encyclopedia of the American Left* ed. by Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 772-73; *Daily Worker*, 19 April 1929 and “Lessons of the Strike Struggle in the USA,” *The Communist*, May 1932, 410.

lutionary labor unions to speed up the predicted downfall of capitalism.² Because of these instructions, Communists were ordered to create revolutionary dual trade unions. Disregarding the Party "line," however, Michelson and the anthracite Reds settled on traditional aims for the 1929 Wilkes-Barre strikes that suited the immediate needs of the workers: higher wages, shorter hours, improved working conditions, and union recognition.³ This calculated evasion of revolutionary goals made little difference to local and state authorities who resorted to harsh measures to crush the strike and its radical leaders. When in April 1929 the local NTWU succeeded in spreading the strike to other nearby silk mills in Luzerne County, anticommunist forces — including police, courts, press, and the mainstream labor movement — came down hard on the Red upstart. Tenacious bosses, police harassment, a death threat from a judge, UMW attacks, and a UTWU organizing campaign combined to soundly defeat the Communist-led union.

After the Wilkes-Barre setback, anthracite Communists moved the NTWU organizing effort to Scranton where it also met stiff resistance. In November 1930, Communists in eastern Pennsylvania acknowledged the severity of past failures of the NTWU, but promised to push ahead with a new organizing campaign for their dual union. This vow of a renewed effort on behalf of the NTWU, however, was not honored. In any event, during the second half of the 1930s, in the years after the

2. For recent accounts of Third Period Communism, see Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York: Twayne Publisher, 1992), 18, 46, 65-66. T.H. Watkins, *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 83; Fraser Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States from the Great Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick, N.J. and London: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 24-28; and Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American Unions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

3. There is very little information in the Russian archives about Communist involvement in organizing the textile workers of the anthracite. Not surprisingly, however, there are abundant sources in this location about the region's miners. The holdings of the Russian Center for Preservation and Study of Documents of Contemporary History (RTsKhIDNI) in Moscow are separated into a number of "fonds," or collections, that represent different kinds of organizational apparatus found most often in modern Russia, chiefly in the Soviet period. Research for this article concentrated on one deposit, "fond 515," documents of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). The most helpful guide to understanding and using RTsKhIDNI is J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, eds., *Research Guide to the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Contemporary History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Center for Russian Studies, 1993).

1934 national textile strike and major shifts in national and international politics, Communists achieved a measure of reluctant acknowledgment and acceptance. During this popular front era local Communists worked effectively behind the scenes in the Congress of Industrial Organization's (CIO's) successful drive to organize the region's textile workers.

Events surrounding the 1929 Wilkes-Barre strikes are illustrative of Communist activity in the anthracite. They also offer particulars concerning the dispute about the correct historical account of American Communists and the role they played in United States history. The image that emerges in the following case study is one of a genuinely committed radical minority whose primary focus centered on local issues and struggles.

In the 1980s and 1990s, historians of American Communism have in the main separated themselves into two factions. One camp, led ably by Harvey Klehr (political scientist) and John Earl Haynes (Library of Congress historian), view American Communists as little more than tools utilized by the Soviet Union and the Comintern (Communist International). Plummeting headlong into the recently opened Russian archival material, Klehr and Haynes discovered what they deem as incontrovertible evidence that American Communists were for all intents and purposes clandestine agents of a menacing enemy regime.⁴ An opposing collection of revisionist scholars, however, argues that social and regional histories of American radicalism lead to the opposite conclusion. In fact, the revisionists argue that Communists in a variety of urban and industrial settings, and from differing ethnic backgrounds, regularly joined the Marxist-Leninist movement because of their desire to actively struggle against exploitation, union corruption, and social injustice. This is stated aptly by William Foster biographer Edward Johanningsmeier: "although American Communism was connected in complex ways to Soviet ideology and politics, its impetus, motivation,

4. The most recent efforts of this duo include John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Klehr, Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); John Earl Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace? American Communism and Anticommunism in the Cold War Era* (New York: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 1996); and Klehr, Haynes, and Fridrikh Igorevich Frisov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

and accomplishments were derived mostly from American sources.”⁵

The interpretive stance in this article walks a fine line between the two positions. It acknowledges that the American Communist Party utilized an authoritarian internal structure and decision-making process that mandated discipline from members. In some instances, Party officialdom exhibited tolerance of organizers who – on the ground, in the field – sometimes disregarded authorized policy. What is more, the revisionist viewpoint suggests that the actual genesis of the NTWU in the hard coal fields may be found more in the section’s native labor traditions than the maneuverings of the far-away Communist International. Over the years the anthracite miners’ class militancy had repeatedly taken the shape of dual union opposition to established groups.⁶ During the twenties and the early thirties the Communists plainly linked up

5. Quoted in Edward P. Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), xii. For a sampling of this school, see also, Alan Wald, “Search for a Method: Recent Histories of American Communism,” *Radical History Review* 61 (1995), 166-174; Michael E. Brown, Randy Martin, Frank Rosengarten, and George Snedeker, eds., *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993); Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party during the Second World War* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Mark Solomon, *The Cry was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998); Paul Lyons, *Philadelphia Communists, 1936-1956* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

6. Recent studies of the anthracite that address the dual unionism issue and working class concerns more generally, include Douglas Monroe, “A Decade of Turmoil: John L. Lewis and the Anthracite Miners, 1926-1936,” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 1977; Thomas Dublin, *When the Mines Closed: Stories of Struggles in Hard Times* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Dublin, “Working-Class Families Respond to Industrial Decline: Migration from the Pennsylvania Anthracite Region since 1920,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 54 (Fall 1998), 40-56; Christopher Sterba, “Family, Work, and Nation: Hazleton, Pennsylvania and the 1934 General Strike in Textiles,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* CXX (January/April 1996), 3-35; Clement Valletta, “‘To Battle for Our Ideas’: Community Ethic and Anthracite Labor, 1920-1940,” *Pennsylvania History* 58 (1991), 311-29; John Bodnar, *Anthracite People: Families, Unions, and Work, 1900-1940* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1983), 14-15; Donald L. Miller and Richard E. Sharpless, *The Kingdom of Coal: Work, Enterprise, and Ethnic Communities in the Mine Fields* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 319-20; and Ronald M. Benson, “Commentary: The Family Economy and Labor Protest in Industrial America and the Coal and Iron Police in Anthracite Country,” in *Hard Coal, Hard Times: Ethnicity and Labor in the Anthracite Region* (Scranton: Anthracite Museum Press, 1984), 121.

with this indigenous tendency.⁷ Moreover, the anthracite's silk workers could boast of a heritage of strikes and walkouts dating from the beginning of the century.⁸

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Scholars of America's radical history have often ignored Communist projects among the coal miners, textile laborers, and other workers in northeastern Pennsylvania.⁹ During the first half of the 20th century a small but determined Communist movement weathered the region's anticommunist storms as it involved itself in nearly all the important social and labor conflicts of the time. In fact, by the end of the 1920s the local Communists had surpassed the Socialists as the region's foremost leftwing militants. To be sure, the Socialist Party at this time focused most of its resources and efforts in the working class town of Reading.¹⁰

7. The best historiographical analysis of anthracite labor history that suggests this perspective is Michael Kozura, "We Stood Our Ground: Anthracite Miners and the Expropriation of Corporate Property, 1930-1941," in *We Are All Leaders?: The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s*, ed. by Staughton Lynd (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 199-237.

8. For example, see *Wilkes-Barre Record*, 18 November 1925 and *Scranton Times*, 6 March 1926, and Patrick M. Lynch, "Pennsylvania Anthracite: A Forgotten IWW Venture, 1906-1916," MA Thesis, Bloomsburg State College, 1974, 107-142. Bonnie Stepenoff, "'Keeping It in the Family': Mother Jones and the Pennsylvania Silk Mill Strike of 1900-1901," *Labor History* 38 (Fall 1997), 432-450 and Stepenoff, "Child Labor in Pennsylvania Silk Mills: Protest and Change, 1900-1910," *Pennsylvania History* 59 (1992), 102-21;

9. The early studies of American Communism say virtually nothing of Communist activities in the Pennsylvania anthracite: Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking, 1957); Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York, Viking, 1960); William Z. Foster, *History of the Communist Party of the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1952); and Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957). More recently, Harvey Klehr's *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) also largely ignores the anthracite. Two recent exceptions are Ottanelli's *The Communist Party of the United States*, 26 and 52; and Theodore Draper, "Communists and Miners, 1928-1933," *Dissent* 19 (Spring 1972), 376 and 377.

10. Communist organizer Steve Nelson described the anthracite as one of the most repressive areas outside the South because of the harassment and intimidation directed against Communist activists. Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett, and Rob Ruck, *Steve Nelson: American Radical* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), 94-95. See also, Walter T. Howard and Virginia M. Howard, "Communist Activism in the Pennsylvania Anthracite during the Great Depression," *Carver* 14 (Spring 1997), 15-23; William C.

At the beginning of the thirties anthracite Communists took the measure of the region. They reported in 1930 that the two relatively sizeable industrial centers of Wilkes-Barre and Scranton, with approximate populations of some eighty thousand and over one-hundred thousand respectively, dominated the northern hard coal fields. A few cities with populations of ten thousand or more, peppered the central and southern anthracite. At the time Communist organizer Steve Nelson noted that beyond the appeal of the attractive rolling hills of the region lay the longstanding harsh poverty that set in after World War I and continued for many decades.¹¹ In 1930 the Communist press accurately declared that the anthracite region claimed 81,642 American (white), 411 African American and 57,517 foreign-born miners.¹² Not surprisingly, Communists were excited by the organizing opportunities they saw in northeastern Pennsylvania.

The working class history of the hard coal fields provided the context for the emergence of the Communist movement. The Molly Maguires, the Lattimer incident and the 1902 coal strike call attention to the anthracite's celebrated tradition of labor militancy.¹³ Addition-

Pratt, "Jimmie Higgins' and the Reading Socialist Community: An Exploration of the Socialist Rank and File," in *Socialism and the Cities*, ed. By Bruce M. Stave (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1975), 141-46 and Pratt, "The Reading Socialist Experience: A Study of Working Class Politics," Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1969.

11. Nelson, Barrett, and Ruck, *Steve Nelson*, 94. See also U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Population, Vol. IV* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933), 1399; and "Unemployment is Subject of Lively Debate: Red Peril Scouted," *Wilkes-Barre Record*, 4 March 1930. See also, Thomas H. Goode, *People, Poverty and Politics: Pennsylvanians during the Great Depression* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1981).

12. Phil Frankfeld, "The Membership Drive in the Anthracite," *Daily Worker*, 2 December 1930 and Olga Gold, "The Anthracite Miners and the Revolutionary Union," *ibid.*, 18 December 1930.

13. Alan Singer, "Communists and Coal Miners: Rank-and-File Organizing in the United Mine Workers of America during the 1920s," *Science and Society* 55 (Summer 1991), 132-157. For an outstanding recent study of the history of working class militancy among the anthracite miners, see Perry K. Blatz, *Democratic Miners: Work and Labor Relations in the Anthracite Coal Industry, 1875-1925* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994). Blatz, however, fails to mention the Communists who were active in the anthracite in the 1920s. Harold Aurand's *From the Molly Maguires to the United Mine Workers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1971), is still the best one volume study of anthracite labor history. The tradition of labor militancy is a major element of the region's folklore, author's interviews with Miriam Maki [Finnish immigrant to the region in the 1910s], 29 April 1998; and author's interviews natives of the northern and southern anthracite who were in their teens and twenties in the 1920s and 1930s, Grace Watts, Arla Girton, Helen Sweeney, and Jane Ross, 30 April 1998.

ally, an oppressive industrial class structure ensured that large and powerful coal operators would cruelly exploit the army of hard coal miners.¹⁴ This class dynamic, compounded by the influx of large numbers of European immigrants open to radical ideas, fashioned a noticeable heritage of Marxist-oriented labor and political groups in the anthracite that included the Socialist Labor Party, the Socialist Party, and the Industrial Workers of the World.

Founded in 1877, the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) moved into the anthracite in the 1890s. Predictably it embodied immigrant Socialism in northeastern Pennsylvania, primarily among the Germans and Irish. Around the turn of the century the SLP enjoyed a relatively modest vigor in electoral Socialism. The Socialist Party (SP) of Eugene Debs assumed leadership of the anthracite's socialist movement during the first decade of the 20th century. Soon after its founding in 1901, devotees announced their presence in the hard coal regions, set up a party apparatus, and made some modest inroads in the miners' union. In the 1904 election, presidential candidate Eugene Debs collected 272 votes in Lackawanna County, 805 in Schuylkill County, and 982 in Luzerne County. In the 1912 contest Debs gathered 959 votes in Lackawanna County, 2,565 in Luzerne, and 758 in Schuylkill. Running from a federal prison cell in 1920, the SP standard-bearer tallied 970 votes in Lackawanna, 1,891 in Luzerne, and 1,318 in Schuylkill. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) arrived in the anthracite in 1907. In the ensuing years it conducted periodic organizing drives among the region's coal miners and textile workers. Between 1907 and 1916 the Wobblies provided some significant competition to the UMW. At its peak in 1916, the IWW had organized more than 10,000 miners into locals in Wilkes-Barre, Scranton, Old Forge, Dupont, Dunmore, Pittston, and elsewhere.¹⁵ Thus, a lineage of labor militancy, a background of class

14. Michael Kozura, "We Stood Our Ground," 199-237. See also, Thomas Dublin, "The Equalization of Work: An Alternative Vision of Industrial Capitalism in the Anthracite Region of Pennsylvania in the 1930s," *Canal History and Technology Proceedings*, 13 (1994), 81-98. Although Mark Aldrich's "The Perils of Mining Anthracite: Regulation, Technology, and Safety, 1870-1945," *Pennsylvania History* 64 (Summer 1997), 361-383, does not emphasize class, it certainly reveals the safety hazards in the mines that might have radicalized the workers who slaved in the pits. See also, Alan Derickson, "Occupational Disease and Career Trajectory in Hard Coal, 1870-1930," *Industrial Relations* 32 (Winter 1993), 94-110. Author's interviews with Watts, Girton, Sweeney, and Ross.

15. Thomas B. Cochran, compiler, *Smull's Legislative Hand Book and Manual of the State of Pennsylvania, 1901* (Harrisburg: State Printers of Pennsylvania), 680-83, 689-96,

discontent, the presence of a large immigrant population, and a modest Marxist political tradition, set the stage for the genesis of the region's Communist movement.

During its tempestuous birth in 1919, the American Communist movement established a permanent presence in the hard coal fields of Pennsylvania that slowly grew in the early 1920s. The local press clearly noted Bolshevik organizing activity that gave birth to the Communist movement in the anthracite. The first converts garnered a great deal of public attention as they indulged in unrestrained revolutionary enthusiasm, rhetoric, and expectation. Newspapers reported on street corner orators and various spokesmen who openly embraced "Bolshevism" and the Russian Revolution as the hope of mankind to overcome the exploitation, ignorance, and injustice of "Capitalism." It seemed to regional authorities that these revolutionary zealots were everywhere, infesting every area of American life, especially the labor movement. To be sure, in the Red Scare of 1919 federal authorities dispatched agents to the anthracite to look into the allegedly subversive activities of local "Reds." This Red Scare mind set lingered through the 1920s as a major impediment to the growth and expansion of the Communist movement. The United Mine Workers reacted with hostility to the new radicals in northeastern Pennsylvania; and it kept a close eye on them. For example, a 1922 UMW report stated, "We can show that the Lithuanian Communists in the anthracite region are actively engaged in circulating under cover Communist propaganda, and it appears that since the coal strike started a new organization known as the United Toilers of America."¹⁶

730-33, 762, 764, 774, 775, 777; Cochran, *Smull's Legislative Hand Book and Manual of the State of Pennsylvania, 1905*, 550-54, 560-66, 599-602; Herman P. Miller, Compiler, *Smull's Legislative Hand Book and Manual of the State of Pennsylvania, 1913*, 647-50, 657-63, 698-701; Miller, *Smull's Legislative Hand Book and Manual, 1921-22*, 830-33, 840-46, 881-83. See also, Lynch, "Pennsylvania Anthracite: A Forgotten IWW Venture, 1906-1916," 1-11, 143-49, and Walter T. Howard, Virginia M. Howard, and Christy Lutz, "The International Labor Defense and Antiradical Repression in the Pennsylvania Anthracite, 1928-1929," *Carver* 15 (Spring 1998), 41-46.

16. *Scranton Times*, 2 May 1919; *Scranton Republican*, 2, 25, 28 April 1919 and 1, 2 May 1919; *Wilkes-Barre Record*, 2 May 1919; and *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, 30 April 1919 and 1 May 1919. For the UMW concerns, see the report titled "The Communist Party in the Coal Strike," 29 May 1922, in the file titled "Communism and the UMW, 1919-1931," Box 2, Official Files of President John L. Lewis, United Mine Workers of America Papers, Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Pattee Library, Pennsylvania State University. See also *The Worker*, 11 February 1922 and J. Louis Engdahl, "The Struggle of the Miners," *ibid.*, 10 February 1923. Some of the pamphlets that anthracite Communists circulated in the early 1920s can be found in New York City at the Reference Center for Marxist Studies.

The CPUSA Central Committee placed the anthracite in District 3. Philadelphia, the District control center, supervised as best it could many industrial locales over a sprawling expanse that included all of eastern Pennsylvania and the state of Delaware. Because of the anthracite's relative distance from the command centers of Philadelphia and New York, local Communists and their leaders exercised a remarkable degree of independence even while generally complying with the instructions and directives coming down through bureaucratic channels. In spite of the region's acrimony toward Communists, the Party's commitment to winning over and leading the American proletariat meant that it could not bypass the working class of northeastern Pennsylvania. Aware of the section's distinguished and tumultuous labor traditions, Communists resolved to organize in this sector of industrial America no matter what resistance they might encounter.¹⁷

During the 1920s Communist organizers in the anthracite came and went with uneven results. Moscow documents conclusively reveal that in this decade, Party membership peaked at more than 200 during the long, bitter coal strike of 1925-26 when organizers found the miners in a rebellious mood. They also show that nearly all Party members at the time were, predictably, immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe as well as from the Russian Empire. In fact, one 1926 account found in the Moscow records listed the following ethnic identification of Party members in the northern anthracite: 49 Lithuanians, 42 Italians, 18 Russians, 18 Ukrainians, 10 Poles, and 4 Croats. It also reported some 60 Party members who resided in the southern anthracite areas. These Communists, chiefly Lithuanians, lived in the vicinity of communities such as Minersville, Shenandoah, and Shamokin.¹⁸ The most success-

17. Nelson, Barrett, Ruck, *Steve Nelson*, 94-124, 153-182. See also, Steve Nelson Oral History Project, 1977-1978 that consists of interviews by scholars Robert Ruck and James Barrett, Archives Service Center, Hillman Library, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Information about the attitudes and actions of national Communist leaders in the Trade Union Committee of the Central Executive Committee (CEC) regarding the anthracite can be found in the Daniel Bell Collection, Box 41, Tamiment Institute, New York University, New York, New York. See also, "Trade Union Committee of the CEC," Earl Browder Papers, Microfilm Edition, Reel #6, no. 148. These latter two sources of information shed little light on the textile workers of the anthracite in 1929.

18. Ed Scharfenberg, "Economic Conditions of the Anthracite Mine Workers," 15 April 1926, CPUSA Papers, Center for Research and Preservation of Documents on Modern and Contemporary History (RTsKhIDNI) (hereafter cited as CPUSA Papers), Moscow, fond 515. See also, E. Scharfenberg, "Supplement to the Anthracite Report of April 15,

ful ethnic Communist from the anthracite was undoubtedly the Polish radical Edward Falkowski from Shenandoah. He wrote extensively on anthracite labor conditions and spend quite a few years studying in the Soviet Union. His unpublished novel, *Anthracite*, is full of rich detail and powerful insights about everyday life for an immigrant miner in the hard coal region during the 1920s and 1930s.

The immigrant make-up of the Party's rank-and-file in the twenties substantially influenced anthracite Communist activity until near the end of the decade. Indeed, regional comrades often exhibited the tendencies of an isolated sectarian group as they created a self-contained social realm in which Party members convivially interacted with each other, reassured themselves in their political faith, and celebrated "Red" occasions such as May Day and Lenin Memorials. Nonetheless, this is not the entire story.

In spite of their small numbers, local Reds in the 1920s noticeably contributed to regional history even while experiencing a decline in Party membership to about 50 by the end of the decade. The regional press highlighted Communist involvement in the major coal strike of 1925-26, in the widespread protests over the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927, in the 1928 Pittston Mine War, and especially in the "Save the Union" movement of the late twenties.¹⁹ The fortunes of the regional CPUSA began to change in 1929 with the advent of dual union militancy as seen in the Wilkes-Barre silk strikes of that year. Though the Wilkes-Barre walkouts ultimately failed, they and subsequent developments ushered in a period of resurgent growth and activity for anthracite Communists. Late in 1929 several hundred hard coal min-

1926," *ibid.* For Party views of the anthracite workers in the mid-1920s, see Joseph Manley, "Anthracite," *The Workers' Monthly* (February 1925), 177-78; Alex Reid, "Lewis Performs for the Anthracite Miners," *ibid.* (August 1925), 453-54; and Benjamin Gitlow, "Why the Anthracite Strikes," *ibid.* (November 1925), 15-18. For Falkowski, see, Edward Falkowski Papers, Box 5, files 10-11, Tamiment Institute, New York University, New York, New York. Two suggestive recent studies of immigrants and Communism include Gerald Meyer, "Italian Americans and the American Communist Party," the *Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies*, Paper presented at the 1998 Balch Faculty Forum, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1-10 and Gary Hartman, "Building the Ideal Immigrant: Reconciling Lithuanianism and 100 percent Americanism to Create a Respectable Nationalist Movement, 1870-1922," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 18 (Fall 1998), 4-40.

19. Nelson, Barrett, and Ruck, *Steve Nelson*, 95. See also, Howard, Howard, and Lutz, "The International Labor Defense and Antiradical Repression in the Pennsylvania Anthracite," 41-46.

ers in the southern fields, especially in the Shenandoah, Minersville, and Tamaqua region, flocked to the banner of the Reds' dual miners' union, the National Miners Union (NMU), and remained loyal to it for years.²⁰

The Wilkes-Barre silk mill labor confrontations were part of the history of Communist activism in one region of industrial America. In the years after the 1929 walkouts, the feared, hated anthracite "Bolsheviks" in the "Red decade" of the 1930s were quite active. In nineteen-thirties industrial America, when Communist-led demonstrations were common occurrences across the nation, and when coal was "king" in this region of the Commonwealth, the lure of Communism exerted itself. In this decade the anthracite Reds led some 15,000-20,000 in a mass unemployed movement, staged scores of hunger marches, challenged the authority of the mainstream labor movement, gave their blessing to the multibillion dollar bootleg coal industry, condemned the vicious violence of a major labor war, ran candidates for local, state and national office, and helped to build the industrial unions of the CIO.

THE 1929 WILKES-BARRE SILK MILL STRIKES

In 1928-29 Communist activism in the anthracite revolved primarily around the struggle to implement the Party's new policy of dual unionism. Under Communist auspices, the NTWU had been founded in September 1928 at a special convention in New York City. A handful of young, female delegates from the silk mills of the anthracite attended this gathering.²¹ The possibility of radical penetration of the region's textile industry, which was largely unorganized owing to the weakness in

20. The story of NMU growth at this time was recounted in one of the southern anthracite's best newspapers, the *Tamaqua Evening Courier*. See *Courier*, 13, 14, 21, 23, 29 November 1929; 6, 7, 9, 21 December 1929; and 5-7 January 1930. See also, *Daily Worker*, 14 September 1929 and 18, 27 November 1929; Howard and Howard, "Communist Activism in the Pennsylvania Anthracite," 19-21; and Nelson, Barrett, and Ruck, *Steve Nelson*, 94-124, 153-182. Also relevant is John Brophy, *A Miner's Life* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 235-36; Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book Co., 1977), 174-78; and Robert Zieger, *John L. Lewis: Labor Leader* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 60-65.

21. Weisbord, *A Radial Life*, 169. See, "Special Miners Relief Issue," *The Working Woman*, published by the Working Women's Conference, vol. 1, no. 5, February 1928, CPUSA Papers, fond, 515.

the northern anthracite of the AFL-United Textile Workers, prompted some to worry about the "Red peril."²²

The textile industry had moved into the anthracite during the late 19th century. It offered a limited diversity of employment for working families who resided in diverse ethnic neighborhoods in various urban centers. During the early 1900s the coal and textile industries provided gender-specific employment for men in the mines and young single women in silk and clothing factories.²³ The silk mills of Wilkes-Barre and surrounding Luzerne County, where so many miners' daughters initially enlisted in the ranks of labor, were numerous. By the end of the 1920s, the *Wilkes-Barre Record* reported that one contemporary industrial survey "shows a total of 92,366 wage earners and salaried employees in the county on the payrolls of productive industries...The nearest competitor of the mines in the number of employees engaged in productive industry is the textile industry...." The *Record* continued, "Making textiles and their products employs 15,566 persons in the county. The largest groups in this industry employ 5,910 persons in making silk yarns and thread, including rayon; 4,935 in making silk goods, including rayon, and 2,132 employees in shirt factories."²⁴

In the twenties, female textile workers were important to the family economy. During the decade large mine operators "downsized" and consolidated their holdings to the accompaniment of periodic unemployment. Under these conditions, many of the anthracite's laboring

22. *Scranton Times*, 11 April 1929 and 1 May 1929.

23. There are excellent studies of the social history of the anthracite before and after the turn of the century. Harold Aurand, *Population Change and Social Continuity: Ten Years in a Coal Town* (Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press, 1986); Edward J. Davies II, *Anthracite Aristocracy: Leadership and Social Change in the Hard Coal Regions of Northeastern Pennsylvania, 1800-1930* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1985); Michael Barendse, *Social Expectations and Perceptions: The Case of Slavic Anthracite* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 1981); and of course, Victor Greene's *The Slavic Community on Strike* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

24. *Wilkes-Barre Record*, 13 January 1930; see also, U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Population, Vol. IV: Occupation By States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933), 1400-1401. Scholars have shown a vigorous interest in the history of labor in Pennsylvania silk mills, see, Stepenoff, "'Keeping It in the Family': Mother Jones and the Pennsylvania Silk Mill Strike of 1900-1901," 432-450. Philip M. Holleran, "Explaining the Decline of Child Labor in Pennsylvania Silk Mills, 1899-1919," *Pennsylvania History* 63 (1996), 78-95; Stepenoff, "Child Labor in Pennsylvania Silk Mills: Protest and Change, 1900-1910," 102-21; and Christopher M. Sterba, "Family, Work, and Nation," 3-35.

families often depended on their daughters' wages to get through the hard times. Parents, union officials and civic authorities were exceedingly protective of these young women. Indeed, the vast majority of mining families vehemently resisted any Communist influence in their children's lives, whether it be a radical-led union, the Young Communist League or any other similar group. In this instance, the region's dominant anticommunist values, reinforced by patriarchy and paternalism, set the established powers against the NTWU. Nevertheless, the new union earnestly sought to empower young female laborers in the workplace and more generally in society.²⁵

Since 1919 the anthracite's mainstream labor movement had kept a close eye on the Communists in the Soviet Union, in the United States, and in its corner of the Commonwealth. It clearly understood the labor policy implications of "Third Period" ideology for northeastern Pennsylvania. Understandably, then, the Scranton Central Labor Union (CLU) and District 1 of the United Mine Workers acted to head off the anticipated Red invasion. They feared that the number of Communists in the ranks of the miners might grow if the NTWU were successful in textiles. Accordingly, they launched a drive to organize the silk mills in their jurisdiction. They threw their support to AFL-UTWU organizer Mary Kelleher in her efforts to bring the region's textile workers into the AFL organization. This localized endeavor reflected the UTWU's determination to combat "left-wing dual unionism." In September 1928, at its own national convention in New York City, the UTWU plainly sported its anticommunist zeal. Moreover, the *Scranton Times* relayed this strong message to its working class readers in a headline that read: "RADICALS NOT WANTED BY TEXTILE UNION."²⁶

Disregarding this warning, NTWU organizers apparently arrived in the Wilkes-Barre vicinity in late September 1928. This development prompted Lawrence Hart, Secretary of the Scranton CLU, to warn area labor leaders to take heed: Communists were in the anthracite to organize textile workers and "a man representing himself as Albert Weisbord, of the (National) Textile Workers' Union, is in the city to address labor meetings." A talented organizer and an inspiring leader, Weisbord visited the anthracite as one of his last Party assignments before assuming field leadership of the crucial Communist-led Gastonia, North Carolina

25. John Bodnar, "The Family Economy and Labor Protest in Industrial America: Hard Coal Miners in the 1930s," in *Hard Coal, Hard Times*, 78-93.

26. *Scranton Times*, 19 April 1928, 8 June 1928, and 13 September 1928.

strike in the South. At the time of this visit, the local Communist Party was small, weak, and isolated. It welcomed any aid it could obtain from the national organization. Further, the local Party members, numbering about 50 at this point, consisting almost entirely of newly arrived young immigrants in their twenties and thirties, lived on the margins of society. Given these circumstances, then, local Communists could do little more than offer their dedicated yet limited efforts to the NTWU.²⁷

NTWU efforts in the Wilkes-Barre vicinity silk mills began to pay off in the Spring of 1929. Local textile workers wrote letters to the *Daily Worker* revealing that low pay, long hours, harsh working conditions, mistreatment by the "bosses," and lack of union representation were reasons that would predispose them to join the militant NTWU.²⁸ The CPUSA's Clarina Michelson took a job at the Wilkes-Barre Silk Weaving Company either at the end of 1928 or early 1929. She and the new union stood ready when on 18 March 1929 the night shift staged a walkout. The wildcat strike occurred when managers fired NTWU member John Gregory for his organizing activities. Local Communists and NTWU partisans did not have sufficient time to plan and prepare for this job action. As in other Communist-led walkouts of the period, such as the noted Gastonia episode, they did succeed for a time in putting themselves in a position of leadership. Finally, local Communists genuinely cared about the strike and the young women who carried it out. There is nothing in the evidence to indicate that their actions in this walkout were determined solely because of cold calculations about the best way to aid the fortunes of the Party. In fact, as events will demonstrate, they were more interested in improving local wages and working conditions than following the party line of revolutionary dual unionism.²⁹

Available evidence indicates that this and subsequent strikes in the Wilkes-Barre region in 1929 followed a common pattern. They broke out spontaneously, were quickly suppressed, and nearly always led to

27. *Ibid.*, 20 September 1928. See also, James G. Ryan, *Earl Browder: The Failure of American Communism* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1997), 34-35; Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism*, 227; and Cochran, *Labor and Communism*, 31-36.

28. *Daily Worker*, 19, 21 March 1929.

29. *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, 22 March 1928 and *Wilkes-Barre Record*, 23 March 1928.

defeat. To the UMW and the public in general, these silk strikes were at first a mild distraction until Communist involvement was confirmed and announced to the public. At this point the community's anticommunist forces combined their effort to crush the walkouts and the radical union before any benefits could accrue to the local Communist movement.

Michelson played a key role in this notable job action. When on 22 March 1929 local police spotted this zealous organizer on the picket line talking with day shift women who had failed to honor the strike, they identified her as an agitator, arrested her, and unceremoniously hauled her off to jail. The press recorded that "it was charged she attempted to molest day shift employees at the Wilkes-Barre Silk Weaving Co. plant, South Empire Street, to win them over to a strike started by the night shift employees." Further, they also detained Joe Ptashinsky (Joe Tash), a Young Communist League organizer and National Miners Union activist, for lending aid on the picket line. Soon after these arrests, and police harassment of the picketers, Michelson and a committee of strikers protested in vain to area newspapers about the "campaign of terrorization" against them. Subsequently, they held a mass meeting at Polish Hall, 316 East Street in Wilkes-Barre, on the evening of 23 March, "and a check up there showed that all the men day workers and most of the girl day workers were already out of the plant."³⁰

The local press disclosed information to the anthracite public about the NTWU leader's role in this strike. According to widely circulated accounts, Michelson testified at a 22 March court hearing that she came to the region from New York City and "secured employment in the mill, being paid \$9 a week, in order to secure an insight of working conditions in the mill. She left the city (Wilkes-Barre) but later returned and has been championing the cause of workers." In these early press accounts no editors had yet openly labeled her a Communist. At first, the Reds kept quiet about their radical credentials, instead, they focused exclusively on organizing and leading the strike.³¹

Rank-and-file Communists and their leaders raised a hue and cry over Michelson's rough treatment at the hands of the police. Local comrades, led by subdistrict organizer Frank Vrataric [he also went by the name of Frank Vitane] and other Party people such as Mike Zaldokis

30. *Daily Worker*, 23 March 1929.

31. *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, 22 March 1929 and *Wilkes-Barre Record*, 23 March 1929.

(leader of the Ukrainian Communists) and Anthony Ricci (NMU operative), staged a mass meeting of support in Wilkes-Barre. Local Party leaders offered fiery words of hope and encouragement. Furthermore, the *Daily Worker*, which closely followed the fortunes and activities of the NTWU in the anthracite, ran frequent stories through March and April that kept national readers informed of the Red union's ordeal at the hands of the anthracite's "capitalist establishment."³²

As the strike continued, so did the arrests. The Communist-led walkout attracted the attention of state governmental officials. In late March the Pennsylvania Labor Department sent two operatives from Harrisburg to the anthracite, prompting the CPUSA press to charge that these "paid functionaries of the state's strikebreaking agencies have been urging the strikers to attend the meeting of the UTW although their ostensible function is to try to bring the strikers and the bosses together for settlement of labor disputes." These Harrisburg men were unsuccessful in snuffing out this walkout. The Party's press coverage of the job action also noted that "A number of strikers yesterday (27 March 1929) had an interview with Wilkes-Barre Chief of Police Russell Taylor to protest against the massing of police and mounted police to prohibit picketing." The Chief, however, replied that "I am going to break the strike. Also I am going to have arrests made before and not after they are necessary." The Communist press, in response, retorted that "Nothing, however, can compel the striking workers to go back to work before their demands are met."³³ Local Communists and the strikers put forward the following demands:

1. An eight-hour day (instead of the standard 12 hours)
2. A forty-four hour week
3. A 30 percent wage increase
4. Time and half for overtime
5. No discrimination against union workers
6. Recognition of the NTWU³⁴

While ambitious and progressive for the time and place, these demands were hardly revolutionary.

On 27 March, strikers officially established the Wilkes-Barre local of the NTWU with its headquarters at 109 South Washington Street.

32. *Daily Worker*, 23, 28 March 1929; 12 April 1929.

33. *Ibid.*, 28 March 1929.

34. *Ibid.*, 12 April 1929.

Short on money, few in number, but long on zeal, at their first meeting they elected officers, planned further picketing and vowed to continue the struggle to expand the union. Likewise, at a 29 March meeting the new NTWU local took steps to route correspondence to District 1 UMW locals appealing for their support.³⁵ No such support was forthcoming. In the meantime, the strike and picketing continued unabated despite daily harassment by the police who patrolled streets adjacent to the Wilkes-Barre silk mill on horseback and motorcycles.³⁶ On 2 April authorities arrested Michelson a second time for organizing activities at the Empire Street silk plant. The arresting officer later testified in court that the radical "agitator" had positioned herself near the mill entrance and refused to leave the premises as directed by lawmen. Arraigned a second time within two weeks, authorities charged Michelson with attempting to incite a riot. The judge, who refused even to listen to the radical defendant, found her guilty, and fined her \$20 and court costs. Her attorney, hired by the International Labor Defense [legal arm of the CPUSA], provided bail pending an appeal of the court's decision that he and his client labeled as arbitrary and unfair. In spite of court sanctions levied against their leader, rank-and-file strikers spread their walkout in early April to the Newark Silk Company plant on South Franklin Street in Wilkes-Barre.³⁷

On 4 April the police took decisive action against several youths on the picket line. They detained a teenager named Julius Leber (of 51 Laurel Street in Plains, PA) and Helen Coloday, a sixteen-year-old member of the Young Communist League and a firebrand from Washington, D.C. Authorities released Leber to his parents on the night of his arrest, but because there were no parents or legal guardians to release the other juvenile to, they decided to banish her from the community. Communist spokespersons in New York and in the anthracite attempted to inform the public that Coloday had traveled to Wilkes-Barre to organize silk mill workers with her parents' knowledge and approval. The *Daily Worker* reported that "N. Coloday, Helen's father, when he heard of his daughter's arrest, came from his Washington home to Wilkes-Barre, and issued a statement denying that her parents were not aware of her activities." Local authorities, however, had already

35. *Wilkes-Barre Record*, 30 March 1929.

36. *Daily Worker*, 28 March 1929.

37. *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, 3 April 1929 and *Wilkes-Barre Record*, 3 April 1929.

ousted the young Communist without the knowledge or consent of her family or friends by placing her on a train to Washington.³⁸

In spite of such police interference, Communist-led picketers succeeded in spreading the silk strike to other nearby mills in Luzerne County. Directing efforts from NTWU headquarters in Wilkes-Barre, on 8 April Michelson organized a walkout at the Hess-Goldsmith Mill in Plymouth. The strikers then announced that their demands included a twenty percent wage increase, a 44-hour week and full recognition of their union. Local comrades issued a statement: "That AFL treachery and police brutality have failed to injure the strike sentiment in this section can be seen by this new walkout." In addition, they elaborated on this point: "Attacks against the NTWU, its organizers, and their valiant fight in leading the silk workers here in a struggle for better conditions, were made by the AFL press and officials. They urged members of the UMWA, whose relatives work in the mills here, to instruct their relatives to scab on those strikers." Finally, they concluded, "The miners and silk workers, however, ignore these attacks and are fighting under NTWU leadership."³⁹

When the Communist-directed walkout spread to the Hess-Goldsmith plant, hostile forces put additional pressure on NTWU strikers. On 11 April, the *Wilkes-Barre Times-Leader*, the *Wilkes-Barre Record* and *Scranton Times*, for the first time, openly identified the NTWU as a Communist-affiliated labor group. Moreover, it linked this Red union to the sensationalist national stories about the labor violence occurring in Gastonia [another NTWU-led textile strike].⁴⁰ If that were not enough, the UMW also went public with its efforts to crush the NTWU and its Red allies. District 1 President John Boylan routed letters to all locals in his jurisdiction advising the UMW rank-and-file to withhold all support from NTWU representatives in the region. One press account remarked that "The miners' leader characterizes the textile outfit as a dual organization similar to the Save-the-Union and the Communists."⁴¹ They also printed Boylan's letter in full in the anthracite press:

38. *Wilkes-Barre Record*, 4 April 1929 and *Daily Worker*, 8 April 1929.

39. *Daily Worker*, 11 April 1929.

40. *Scranton Times*, 11 April 1929; *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, 11 April 1929; and *Wilkes-Barre Record*, 11 April 1929.

41. *Wilkes-Barre Record*, 11 April 1929.

Scranton, Pa., April 10, 1929

To the Local Unions of the United Mine Workers of America, Wilkes-Barre and vicinity:

During the past several days, circulars have been mailed to our local unions by the National Textile Workers' Union of America, with headquarters at 109 South Washington Street, Wilkes-Barre, PA.

The circulars state that a strike exists at some silk mills in Wilkes-Barre and Plymouth, involving sons and daughters of our members. It further appeals for moral and financial support. The National Textile Workers of America is a dual movement, similar to the Save-the-Union and Communist organization, who profess to represent the labor movement. They are not connected with the American Federation of Labor or any of its affiliated branches.

Therefore all secretaries of our local unions are requested to refuse to read any circulars coming from the National Textile Workers Union, nor is any local union allowed to render assistance to this organization. If the textile workers of (the) Wyoming Valley needs the assistance of the labor movement, the United Mine Workers of America stands ready to help the boys and girls of our mills, but such work must be done by the United Textile Workers or the Central Labor Union of Wilkes-Barre and vicinity.

John Boylan

President of District 1, U.M.W. of A.⁴²

The UMW had, on the second day of the Hess-Goldsmith walkout, refused the floor to a NTWU strike committee at UMW Local 311's meeting at Campbell Hall in Plymouth. Local officers there made things worse by denouncing the NTWU people as "Communists," "Reds," and "dual unionists."⁴³ Furthermore, on 1 April the *United Mine Workers Journal* carried an editorial titled "Dual Organization: A.F. of L. Brands National Textile Workers Union" and communication sent by AFL President William Green stating that "the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor is of the opinion that the officers and members of organizations affiliated with the American Federation of

42. Ibid., and *Scranton Times*, 11 April 1929.

43. Ibid.

Labor should at all times refrain from making any financial contributions to appeals....”⁴⁴

On 11 April, a powerful coalition delivered a severe blow to the NTWU and Michelson by hijacking a critical mass meeting. On this day at Stravinsky Hall (42 Perry Street, Plymouth), the entire Plymouth police force led by Chief House, and accompanied by the UTWU’s Mary Kelleher, AFL international officers William J. Kromelbein and Bernard Calhoun, waited outside for the arrival of Michelson and other Communists who had been busy picketing all day at the mill. When an unsuspecting Michelson showed up, Chief House informed her that he would not allow her to enter the hall to address the 500 waiting workers. She nevertheless tried to enter and was immediately arrested. With the radical leader out of the way, the AFL representatives were free to speak before what was formerly the NTWU’s large audience.⁴⁵

At this point law officers took advantage of the situation to arrest two other local Communist leaders, Mike Zaldokas and Anthony Ricci. They charged them with unlawfully trying to enter a peaceful meeting, disorderly conduct, and refusing to disperse when told to do so by an officer. At a legal hearing before Squire Evans of Plymouth, Riccio and Zaldokas were found guilty and briefly detained. Then, in a clear example of judicial abuse, the squire dismissed Michelson’s case and threatened her life: “I order you out of Plymouth. Don’t ever dare come into the city again. If you do, you won’t live long!”⁴⁶

As expected, Michelson fearlessly disregarded this intimidation. The next day a NTWU strike committee unanimously voted to demand Michelson’s admission to an afternoon union meeting at the Polish Alliance Hall, West Main Street, Plymouth. They also demanded that AFL and UTWU officials publicly debate NTWU spokespersons. Predictably, the latter ignored the debate request. In any case, the police showed up at the Polish Hall gathering and refused to let the strike committee have the floor, and then arrested several committee members. Additionally, the authorities manhandled Michelson by throwing the radical leader down a series of stairs, and then again ordered her to leave town.⁴⁷

44. *United Mine Workers Journal*, 1 April, 1929.

45. *Daily Worker*, 12, 19 April 1929.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*

The situation worsened. A few days after law officers had physically abused Michelson, the police refused to let the strikers enter Stravinsky Hall, where the NTWU often held meetings. They again detained Michelson and Ricci, this time for inciting to riot. Zaldokas, in charge of the local ILD, tried in vain for twenty-four hours to obtain information about the arrest at police headquarters. He was himself subsequently arrested and charged with inciting to riot. At another hearing before Squire Evans they were all found guilty. The ILD and ACLU collaborated to hire attorney Gus Kleeman of Wilkes-Barre who tried to obtain the release of his Communist clients. Squire Evans, however, had set bail at an excessively high \$2,500 for each defendant to ensure that they would spend some time in jail before he released them.⁴⁸

Local Communists and Michelson complained about this treatment. They rightly claimed that "ever since the strike in the Hess-Goldsmith Mill...on April 8th, when the entire night shift, all members of the NTWU, walked out, the officials of the UTWU, the AFL and UMW have done everything possible to break this strike." They added: "The strike of the two Hess-Goldsmith Mills, involving 500 workers, completely shutting down the two mills within three days, would have forced the boss to accept the demands of the strikers within a short period." Michelson wrote an analysis of her ordeal in Wilkes-Barre for the *Daily Worker*, and concluded that "It is clear that from now on, the NTWU will be fought, and be fought bitterly, in the anthracite by the bosses, and the agents of the bosses, the officials of the AFL, the officials of the UTW, and officials of the UMW, by the police, the courts, and the press."⁴⁹

Michelson's more or less accurate assessment summed up the inhibiting effect of the anthracite's anticommunist forces that crippled the NTWU in northeastern Pennsylvania. In mid-April the regional press sounded the alarm about the shocking labor violence in Gastonia in such a way as to blame the Communists for fomenting it.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, on 15 April the Wilkes-Barre Central Labor Union's executive board "endorsed the aims of the newly organized local (AFL-UTWU) textile workers' organization which has recently affiliated with the AFL," It was also reported that "Miss Mary Kelleher, national organizer of the

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

50. *Scranton Times*, 15, 18 April 1929.

UTW, addressed the board meeting and told of the demands that she made yesterday to the operators of the Hess-Goldsmith mills in the city and Plymouth for improved conditions, increased wages, and shorter hours for the workers.”⁵¹

The local press carried the news to area citizens of the AFL-UTWU success at the expense of the Communist-led NTWU. For example, on 19 April the *Wilkes-Barre Record* reported that “Approximately 350 striking employees at the Hess-Goldsmith Co., Inc. silk mills on Waller Street, Wilkes-Barre, and in Plymouth, have been admitted to membership in (the) American Federation of Labor and in (the) Central Labor Union.” It also declared that “Assisting the silk strikers are Miss Kelleher, member of the Plymouth and Nanticoke policy committee of the United Mine Workers of America; William J. Kromelbein, Miles Sweeney, V.T. Kennedy of the UMW; and Thomas Lambert, UMW lobbyist.” Finally, it concluded, “President John Boylan of the UMW also has promised to aid the strikers, and efforts are being made to interest John Kmetz, first vice-president of the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor.” If the UTWU and UMW believed that the textile owners would make concessions to them in order to avoid dealing with the Communists, they were wrong. The textile firms of the region, including those in Luzerne County, fought the AFL organizing drive just as they had battled the NTWU.⁵²

By mid-April antagonistic forces had virtually eliminated NTWU protests, strikes and organizing in Luzerne County. Worse still for the radical-led union, many of its former adherents had defected to the AFL-UTWU. Committed to the major Gastonia battle in the South, the NTWU did not have available resources to reverse its defeat in the anthracite. Nonetheless, Michelson and a handful of supporters continued to organize young textile workers in the face of staunch opposition. For instance, on 25 April the *Daily Worker* published a letter from anthracite worker Edward Gates, “I have lost my job trying to organize a union in the mill called (the) Ferrenbach Silk Mill Co.. I got 17 fellows on the night shift to say they would join the union, but then the boss got wise and he canned me and couple more and the other fellows got scared out of it.”⁵³ On the eve of May Day 1929, Wilkes-Barre

51. *Wilkes-Barre Record*, 16 April 1929.

52. *Ibid.*, 19 April 1929.

53. *Daily Worker*, 25 April 1929.

authorities again arrested Michelson for NTWU organizing activity. They picked her up at the front gate of the Belmont Silk Mill.⁵⁴

In the fall of 1929 local NTWU'ers moved their operation to Scranton and Lackawanna County. In November the NTWU was back in the newspapers of the anthracite as it sought in vain to organize at the Katterman & Mitchell Mill and the West Park Mill.⁵⁵ For the next year progress was slow and unsatisfactory. The Party's District 3 organizer, Irving Keith from Philadelphia, said as much at the end of 1930 when he wrote in the *Daily Worker* that "We shall have to pay much more attention to the textile industry. We must immediately work out a plan of concentrating activity on one mill and establish here a shop nucleus with a committee of the NTWU around it." He also stated, "This task, if properly carried through, will give us a base for carrying on more extensive work for the building of the textile union in the anthracite... For the League (Young Communist League) these textile mills must become an important point for concentrated activity." His sharp criticism, which appeared to ignore the temporary success in the Spring of 1929 in Wilkes-Barre, must have stung Party activists in the region: "One of our biggest mistakes heretofore was the failure to pay even the slightest attention to these mills, or create in even one mill a base for the NTWU and the League."⁵⁶ Without any significant victories in Scranton or elsewhere, small numbers of isolated NTWU supporters hung on until the nationwide 1934 textile strike. They played a supporting role in this major job action. During this strike, at the national level, the NTWU merged with the UTWU. The merged organization, however, failed to take maximum advantage of the 1934 general textile strike and so it was left to the CIO to organize most of the nation's, and the anthracite's, textile workers.⁵⁷

In the Spring of 1937 the Congress of Industrial Organizations turned its attention to the textile industry. Indeed, in 1937 and 1938

54. *Ibid.* and *Scranton Times*, 1 May 1929.

55. *Daily Worker*, 22, 26 November 1929; *Scranton Times*, 23 November 1929 and 7 December 1929.

56. *Daily Worker*, 5 November 1930.

57. John Schinies to William Foster and Earl Browder, 4 August, 1930; "Report of National Women's Department of the TUUL (Trade Union Unity League)-USA," 1930, no author, CPUSA Papers, f. 515; Sterba, "Family, Work and Nation," 3-25; *Daily Worker*, 22 February 1930, 7 March 1930, 6 June 1930, 15, 22 September 1930, 5, 12, 21, 24 November 1930; *Wilkes-Barre Record* 16 July 1930.

local Communists in northeastern Pennsylvania participated in the CIO organizing drive among textile workers, and their efforts were effective. The CIO's Textile Workers' Organizing Committee (TWOC) performed well in the anthracite because of the aid and assistance of the powerful UMW in the tri-district area, and because the local Reds willingly stayed in the background and muted their revolutionary rhetoric. In the late 1930s TWOC used Communist organizers such as Mike Zal-dokis (a veteran of the 1929 Wilkes-Barre silk mill strikes) to organize most of Wilkes-Barre's textile industry.⁵⁸ By the end of the decade, most of the region's textile workers had at last attained adequate union representation.

CONCLUSIONS

This study tells us something about the nature of the Communist Party in the anthracite. At the end of the 1920s the Communist Party in this region was small and weak, as small and weak as it ever was in twenties and thirties. In spite of this weakness, however, the small cadre was dedicated and persevered as best it could. Indeed, it took on a challenging task of aiding in the organization of the NTWU in northeastern Pennsylvania. This was a case where the workers, largely the daughters of the miners, lacked any effective form of union organization to channel their discontent. As events revealed, they found in the Communist-led union a willing and eager voice. The more or less spontaneous 1929 strikes in the Wilkes-Barre silk mills provided the Communists with an opportunity to take over leadership of what were apparently ill-timed and poorly organized spontaneous walkouts. In order to make up for their limited numbers and resources, anthracite Communists concentrated their available support and organization on the task of building the NTWU. The project failed. The strike followed a pattern of commitment, violent opposition, and defeat.

58. *Daily Worker*, 26 June 1936; 27 July 1936; 6 August 1936; 10 September 1936; and 6 November 1936; 11, 13, 21 August 1937; 8 September 1937; *Wilkes-Barre Record*, 5 July 1936; 19 September 1936; 6, 8, May 1937; 2, 3, 4, 10, 11, 13 September 1937; *Scranton Times* 21, 28, May 1936; 7 September 1936; 1, 20, October 1936; 20 March 1937; 8 May 1937; 14, 18, 26, 28 June 1937; 11, 15 September 1937; 19 November 1937; 21 November 1938; 15 May 1939; 7 June 1939. See also, John Dean, "Textile Workers in (Wyoming) Coal Valley Flock to CIO," *Daily Worker*, 20 June 1937 and "TWOC Signs With Biggest Silk Firm," *Daily Worker*, 20 January 1938. For the authoritative account of TWOC, see Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 75-81, 94, 216, 228.

The Communist-led National Textile Workers Union operated in the Pennsylvania anthracite for a few months in 1928-29. In September 1928 the CPUSA set up the NTWU to comply with the official Comintern dual union policy mandated by "Third Period" ideology. Accordingly, the NTWU in the anthracite was supposed to quickly build a revolutionary organization of textile workers strong enough to challenge, defeat, and replace the AFL-UTW. This is not how developments unfolded, however. Indeed, more than anything else, local radicals acting in response to local conditions and events shaped the contours of the Red union's brief history in northeastern Pennsylvania. Regional members and supporters of the NTWU set aside revolutionary rhetoric and generally ignored unrealistic expectations that might come down through Party channels. Moreover, in spite of overwhelming anticommunist forces deeply rooted in the local political culture, they made a good faith effort to build a militant union that addressed a variety of progressive issues including wages, hours, working conditions, and union recognition. In the 1920s, the Communists may not have been wanted by "the powers that be" in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania, but they nevertheless continued to organize and agitate through the era of the Great Depression until the beginning of the Second World War.