

THE ANTHRACITE STRIKE OF 1887-1888

BY HAROLD W. AURAND*

THE idea that the Molly Maguire episode completely destroyed anthracite unionism until 1897 when the United Mine Workers of America entered the fields has scarcely been challenged.¹ Consigning unionism to a twenty-year limbo does little justice to the mine organizers and their unions that followed John Siney, founder of the Workingmen's Benevolent Association (later the Miners and Laborers' Benevolent Association) of 1868-1875.² During the 1880's miners organized two unions whose cooperative efforts not only stifled production in the Lehigh and Schuylkill anthracite regions, but whose struggle illuminates the transformation of the unique social order prevailing in the anthracite regions of Pennsylvania.³

Transportation lines grouped the four anthracite basins into three economic regions: the Schuylkill served by the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad supplying the Philadelphia market; the Lehigh using either the Lehigh Valley or Central of New Jersey railroads to supply both the Philadelphia and New York markets; and the Wyoming-Lackawanna (formerly known as the Luzerne)

*Mr. Aurand is a member of the history department at The Pennsylvania State University, Hazleton Campus.

¹ Several writers agree that organized labor did not exist in the anthracite fields: George G. Korson, *Black Rock: Mining Folklore of the Pennsylvania Dutch* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1960), p. 187; and Joseph Rayback, *A History of American Labor* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964), p. 187. Other historians largely ignore the anthracite region during the period: Andrew Roy, *A History of the Coal Miners of the United States From the Beginning of the Mines to the Close of the Anthracite Strike of 1902* (3rd ed., revised and enlarged; Columbus: J. L. Trauger Printing Co., 1903); and Norman J. Ware, *The Labor Movement in the United States, 1860-1895: A Study in Democracy* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1929).

² See Harold W. Aurand, "The Workingmen's Benevolent Association," *Labor History*, VII (Winter, 1966), 19-34.

³ There are several accounts of the 1887-1888 strike: Victor R. Green, "The Attitude of Slavic Communities to the Unionization of the Anthracite Industry Before 1903," unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1963, pp. 209-266, and Rev. William J. Walsh, *The United Mine Workers of America as an Economic and Social Force in the Anthracite Territory* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1931), pp. 72-76.

finding an outlet to the New York City market over the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad and the Delaware and Hudson Canal.⁴ Before the Civil War industrial organization intensified the divisions created by market orientation. Large corporations dominated the Wyoming-Lackawanna region and exerted considerable influence in Lehigh, but the individual mine owners were preponderant in the Schuylkill region. In 1871, however, the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad destroyed the Schuylkill independents' hegemony by purchasing 70,000 acres of coal land.⁵ Independent operators remained in all regions, but only in the Hazleton area of the Lehigh region did such "petty coal kings" as Ario Pardee, George B. Markle, and Eckley B. Coxe remain supreme.⁶

Economically dependent upon an absentee-owned industry, the anthracite regions' social structure appeared "headless."⁷ Closer examination, however, reveals a group which actively sought to become the society's leading element—the independent businessmen. Living and investing in the area, businessmen could not view with indifference any activity which threatened either their position or their region's future. Realizing that "you can not mine anthracite except where God Almighty put it," the merchants were free to offend industry whenever their interests demanded. During the period of concentration the merchants, believing the corporations were "an infringement upon the rights of individuals," allied with the independent mine operators to oppose the Reading's entrance into coal mining.⁸ Mere words could not dislodge the powerful corporation, and the press called upon labor to "teach the Railroad Company that we [the public] cannot be imposed upon without

⁴ Marvin W. Schlegel, *Ruler of the Reading: The Life of Franklin B. Gowen, 1836-1889* (Harrisburg: Archives Publishing Company of Pennsylvania, 1947), pp. 170-172.

⁵ *Record of the Times* (Wilkes-Barre), January 17, 1872.

⁶ Rowland Berthoff, "The Social Order of the Anthracite Region, 1825-1902," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LXXXIX (July, 1965), 277.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

⁸ George Taylor, *Effect of Incorporated Coal Companies Upon the Anthracite Coal Trade of Pennsylvania* (Pottsville: Benjamin Bannan, 1833), p. 19; *Shenandoah Herald*, June 27, 1872, and November 14, 1872; U. S. House of Representatives, 52nd Cong., 2d Sess., Subcommittee of the Committee of the House on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, *Report and Testimony in regard to the Alleged Combination of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad Company and Other Railroad and Canal Companies and Producers of Coal*, Report 2278, p. 147.

impunity."⁹ Labor, torn by schism and unable to cope with the new economic realities, could do nothing.¹⁰

The demise of the Miners and Laborers' Benevolent Association in 1875 seriously weakened, but did not destroy organized labor. The Knights of Labor organized Scranton miners in 1876 and directed their 1877 strike.¹¹ In June, 1877 Lackawanna miners struck to protest a 10 percent wage cut. The strike lasted three months until some operators promised to rescind the reduction when coal prices permitted and the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western reduced the miners' ton upon which wages were based from 2,700 to 2,600 pounds.¹² Token victories as they were, the results of the 1877 strike demonstrated that trade-unionism still survived. The Knights' gains, however, were soon wiped out by blacklisting and opposition by the Roman Catholic Clergy.¹³ Organized labor no doubt would have died had working conditions and wages improved.

But neither working conditions nor wages improved. The Pennsylvania Bureau of Labor Statistics found little to gloat over in its comparison of working conditions in Pennsylvania and English mines:

In conclusion, we must admit that the advantages enjoyed by the wage workers in Pennsylvania coal mines over their brothers in English collieries do not appear on the surface, though it is possible that further inquiry may yet serve to bring those advantages to light.¹⁴

It was difficult to see the advantages of working in knee deep water, breathing powder fumes, and having coal dust settle on faces and bodies drenched by seepage.¹⁵ But being uncomfortable

⁹ *Shenandoah Herald*, May 30, 1872.

¹⁰ See Aurand, "The Workingmen's Benevolent Association."

¹¹ Ware, *The Labor Movement*, p. 32; Schlegel, *Ruler of the Reading*, 170-172.

¹² *The Scranton Republican*, September 26, 1877.

¹³ *Ibid.*, October 10, 1877; U. S. House of Representatives, 50th Cong., 2d Sess., Select Committee on Existing Labor Troubles in Pennsylvania, *Labor Troubles in the Anthracite Regions of Pennsylvania, 1887-1888*, Report No. 4147, p. 49 (hereafter referred to as *Labor Troubles*); Schlegel, *Ruler of the Reading*, pp. 174-175.

¹⁴ Pennsylvania Secretary of Internal Affairs, *Report, 1884*, Part III, *Industrial Statistics* (Harrisburg, 1884), p. 7.

¹⁵ E. P. Gibbons, "The Miners of Scranton, Pennsylvania," *Harpers New Monthly Magazine*, LV (November, 1877), 918.

was only a minor irritation when compared with the terrors of working underground. Despite mine safety laws, the anthracite mines claimed 2,703 lives in the decade 1876-1887.¹⁶ Miners' asthma awaited many who escaped the mines unscathed.

The returns on these risks were small. Despite its destruction, the Miners and Laborers' Benevolent Association showed how the basis system failed to benefit the miners. The basis system was a sliding wage scale based on the price of coal. A base price and base wages were agreed upon, and as coal rose above or fell below the base wages would be increased or decreased.¹⁷ Under the coal pool, which kept prices fairly steady, the basis tumbled until it reached a trough of 62 percent below the record high of 1869.¹⁸ Costs of powder, oil, and other mining supplies, which the miners paid for, bit deeply into the already low wages. Operators profited from \$1.50 to \$1.60 per keg of powder and from 45 cents to 50 cents per gallon of oil.¹⁹

Paternalism cut deeper into the miners' pay. Ownership of surface land made mine operators lords as well as employers:

Everything in the region belongs to the operators and must be subject to their autocratic domination. They are the lords of the domain and no man is allowed to encroach on their territory, even the Jew peddler is not allowed to expose his wares within their borders.²⁰

Most operators profited from company housing, but small operators developed a complete system of paternalism. Independent mine owners kept stores, doctors, and, in some cases, priests, and deducted charges for these services from the miner's paycheck.²¹ It was common for a miner to find a month's labor resulted in a debt; the *New York World* published the monthly earnings of a family with three members working in the mines:²²

¹⁶ Pennsylvania Mine Inspectors, *Mine Inspectors' Reports, 1901* (Harrisburg, 1901), 42.

¹⁷ *New York Daily Tribune*, September 21, 1887.

¹⁸ Christopher Evans, *History of the United Mine Workers of America from the Year 1860 to 1890* (Indianapolis: United Mine Workers of America, 1914), p. 36.

¹⁹ *Daily Republican* (Pottsville), October 26, 1887.

²⁰ *The Plain Speaker* (Hazleton), January 25, 1888.

²¹ *Labor Troubles*, pp. 43, 47-49, 163, 488.

²² Quoted by *Colliery Engineer*, August, 1887.

Earnings		
By Boy (253 hours)		\$17.45
By Boy (236 hours)		18.57
By Man (249 hours)		29.38
		65.40
Charges		
To Balance (debt)	\$61.40	
To Team	.75	
To Rent (3 rooms)	2.50	
To Coal	1.50	66.16
		.75
Balance (debt)		47.46
		\$48.21

Unsteady work added to the mine-worker's burden of low wages, the cost of mining supplies, and paternalism. Anthracite, mainly a domestic fuel, suffered from seasonal variation. The coal pool compounded normal seasonal variation by using three-quarters and half time work to keep production within demand. During the decade 1878-1887, the mines never worked more than eight months out of the year.²³ Miners could understand George Gowan's predicament and ask his question:

My wife needs medicine. She needs nourishing food, but I have not the common nessesaries [*sic*] of life to give her. My God what am I to do?²⁴

Cooperative not individual action held the answer. Numerous small (one to four collieries) strikes occurred during the period 1879-1885. Most strikes concerned wages, but the miners also struck to protest contracts authorizing companies to pay any bill against a miner when presented and to enforce a demand that the check weighman be permitted to examine the company's books. Usually unsuccessful, and when successful unable to extend victory beyond the immediate locale, the strikes reaffirmed the need

²³ *Labor Troubles*, lxiv.

²⁴ George M. Gowan to Samuel Sloan, March 15, 1879, Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Papers, Lackawanna Historical Society.

for organization.²⁵ In 1882 Wyoming-Lackawanna miners gathered at Hyde Park to discuss mutual problems, but operators easily destroyed the infant movement by posting concessions.²⁶ Two years later the Schuylkill miners organized a more durable union—the Miners and Laborers' Amalgamated Association.²⁷

Loosely organized by an Executive Board composed of one delegate from each branch and connected with bituminous miners through a state convention, the Amalgamated recruited English, Welsh, and German miners in the Schuylkill and Lehigh regions. Irish miners, however, were more at home in the resurgent and competing Knights of Labor.²⁸ Overcoming ethnic animosities, the two unions abandoned competition in 1885 and formed a joint committee to coordinate action.²⁹ The joint committee received its supreme test in the 1887-1888 strike.

In August, 1887 the Amalgamated's executive board demanded a 15 percent basis increase.³⁰ The joint committee ratified the executive board's action by calling a strike for September 10 against any operator who refused to either grant the demand or negotiate.³¹

Reaction to the call for a strike varied according to the region. The poorly organized Wyoming-Lackawanna region did not obey the call and the Schuylkill region largely evaded the strike when the bankrupt, yet dominant Philadelphia and Reading companies opened last minute negotiations. Negotiations produced a compromise—an 8 percent increase until January 1, 1888 pending settlement in other areas.³² Most Schuylkill independent mine owners followed the Reading's lead.³³

²⁵ Pennsylvania Secretary of Internal Affairs, *Report, 1887, Part III, Industrial Statistics* (Harrisburg, 1887), pp. 26-29, 34-35, 42-43; *The Scranton Republican*, December 4, 1879.

²⁶ Pennsylvania Secretary of Internal Affairs, *Report, 1881-1882, Part III, Industrial Statistics* (Harrisburg, 1882), pp. 145-146.

²⁷ Peter Roberts, *The Anthracite Coal Industry: A Study of the Economic Conditions and Relations of the Co-operative Forces in the Development of the Anthracite Industry of Pennsylvania* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1901), pp. 182-183.

²⁸ *Daily Republican*, January 13, 1888.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, November 26, 1885.

³⁰ *Public Ledger and Daily Transcript* (Philadelphia), September 1, 1887; *Labor Troubles*, p. 45.

³¹ *Public Ledger and Daily Transcript*, September 7, 1887.

³² *Daily Republican*, September 12, 1887.

³³ There was a small strike in the Shamokin area in which the Mineral Mining Company refused to recognize the union. *New York Daily Tribune*, November 5, 1887.

The Lehigh independents, however, led the large corporations in rejecting labor's offer.³⁴ Ario Pardee, Sr., spokesman for the Hazleton independent operators, bluntly stated:

Our position always has been and is now that we are unwilling to treat with anyone outside our employ, who knows nothing of our business and who is no way connected with us, and we are just as firm in that position as we ever have been.³⁵

Some 20,000 miners tested the operators' firmness by walking out.³⁶

Mine operators adopted two strikebreaking strategies—reopening and starvation. Operators tried wooing immigrant miners back to work, but found most Slavs and Italians solidly behind the strike.³⁷ Nonmining immigrants appeared in the Lehigh region, but their lack of skill made them dubious assets.³⁸ In December, rumors circulated that operators were importing Belgian miners. The rumors created an avalanche of protest:

The talk of the Lehigh operators importing Belgians to operate their mines is the merest subterfuge. Such action would not only be a violation of law but would be fruitful of consequences which would consign its projectors to ignominy such as would make them wish they themselves had gone to Belgium instead of bringing Belgium to the anthracite coal regions of Pennsylvania. Can it be possible that these operators are becoming demented to talk such stuff.³⁹

In Washington, Congressman Charles N. Brunn (Republican-Greenbacker) supported his constituents' interests by offering a resolution requesting the president to enforce the immigration act

³⁴ Evidence of independent leadership can be seen in the behavior of the Lehigh Valley Coal Company. The Lehigh Valley agreed to the Reading compromise in the Schuylkill region, but refused to grant the increase in the Lehigh region. *Daily Republican*, September 14, 1887; *Wilkes-Barre Telephone*, September 24, 1887.

³⁵ *Daily Republican*, September 16, 1887.

³⁶ The Lehigh strike involved forty collieries around Hazleton, sixteen in Panther Valley, and five around Shenandoah. *Evening Chronicle* (Pottsville), October 18, 1887.

³⁷ *The Plain Speaker*, January 9, 1888; *Shamokin Herald*, September 16, 1887.

³⁸ *The Plain Speaker*, September 13, 1887; *Daily Republican*, September 13, 1887.

³⁹ *Daily Republican*, December 2, 1887.

of 1885.⁴⁰ The Treasury Department responded by instructing its Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore customs collectors to detain any Belgian miners entering their ports. The scare subsided when the Philadelphia collector detained twelve Belgian miners.⁴¹ Mine owners even attempted to buy off the striking miners and destroy their unions. Higher coal prices enabled operators to offer a 4.5 percent increase, but they refused to recognize the unions or their demands. The miners spurned what they felt to be a bribe.⁴²

Unable to reopen, capital waited until the men's necessities forced them back. The "masters of the domain" began evicting tenants from company housing, but labor staved them off with a temporary restraining injunction.⁴³ Temporarily assured of shelter, the miners faced a greater threat in starvation. Company stores denied credit.⁴⁴ Mine owners withheld wages due by deducting advance rents or refusing to pay in cash.⁴⁵ Local independent operators exerted their influence to deprive miners of temporary jobs.⁴⁶ Strikers reacted by singing:

In looking o'er the papers now,
 A funny thing appears,
 Where Eckley Coxe and Pa dee say
 They'll stand for twenty years,
 If God should call us miners off,
 We'll have children then alive,
 Who will follow in our footsteps
 Keep the strike for thirty-five.⁴⁷

Two factors explain how the miners withstood the starvation campaign. Many escaped its effects by finding work in the Schuylkill or Wyoming-Lackawanna regions or leaving the anthracite

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, December 21, 1887.

⁴¹ *Public Ledger and Daily Transcript*, December 23, 1887; *The Plain Speaker*, December 23, 26, 1887.

⁴² *The Record of the Times* (Wilkes-Barre), November 11, 1887; *New York Daily Tribune*, November 11, 1887. In Shamokin, the Mineral Mining Company offered its men a 10 percent increase with the same result. *New York Daily Tribune*, November 5, 1887; *Public Ledger and Daily Transcript*, November 5, 1887.

⁴³ *The Plain Speaker*, November 16, 1887; *Daily Republican*, September 13, 1887.

⁴⁴ *Daily Republican*, September 14, 21, 1887.

⁴⁵ *The Plain Speaker*, September 16, 17, October 1, 1887.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, November 3, 1887.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, December 17, 1887. "Pa dee" is a play on Ario Pardee's name.

fields. Both the Schuylkill and Lackawanna regions, operating full time, found the strikers to be a willing pool of skilled manpower; in the Schuylkill region the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company hired 50 Lehigh miners and the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western in the Lackawanna region found room for 400 strikers.⁴⁸ Strikers also sought work in the cities or in the west; some immigrants, whose savings permitted, returned to the homeland for the strike's duration.⁴⁹

Strikers who did not join in the exodus received outside support. Organized labor raised relief funds. The Knights of Labor's Executive Board issued a "red circular" accompanied by Terence V. Powderly's personal appeal for donations.⁵⁰ District and local assemblies responded generously; the Reading railroad workers donated a day's wages and the Schuylkill miners contributed 5 percent of their pay.⁵¹

Businessmen supplemented organized labor's support. Local editors viewed the strike as an issue upon which they had to take a stand:

For years have the intelligent people of this region been looking upon this picture of despair, but they like the toilers have been deaf, dumb and blind until now. The time has come, however, when silence ceases to be a virtue, and we believe that if the strikers will stand united they may be successful.⁵²

Becoming vocal, the local fourth estate chastized the operators:

The tactics of the petty nabobs of Lehigh are more like the antics of the old time Russian despots in dealing with their serfs, than the conduct of American employers towards American workingmen.⁵³

⁴⁸ *New York Daily Tribune*, October 4, 1887; *Wilkes-Barre Telephone*, February 18, 1888.

⁴⁹ *New York Daily Tribune*, September 17, 1887; *The Plain Speaker*, March 8, 1888. The miners' ability to migrate should not imply high wages. The immigrants' lower standard of living gave them a greater propensity to save. Many native Americans "tramped" out of the region; forty Schuylkill region miners, fleeing their strike, were stranded in Mexico until the citizens of Pottsville took up a purse to pay their transportation back. *The Plain Speaker*, March 8, 1888.

⁵⁰ *New York Daily Tribune*, November 3, 1887; *Daily Republican*, November 3, 1887; *Evening Chronicle*, November 4, 1887.

⁵¹ *Evening Chronicle*, October 25, 1887; *Labor Troubles*, pp. cii, lxxx, 46.

⁵² *The Plain Speaker*, September 14, 1887.

⁵³ (Scranton) *Truth* quoted by *The Plain Speaker*, October 5, 1887.

It [the strike] points out very clearly that public opinion is moulded in favor of the miners in this struggle of might against right; the defiant stand taken by operators against what is only fair and just, has awakened the American people to the fact that a few millionaires have combined to gather [*sic*] to defeat the mining class of people in their endeavors to get a fair compensation for a fair days [*sic*] labor.⁵⁴

Editors not only defended the miners' cause, they furthered it by pointing out that the philanthropy of local independent operators benefited other areas and the "petty coal kings" kept company stores which were a "drawback to legitimate business houses."⁵⁵

Local businessmen understandably rallied to labor's banner. By issuing orders drawn on local merchants rather than opening their own stores, the strikers astutely distributed the relief funds.⁵⁶ Hazleton merchants subscribed to *The Plain Speaker's* relief fund.⁵⁷ The businessmen of the Schuylkill region assisted the miners in their fight against "autocrats who do not possess the ordinary instincts of good Christians nor respectful citizens" by organizing themselves as financial auxiliaries to the unions.⁵⁸ Other members of the anthracite regions' "middle class" also supported the strikers. Reverend T. M. Bateman, pastor of the Hazleton Primitive Methodist Church, gave a series of ten lectures to raise money for the striking miners' Christmas dinner and Roman Catholic priests refused to exert their influence against the strike.⁵⁹ Even civil authorities supported the strike by detaining would-be strikebreakers for "non-payment of taxes."⁶⁰

Merchants also took a more active role in the strike. Labor believed the Lehigh Valley Railroad was aiding the more pertinacious independents by threatening wavering operators with rate in-

⁵⁴ *Daily Republican*, December 6, 1887.

⁵⁵ *The Plain Speaker*, September 26, December 3, 1887.

⁵⁶ *Evening Chronicle*, October 4, 1887.

⁵⁷ *The Plain Speaker*, October 28, December 8, 1887.

⁵⁸ *Public Ledger and Daily Transcript*, October 29, 1887; *The Tribune* (Chicago), December 10, 1887; *The Herald* (Shenandoah), November 5, 1887; *Tamaqua Courier*, November 12, 1887; *Daily Republican*, November 1, 1887.

⁵⁹ *Tamaqua Courier*, December 10, 1887; *The Plain Speaker*, September 20, 1887.

⁶⁰ *The Plain Speaker*, January 11, 1888.

creases.⁶¹ Spurred by threats of being boycotted themselves, local merchants joined labor's boycotting attack against the Lehigh Valley.⁶² Attention, however, soon switched to the Reading.

The Reading's decision to negotiate in September created excellent labor relations which the company cultivated by hiring Lehigh strikers and selling excursion tickets to the Philadelphia Academy of Music's benefit for the striking Lehigh miners.⁶³ But as the strike continued labor began to question the good intentions of the railroad. The Reading's greatly increased production created suspicions that it was helping the Lehigh operators meet their contracts.⁶⁴ Many miners also feared that the Reading had agreed to enter the battle when its temporary agreement with the unions pending settlement in other areas expired.⁶⁵

A strike on the Reading Railroad substantiated these suspicions. The strike occurred when the Reading dismissed Port Richmond Knights of Labor who refused to deliver a carload of flour to the Philadelphia Grain Elevator Company.⁶⁶ Determined that "the company will hereafter operate its own road if it takes a regiment of military at every point," the Reading fired and blacklisted the striking Knights; even Operator Kane, who had lost a leg in railroad service, was caught in the sweep.⁶⁷ The Reading enjoyed the services of a valuable ally in its fight against the Knights; a spokesman for the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers gloated:

The Knights are knocked out, and the Brotherhood had a hand in doing it. We are pledged to stand by the Company and we have a man ready at any moment to take charge of every engine on the entire system.⁶⁸

The company's action aroused fear as well as anger among the Schuylkill miners. In December they requested a continuation of

⁶¹ In the 1875 "Long Strike" the Lehigh Valley kept independents in line by raising its rates from \$2.00 to \$5.00 a ton. *Daily Republican*, September 14, 1887.

⁶² *The Plain Speaker*, November 15, 1887.

⁶³ *Daily Republican*, November 21, 1887.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, November 18, 1887.

⁶⁵ *The Plain Speaker*, December 31, 1887.

⁶⁶ *Labor Troubles*, pp. 18-19 and 33.

⁶⁷ *Daily Republican*, December 24, 27, 1887.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, December 28, 1887. Many Knights sought revenge by working for the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad when the B.L.E. struck that line in 1888. *The Tribune* (Chicago), February 29, 1888.

the 8 percent increase due to expire on January 1, 1888. Arguing that coal prices would not permit an extension, Austin Corbin, the Reading's president, refused to negotiate and his miners walked out on January 3, 1888.⁶⁹ Independent operators were willing to grant the continuation to avert a strike, but ran afoul of the Reading's railroad strike when their miners refused to dig coal which would be hauled by the Reading.⁷⁰ The Schuylkill strike was a composite of two strikes aimed at the Reading.

Proclaiming that the Reading drove "the individual coal operators out of business," labor began a legal campaign to separate the Railroad from its coal mining industry.⁷¹ Citing Pennsylvania's 1874 Constitution which prohibited railroads from owning mining property, labor, supported by the Constitutional Defense Association, petitioned state authorities to initiate *quo warranto* proceedings against the Reading.⁷² State authorities, however, could do little since the Reading enjoyed *ex post facto* protection.⁷³

Frustrated at the state level, labor turned to Washington. In Washington the unions petitioned the House of Representatives to investigate the Reading. The petition illuminated intraparty strife when Samuel J. Randall, Pennsylvania's Democratic leader, sought to extend the investigation's scope to embarrass his chief rival, William L. Scott, who owned coal mines in the Shamokin area, and Eckley B. Coxe, who, rumors held, was being considered as a candidate for state chairman by anti-Randall forces.⁷⁴ The political maneuvers resulted in an authorization to investigate the anthracite labor troubles. Under Chairman George D. Tillman, "Pitchfork Ben's" brother, the investigating committee discovered a pool of anthracite operators regulating production and prices, a conspiracy to destroy labor unions, and suggested legislation divorcing railroads from mining.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ *Public Ledger and Daily Transcript*, December 15, 1887.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, January 6, 1888; *Evening Chronicle*, January 10, 1888.

⁷¹ *Daily Republican*, January 15, 1888.

⁷² *Ibid.*, January 16, 1888; *Public Ledger and Daily Transcript*, January 20, 1888; *Evening Chronicle*, February 3, 1888.

⁷³ The Reading began mining in 1871.

⁷⁴ *New York Daily Tribune*, February 12, 1888; *The Record of the Times*, January 13, 1888.

⁷⁵ *Labor Troubles*, vii, xx-xxvi. It is interesting to note that two members of the committee, John A. Anderson and William J. Stone, earned considerable reputations as exponents of railroad regulation during their Congressional careers.

The congressional investigation was a hollow victory: Congress passed no legislation and the miners succumbed to overwhelming power. Before the strike began, the Reading attempted to overawe the miners by increasing its Coal and Iron Police force.⁷⁶ When the strike began, the company adopted the Lehigh operator's strike-breaking tactics. It shipped in 260 Italian immigrants to reopen its Mahanoy City colliery and evicted its Big Mountain colliery strikers.⁷⁷ Lacking company stores, the Reading could not deny credit, but it did add to the strikers' discomfort by refusing to sell coal in the region during the strike.⁷⁸ Pressure only affirmed the miners' faith in unionism. Fathers denounced sons who broke the strike and children refused to share their schoolbooks with "scabs."⁷⁹ But management realized that men cannot live by faith alone.⁸⁰

The Schuylkill strikers were unsuccessful in their efforts to obtain adequate relief funds. Organized labor gave generous but not ample aid.⁸¹ Local business elements, however, unlike those in the Lehigh region, refused to support the strike. Although metropolitan editors believed that the strike was "provoked by rank injustice," local publishers denounced the strike and lectured the congressional committee on the moral differences between a pool formed to regulate an industry suffering from overproduction and one formed for speculative purposes.⁸² Merchants anxious to end the strike urged Corbin to make minor concessions, but labor would not settle for less than a contract extension and Corbin refused to negotiate.⁸³ Rebuffed by both capital and labor, local business turned on labor. Storekeepers wrote public letters denouncing the strike and its leaders and added force to their words by denying credit.⁸⁴ No Protestant minister stepped forward

⁷⁶ *Daily Republican*, December 31, 1887.

⁷⁷ *The Tribune*, January 8, 1888; *Public Ledger and Daily Transcript*, February 16, 1888; *The Record of the Times*, January 13, 1888.

⁷⁸ *Daily Republican*, January 18, 1888.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, January 16, February 1, 1888.

⁸⁰ *Labor Troubles*, p. 174.

⁸¹ *Evening Chronicle*, February 7, 1888; *New York Daily Tribune*, January 30, 1888.

⁸² *New York World* quoted by *Evening Chronicle*, January 9, 1888; *Evening Chronicle*, February 11, 1888; *Record of the Times*, January 13, 1888; *The Herald*, February 18, 1888.

⁸³ *The Herald*, January 14, 1888; *The Plain Speaker*, January 16, 1888; *Evening Chronicle*, January 19, 1888.

⁸⁴ *The Plain Speaker*, January 25, 1888.

to aid the strikers and the Catholic clergy denounced the unions and their strikes.⁸⁵

Loss of public support and a growing disenchantment within the ranks seriously weakened the Schuylkill strike.⁸⁶ The crucial blow fell at Shenandoah. In late January the manager of the William Penn colliery at Shenandoah posted notices that he would reopen in February.⁸⁷ Beaten and sick at heart, the men could hold out no longer. Despite a small riot in which three were wounded, the miners returned to work and wholesale desertions followed the reopening of the William Penn.⁸⁸

With its united front crumbling, labor sought peace. W. T. Lewis, Master Workman of the Miners' National Assembly, ordered the Knights of Labor back to work on February 17.⁸⁹ The Amalgamated, however, held out six days longer and returned with a face-saving reduction in the cost of mining supplies.⁹⁰ The victorious Corbin displayed his personal magnanimity by donating \$20,000 for the relief of the destitute miners.⁹¹ Discouraged by the Schuylkill example and by Lackawanna operators systematically discharging those hired earlier in the strike, the Lehigh strikers forgot their promise to hold out for thirty-five years and began returning to work in late February.⁹² The unions capitulated on March 12.⁹³ The defeated miners, however, did not receive charity from the victorious operators in the Lehigh region :

Dont [*sic*] suppose any of our men made themselves particularly obnoxious during the strike; if they did you can gradually, without causing comment, weed them out after work is resumed.⁹⁴

While the 1887-1888 anthracite strike failed, it demonstrated

⁸⁵ *Daily Republican*, January 18, 1888.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, February 6, 1888; *Evening Chronicle*, January 19, 1888.

⁸⁷ *The Plain Speaker*, January 31, 1888; *New York Daily Tribune*, January 29, 1888.

⁸⁸ *Daily Republican*, February 4, 5, 1888.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, February 29, 1888.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, February 29, 1888; *Shamokin Herald*, February 23, 1888. The Shamokin strike ended in late January. *Public Ledger and Daily Transcript*, January 27, 1888.

⁹¹ *New York Daily Tribune*, February 19, 1888.

⁹² *Tamaqua Courier*, February 18, 1888; *The Plain Speaker*, March 6, 1888.

⁹³ *The Plain Speaker*, March 12, 1888.

⁹⁴ H. R. Maxwell to J. I. Hollenbeck, March 9, 1887, Lehigh-Wilkes-Barre Coal Company Papers, Wyoming Geological and Historical Society.

that organized labor did indeed exist in the Pennsylvania hard-coal region. The strike was actually a composite of three strikes: the Lehigh region strike which sought both union recognition and a pay increase; the Reading coal strike for a continuation of an 8 percent wage increase granted in September, 1887; and the Schuylkill strike in sympathy for the blacklisted Reading railroaders. Although the strike conducted by the joint efforts of the Knights of Labor and the Miners and Laborers' Amalgamated Association revealed a remarkable degree of support from local business, cooperation between unions, and solidarity among miners, it required even more outside support and above all unity of purpose in order to achieve victory. The lack of unity that weakened labor's cause could not be blamed on the "new immigrants." One of the most heartening lessons the strike taught labor leaders was that they had sadly misjudged these people—they could be depended upon.⁹⁵ On the other hand, labor also learned that it could beat a starvation campaign only if it received ample outside support for it could not depend upon local businessmen.

But why should businessmen support the strikers in one area and oppose them in a second? One may explain the Schuylkill businessmen's erratic behavior in terms of self-interest—while Lehigh was idle, Schuylkill worked full time. But this argument fails to account for the Lehigh merchants' support of the Lehigh strike. The difficulty rests in correctly assessing the objectives of local businessmen; merchants were not supporting labor as much as they were attacking "the petty nabobs"—the independent mine operators.

The riddle of mercantile inconsistency can be explained by their unyielding hatred of the smaller independent "coal baron" and by the transformation of their attitude—from hostility to friendship—toward the large scale corporation. Business interests had much to gain from the independents' destruction. The great Lehigh and Schuylkill corporations did not keep stores, but the smaller individual operators were infamous for their company stores. Though some individual operators were great philanthropists and the corporations were not famous for patronizing the arts, merchants and editors preferred no philanthropy to that which benefited other areas. Local independent operators dominated the community, but

⁹⁵ *Daily Republican*, December 14, 1887.

the large corporation, based in New York or Philadelphia and having more cosmopolitan interests and less desire to intervene in local affairs, was more tolerant of nonmining influence.⁹⁶ Finally, the anthracite regions needed industrial stability which only the large corporation, operating through a pool, seemed able to provide.

Local businessmen wished to destroy the "petty coal kings" not to achieve steady work at higher wages for miners. Seen in this light, business support becomes explainable. The Lehigh merchants were willing to forego a temporary loss of revenue if it would undermine the local independent operators' position. The Schuylkill merchants could enjoy a larger income at the same time that they were striking a blow against the individual mine owners by supporting the Lehigh strike. The Schuylkill strikes, however, aimed at the Reading would result at best in a drop in sales and at worst would destroy the Reading's hegemony and hand the region back to the independent mine operator. Having emerged from receivership on January 1, 1888, the Reading to some appeared particularly vulnerable to labor's economic threat and the campaign to divorce the Railroad from its mining subsidiary only increased apprehensions. It is not surprising that with such alternatives looming before them Schuylkill merchants refused to support the strike in their region. Local business response to the 1887-1888 strike reflected a changed social order. Businessmen no longer feared the corporation, but viewed it as a liberator from the "autocratic domination" of the "petty coal kings."⁹⁷

In seeking their liberation local businessmen acted with the smug assurance of a prosperous future. The destruction of the independent mine operators carried only the promise of their replacement by a large scale corporation not the threat of economic ruin. The region's geological monopoly gave local businessmen a freedom of action seldom granted in a "one industry" economy. To a pre-

⁹⁶ See Robert O. Schulze, "The Role of Economic Dominants in Community Structure," *American Sociological Review*, XXIII (February, 1958), 3-9. Berthoff, "The Social Order of the Anthracite Region," p. 286.

⁹⁷ "In general," a contemporary observed, "it may be said that the control of the anthracite coal business by the great corporations, rather than by individual operators, is an undoubted benefit, not only to all the parties in direct interest, but to commerce and society as a whole. The only danger to be feared is from an abuse of the great powers to which these companies have attained; a danger which, thus far, has not seriously menaced the community." Homer Green, *Coal and the Coal Mines* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1889), p. 74.

cocious few, however, the strike exposed serious flaws in the local merchants' seemingly impregnable position:

If the businessmen and people of this region would learn a lesson from the present strike they will in the future take steps in the direction of locating other industries in their midst from which they can depend upon for maintenance, instead of being dependent entirely and alone upon the coal industry.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ *The Plain Speaker*, January 30, 1888.