The National Miners Union: Communists and Miners in the Pennsylvania Anthracite, 1928–1931

During the early years of the Great Depression a small but determined Communist movement in the Pennsylvania anthracite (as the hard coal region was called), organized a militant coal diggers’ organization, the National Miners Union (NMU), to challenge the dominance of the area’s coal operators, to contest the ascendancy of the United Mine Workers of America (UMW), and to marshal working-class militancy under its leadership.¹ This Red miners’ union in the anthracite was an important labor organization that historians have largely overlooked. The Communist-led NMU operated in the hard coal region from 1928 to 1931.

¹ There are no designated collections of NMU papers, correspondence, or local union records in any American labor archives. While thinly scattered NMU materials can be found in various holdings such as the UMW Papers (Penn State University) and the Powers Hapgood Papers (University of Indiana), the largest number of NMU-related primary source items can be found in the newly opened archives of the former Soviet Union. The holdings of the Russian Center for the 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 in modern Russia, chiefly in the Soviet period. Research for this article concentrated on one deposit, fond 515, documents of the U.S. Communist Party. The most helpful guide to understanding and using RTsKhIDNI is J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Namov, eds., Research Guide to the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Contemporary History (Pittsburgh, 1992). For the few studies that deal specifically with the NMU, see Theodore Draper, “Communists and Miners, 1928–1933,” Dissent 19 (1972), 371–92; and Linda Nyden, “Black Miners in Western Pennsylvania, 1925–1931: The National Miners Union and the United Mine Workers of America,” Science and Society 41 (1977), 78–87. For the American Communist Party’s view of the NMU, see Arne Swabeck, “The National Miners’ Union: A New Conception of Unionism,” The Communist, Oct. 1928, 622–27. Also relevant is, Ralph Stone, “National Miners Union,” in The Encyclopedia of the American Left, ed. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas (Urbana, Ill., 1992), 560.

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It drew membership and support from an identifiable segment of the working class: namely, recent eastern and southern European immigrants—especially Italians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Poles—who possessed the least economic security of any laboring groups in the area. This short-lived Red upstart survived for about three years, reaching its peak in the summer of 1930 when it claimed some 500 members in about twenty locals. These figures are admittedly small. However, there were undoubtedly thousands of dissatisfied miners who suffered enough in the coal pits to sympathize with the NMU as a militant group that fearlessly stood up to the coal operators, the police, judges, and, most important, to UMW power.

Mapping a new direction in trade unionism, the American Communist Party (CPUSA) established the National Miners Union in Pittsburgh in September 1928. Official Communist Party policy between 1928 and 1935, based on the ultra-left militancy of “Third Period” ideology, called for the creation of insurrectionary trade unions to hasten the supposed imminent demise of capitalism. Communists everywhere were required to organize separate, radical unions that would engage American Federation of Labor (AFL) organizations in sanguinary conflicts in order to destroy and replace them. Ignoring the party line, however, anthracite Reds and NMU activists set essentially nonrevolutionary goals. They understood the folly of trying to “smash” or replace the UMW. Acting realistically, they were more interested in the immediate needs of the workers—higher wages, shorter hours, improved working conditions, and union recognition—than with revolt or sedition. They sometimes paid lip service to revolutionary objectives, but ignored them in practice. This deliberate avoidance of rebellious aims, however, made no difference to hostile employers, the UMW, or to other authorities who took stern measures to suppress the NMU and its radical leaders. Time and again anticommunist forces came down hard on the Red union. Obstinate employers, the criminal justice system, the press, and the mainstream labor movement combined their efforts in an attempt to destroy the Communist-led group.

To be sure, the NMU encountered extraordinary difficulties that severely limited its effectiveness. Predictably, it failed to sign up even a sizable minority of anthracite miners. By the late 1920s most of the region’s coal diggers consisted of native-born workers who were reluctant to associate with an openly Communist-led organization. The foreign-born miners who made up most of the NMU’s rank and file were, for the most part, isolated and sectarian. Overall, of course, the NMU attracted relatively few partisans and was largely unsuccessful in its attempt to influence non-Communist UMW insurgents. Outside the region, however, the NMU did enjoy some success. For example, in 1931, Harlan County, Kentucky, Communists gained control of a major on-going strike in a region where the UMW was relatively weak. Likewise, in western Pennsylvania the NMU achieved some notable gains because it recruited a large number of exploited, defiant African American miners. In the anthracite, the NMU failed to win control of any major strikes: it faced a strong UMW presence, and there were few blacks on hand to bolster its militancy.

In spite of these difficulties, the NMU garnered a great deal of public attention as it vehemently protested against the region’s ensconced authorities. This widespread public attention undeniably certified the NMU as a symbol of resistance. Furthermore, it had strong support in the anthracite in the ranks of Communist miners. This small cadre that included radical miners such as Charles (Sam) Licata, Joe Dougher, George Dziengielewski, Ed Falkowski, Mike Zaldokis, Anthony Ricci, and others, committed itself to the NMU with much devotion and passion.

Party leaders themselves in 1931 acted to end the union’s existence when it failed to gain control of a key coal strike against the region’s largest mining concern, the Glen Alden Company. In fact, Communist subdistrict organizer Steve Nelson reported that he and other officials had to call on national leaders to visit the area to persuade many diehard local NMU members to re-enter the UMW and “bore within.” Based on their disappointing experiences with the regional NMU, anthracite Communists in the 1930s adopted a labor strategy that categorically opposed dual unions in the coal industry. In the mid-thirties a violent labor war erupted between the UMW and a widely supported dual union, the United Anthracite Miners of Pennsylvania (UAMP). Communists adopted the position that

the UAMP insurgents should rejoin the UMW and unite with other “progressive” rank-and-file forces to achieve the goals of a less corrupt, more democratic miners’ union.

The NMU’s life-history reveals much about the dynamics of Communist activism in the anthracite. It also provides information relating to the debate about the accuracy of historical representations of American Communists. 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.

Over the last two decades, historians of American Communism have generally divided themselves into two camps. One group, led by political scientist Harvey Klehr and Library of Congress historian John Earl Haynes, tends to see American Communists as supervised and sustained principally by the Soviet Union and the Communist International (Comintern). Klehr and Haynes plunged headlong into the recently opened Russian archives and found what they consider indisputable evidence that United States Reds were essentially covert agents of a threatening foreign government. An assortment of other scholars, however, argues that social and regional histories of American radicalism suggest a different conclusion. According to this school of thought, Communists in various cities and industries, and from differing backgrounds and ethnic groups, often joined the Marxist-Leninist movement because of idealistic impulses to fight local battles against exploitation, union corruption, and social problems. Historian Edward Johanningsmeier, biographer of Communist chieftain William Foster, sums up this viewpoint: “although American Communism was connected in complex ways to Soviet ideology and politics, its impetus, motivation, and accomplishments were derived mostly from American sources.”


The following account steers a course between the two opposing interpretative positions. It takes note that the CPUSA did possess an authoritarian internal structure and decision-making process that required discipline from its members. On the other hand, the leadership often displayed tolerance of Communist organizers who, in the field, sometimes ignored or even defied official policy. Moreover, in light of the latter perspective, the deepest origins of the NMU in the Pennsylvania anthracite may be found more in the region's indigenous labor history and labor conditions than the machinations of the distant Comintern. Working-class militancy in the anthracite frequently took the form of dual union challenges to existing organizations.\textsuperscript{6} In the 1920s and the early 1930s the Communists' strategy simply coincided with this native, homegrown predilection.\textsuperscript{7} Furthermore, workers in the hard coal industry lay claim to a long heritage of strikes and walkouts dating from the middle of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{8}


\textsuperscript{7} The best historiographical analysis of anthracite labor history that suggests this perspective is Michael Kozura, \textit{"We Stood Our Ground: Anthracite Miners and the Expropriation of Corporate Property, 1930–1941,"} in \textit{We Are All Leaders: The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s}, ed. Staughton Lynd (Urbana, Ill., 1996), 199–237.

The NMU’s brief history in the anthracite is complex. It was a reference point for many groups. Not surprisingly, the United Mine Workers viewed the NMU as the hated challenge of the most troublesome sort of dual unionism because of its Communist association. To coal operators it embodied the kind of militant unionism that threatened the legitimacy of their economic dominance; and to the middle class it stood for the subversive danger of an un-American, alien ideology. To some regional Communists the new miners’ union signified the revolutionary hope for their Marxist vision of the future, but for most Reds, and for most radical miners as well, it meant a militant alternative to the languid UMW. Finally, the rise and fall of the NMU reveals much about the history of the Communist movement in the anthracite during the first half of the twentieth century.

Chroniclers of America’s radical past have usually overlooked Communist enterprises among northeastern Pennsylvania’s workers—coal miners, textile laborers, and the like—during the first half of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, in the virulently anticommunist environment of the anthracite, relatively small groups of party operatives withstood violence and intimidation to immerse themselves in the social as well as trade union conflicts of the day. Indeed, in the 1920s and 1930s Communists emerged as the region’s unrivaled and preeminent left-wing militants. The Socialist Party in the anthracite was smaller and less active than its Communist counterpart. Furthermore, Socialists in eastern Pennsylvania concentrated most of their resources and efforts in the city of Reading rather than the hard coal fields.


10 *Daily Worker*, July 17, 1928. 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. See also Walter T. Howard and Virginia M. Howard, “Communist Activism in the Pennsylvania Anthracite during the Great Depression,” *Carver* 14 (1997), 15–23; William C. Pratt, “Jimmie Higgins’ and the Reading Socialist Community: An Exploration of the
Regional Communists knew their territory well. One radical correctly observed that in 1930, "The northern anthracite was dominated by two fairly large industrial cities: Wilkes-Barre, with around eighty thousand people, and Scranton, with over one hundred thousand. The central and southern areas each had a few towns of ten thousand or more, as well as many smaller ones." And, although scenic, "Behind the very real beauty of the region lay a bitter poverty. The Depression had started here in the twenties, and by the time it reached other areas, the eastern Pennsylvania mining towns were already devastated." The *Daily Worker* noted in 1930 that the miners in the anthracite included "81,642 American (white) workers, 411 Negro workers, and 57,517 foreign-born." The anthracite is a highly concentrated industrial section, with mining, textile, and railroad shops as the main industries." As this suggests, while the coal industry dominated the local economies of Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, Hazelton, and smaller towns, at no time did it ever entirely control them. (This was also due to the fact that during the first half of the century these cities served as important commercial and transportation centers for the northern and southern anthracite regions.) Eager to get about their work, Communists viewed northeastern Pennsylvania as an inviting heavily industrialized region.

The region's social history stood as a somber backdrop to the rise of the Communist movement in the Pennsylvania anthracite. Few areas in the United States could boast such a record of labor militancy. Mention of the Molly Maguires, Lattimer, and the 1902 coal strike conjures up images of

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12 Phil Frankfeld, "The Membership Drive in the Anthracite," *Daily Worker*, December 2, 1930, and Olga Gold, "The Anthracite Miners and the Revolutionary Union," ibid., December 18, 1930. A crucial source for the Communist perspective on the anthracite is, of course, the *Daily Worker*, the party-sponsored daily. It provides a steady stream of information and commentary on Communist activism in northeastern Pennsylvania.
classic episodes in American working-class history. Unsettling social and economic conditions fostered by an inequitable industrial class structure led to the widespread exploitation of miners by large, powerful coal operators.

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. Thus, a lineage of labor militancy, a background of class discontent,

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15 The complete history of working class radicalism in the anthracite has yet to be written. Founded in 1877, the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) moved into the anthracite in 1880s. Not surprisingly, 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 twentieth 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 presidential election, Debs collected 272 votes in Lackawanna County, 805 in Schuylkill County, 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. Thomas B. Cochran, comp., *Small's Legislative Hand Book and Manual of the State of Pennsylvania, 1901* (Harrisburg, 1902), 680–83, 689–96, 730–33, 762, 764, 774, 775, 777; Cochran, *Small's Legislative Hand Book and Manual of the State of Pennsylvania, 1905*, 550–54, 560–66, 599–602; Herman P. Miller, comp., *Small's Legislative Hand Book and Manual
the presence of a large immigrant population, and a modest Marxist political
tradition, set the stage for the genesis of the region's Communist move-
movement. 16

During its tempestuous birth in 1919, the American Communist
movement established a permanent presence in the hard coal fields of
Pennsylvania that endured periodic repression in the 1920s. 17 Within the
CPUSA's geographical framework the anthracite was part of a large regional
district. 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 inde-

of the State of Pennsylvania, 1913, 647–50, 657–63, 698–701; Miller, Smull's Legislative Hand Book
Lutz, "The International Labor Defense and Antiradical Repression in the Pennsylvania Anthracite,

16 Another way that anthracite miners and their families responded to hard times was to leave the
area in search of better jobs and a more suitable life. Thomas Dublin, When the Mines Closed: Stories
of Struggles in Hard Times (Ithaca, 1998) and Dublin, "Working-Class Families Respond to Industrial
Decline: Migration from the Pennsylvania Anthracite Region since 1920," International Labor and

17 The local press clearly noted "Bolshevik" organizing activity that gave birth to the Communist
movement in the anthracite: "Resolution of the Polish Citizens of Luzerne County," Scranton
Republican, April 25, 1919; "Says Bolsheviks Will Rule World in Short Time," Wilkes-Barre Times
Leader, May 1, 1919; "Reds," Scranton Times, May 2, 1919; "Bolsheviks Growing Audacious in
Scranton," ibid., May 19, 1919; "Alleged Reds Under Arrest," ibid., May 1, 1919; "Many Radicals
Around City," Scranton Republican, May 7, 1920; "Red Literature Thrown Around," ibid., May 1, 1921;
"Miners to Halt Spread of Radical Propaganda," ibid., April 29, 1922; "Golden Warnings Miners of Red
Propaganda," ibid., May 2, 1922; "Wilkes-Barre Police Find Radical Letters," ibid., May 2, 1923;
"Experiment Station of Communism," ibid., May 1, 1923; and "Gives Reds Ultimatum," Wilkes-Barre
Record, March 3, 1924. See also Scranton Times, May 2, 1919; Scranton Republican, April 2, 25, 28,
1919 and May 1, 2, 1919; Wilkes-Barre Record, May 2, 1919; and Wilkes-Barre Times Leader, April
30, 1919, and May 1, 1919. Also pertinent is a United Mine Workers report from 1922 that 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 they started a new
organization known as the United Toilers of America," in a report titled "The Communist Party in the
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, Feb. 11, 1922, and J.
Louis Engdahl, "The Struggle of the Miners," ibid., Feb. 10, 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.
pendence even while generally complying with the instructions and directives coming down through bureaucratic channels. In spite of the region's effusive 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 history, Communists resolved to organize in this sector of industrial America no matter what resistance they might encounter.  

During the 1920s Communist organizers and activists in the anthracite came and went with uneven results. The Trade Union Educational League (TUEL), the Party's trade union center under the stewardship of William Foster, penetrated the region in the early 1920s. At that time Communist miners made common cause with union dissenter to "bore" within the UMW as part of a broad opposition to the leadership of the iconoclastic John L. Lewis. The TUEL's operatives established a small base in the anthracite, although Lewis made repeated efforts to stamp it out. Moscow documents conclusively reveal that in this decade party membership peaked at more than two hundred 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, invariably, 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

18 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. Some sketchy 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. See also "Trade Union Committee of the CEC," Earl Browder Papers, microfilm edition, reel #6, no. 148.

19 Letter from "BKC* to the Central Executive Committee, CPUSA, Sept. 3, 1926, CPUSA Papers, Center for Research and Preservation of Documents on Modern and Contemporary History (RTsKhIDNI) (hereafter cited as CPUSA Papers), Moscow, fond 515; letter from Bill G. to Central Executive Committee, Mining Committee, Oct. 2, 1926, ibid.


reported some sixty party members who resided in the southern fields. These Communists, chiefly Lithuanians, lived in the vicinity of communities such as Tamaqua, Minersville, Shenandoah, and Shamokin. 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 occasions such as May Day, Lenin Memorials, Sacco-Vanzetti Days, youth activities, dances, picnics, socials, and fundraisers. Nonetheless, this is not the entire story.

In the mid-twenties, anthracite Communists joined with UMW dissidents and sought to oust John L. Lewis and his lieutenants. Aply characterized as the Communist Party’s “most important labor initiative of the last years of the 1920s,” this Save-the-Union movement enlisted an anthracite dissident, William Brennan (former UMW president of District 1) to run in 1926 as the number two man with Socialist John Brophy on an insurgent ticket for president and vice president of the UMW. The party’s


23 Notice of these social activities in the anthracite were regularly published in the Daily Worker.

subdistrict organizer in the anthracite at this time, a young and relatively inexperienced Pat Toohey, worked diligently for the Save-the-Union movement as a speaker and organizer. UMW documents show that Lewis's agents in the anthracite followed Toohey and submitted long typed reports to UMW international headquarters about his activities. In any event, Lewis won the 1926 election, using tactics that many historians have regarded as questionable, throwing Communists and their progressive allies back on their heels.²⁵

Following this setback, Communist miners tried to keep the ideals of the Save-the-Union campaign, especially union democracy, alive in the anthracite and elsewhere.²⁶ Also, from 1927 to 1928, William Foster decided to revitalize the Save-the-Union organization as a permanent rank-and-file opposition group within the UMW. He met with John Brophy and Powers Hapgood, a radical organizer who specialized in miners' affairs, to secure their support in organizing non-Communists.²⁷ In 1928 Hapgood was the most discernable Save-the-Union figure of national stature in the anthracite region. He continued his efforts in spite of instructions from both the Comintern and the Profintern (Red International of Labor Unions) for Foster and the party to turn in the new direction of dual unionism. Foster and Hapgood would not fall into line regarding these Moscow guidelines.
until near the end of the year. As the CPSUA's trade union expert, Foster strongly disagreed with the new party line.  

Radical coal diggers in the hard coal region, now led by Toohey's replacements, first Emil Gardos and then Frank Vrataric (a Lithuanian Communist), disagreed with Foster's position. They ardently favored dual unionism. By the end of the 1920s they felt bitterly alienated by what they saw as the corruption and high-handedness of John L. Lewis and his cronies in the tri-district (UMW districts 1, 7, and 9 in the anthracite). Likewise, the bloodshed and assassinations associated with the Pittston Mine War of early 1928, which pitted the UMW against non-Communist UMW dissidents, only reinforced the radical miners' disdain for Lewis and his leadership. In 1928 local Communist miners such as George Dziengielewski and Sam Licata organized a legal defense campaign to save several UMW renegades, charged with murder, from the death penalty.  

Sectarian in outlook, ethnically isolated, Communist miners detested Lewis and his political machine, which they believed often sacrificed their interests in the name of union tactics and compromises with coal operators. When the Comintern handed down the dual union line, anthracite comrades among the rank and file of miners enthusiastically embraced it. So forceful was the pro-dual union position among Communist miners that the Daily Worker published statements of support by Dziengielewski and Licata.  

Acting as the eyes and ears of the middle class, newspaper editors in the anthracite kept a close eye on Comintern moves that might have an impact on their region. In doing so, they saw dual unionism coming as early as

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28 Barrett, William Z. Foster, 153-55; and Johanningsmeier, Forging American Communism, 236-38, 241-42. For Happood's activities in the anthracite, see Scranton Times, March 1, 4-8, 10, 12, 13, 18, 23, 27, 31, 1928, and April 10, 12, 1928.  
30 Daily Worker, March 10, 1928 (Dziengielewski statement), and July 11, 1928 (Licata statement). See also untitled and undated report to national CPUSA leaders by George Papcut, who recruited miners into the party during the 1920s, on the extent of support for a new radical miners union, CPUSA Papers, Moscow, fond 515. One letter from a miner who resided in Coaldale, Pa., to the Daily Worker (March 20, 1928) stated he would welcome a dual union because he believed that the UMW had given up on trying to organize in his community.
March 1928 when they examined the pronouncements of the 6th World Congress of the Comintern. And a few months later, in June, they noted that a Save-the-Union meeting in western Pennsylvania, attended by a few tri-district delegates, directed a strong attack on UMW president Lewis, and made plans for a national conference in the fall “to build an insurgent miners’ union.” From the national Republican Party convention in Kansas City, Lewis remarked: “It’s unimportant and the work of a few Communists.” Further, UMW vice president Phil Murray stated that the mandate of the Save-the-Union group “was following in detail the mandate of the Third Internationale.” Moreover, the UMW, he asserted, will fight “Communist propaganda in the American trade union movement just as viciously as we fight the strike-breaking non-union coal operators.”

On July 10, 1928, the Scranton Times further spread the word about plans to found the National Miners Union. It pointed out that the Save-the-Union organization had officially put out the call for a national conference in Pittsburgh, scheduled to begin on September 9, to form a new miners’ union. The anthracite’s former subdistrict organizer and Save-the-Union activist, Pat Toohey, informed the press that the call requested UMW locals to name delegates to the convention, charging that Lewis had failed to organize nonunion men, and was responsible for many strike losses. “We must organize a new miners’ union, one with an honest progressive leadership and a fighting policy,” the call concluded.

In early fall 1928 Communists in the anthracite prepared for the coming NMU convention. On September 1 they welcomed Communist vice-presidential candidate Benjamin Gitlow to Wilkes-Barre. Speaking at Sans Souci Park before about 200 miners, Gitlow condemned the anthracite coal operators and UMW officialdom with equal vigor. He also spoke about the new miners’ union: “The National Miners Union convention to be held at

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31 The editors were right to think so. “New Miners Union in America Advocated by Communists in Russia,” Scranton Times, March 8, 1928 and “Communism Reorganized,” Tamaqua Evening Courier, Jan. 4, 1928. Moscow documents reveal that Foster and the TUEL clearly intended to step up Communist organizing in the anthracite. Nevertheless, in his letters to Lozovsky, Foster still resisted the dual union policy. William Foster to Lozovsky, Feb. 17, 1928, and Foster to Lozovsky, Feb. 20, 1928, CPUSA Papers, Moscow, fond 515.

32 Scranton Times, June 13, 1928.

Pittsburgh on the 9th of this month will be the biggest historical turning point in the history of the mining industry." This obvious hyperbole accurately reflected Communist faith in the NMU. The rank and file also showed marked enthusiasm for the new union. One miner from the southern anthracite wrote that "The Lattimer Local was sure proud of being the first anthracite local to send in credentials for the convention... I can't tell you how the boys here are looking forward to building a new miners' union and throwing out" UMW regulars.

On Labor Day, the UMW and its allies in the anthracite responded to the Communists. As a show of strength, the Scranton Central Labor Union sponsored a large, colorful, and elaborate Labor Day parade in which some 6,000 union men marched through the streets of northeastern Pennsylvania's largest city. In his speech, Thomas Kennedy, international secretary-treasurer of the UMW, took direct aim at Communism and dual unionism: "During the past year certain forces of disruption and destruction, who took their orders from Communistic dictators, have come out in the open with their treacherous work..." David Fowler, the UMW's anti-radical "trouble shooter," also spoke of the evils of Communism and dual unionism. The Scranton Times remarked that "Mr. Fowler... is in the hard coal fields for the purpose of checking up details on alleged Communistic leaders said to have invaded the anthracite region."

In early September, all classes in the anthracite read about the stormy birth of the NMU. One newspaper reported that "The National Miners Union" was "born amidst strife between members of the United Mine Workers of America and insurgent members of that union," and "announced that it had elected officers..." It also carried a story on September 12 entitled "Insurgents in Miners' Union Define Policy." Calling the NMU an outgrowth of the "left-wing" movement in the UMW, the article stated the radical union "made public through its executive board a statement of national policy, in which the new union is to struggle without pause for better hours and wages, for a labor party, and in solidarity with all other struggling workers. The eventual aim is complete emancipation from

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34 Draper, "Communists and Miners," 371, and Daily Worker, Sept. 16, 1928.
35 Daily Worker, Sept. 3, 1928.
36 Scranton Times, Sept. 6, 1928.
capitalist exploitation.”

About twenty Communist miners and sympathizers from the anthracite attended the Pittsburgh convention to found the NMU. Dziengielewski, Licata, Joe Dougher, Mike Zaldokas, Anthony Ricci, and others attended the event and made their presence felt. The anthracite delegation unanimously requested that a capable young organizer that they knew well, Anthony (Tony) Minerich, be immediately sent to northeastern Pennsylvania to begin work for the NMU. The CPUSA documents, however, do not make clear why the delegates made this request with such urgency. Perhaps it was because anthracite comrades felt that the party might neglect them unless they asserted themselves, or that after a year of wildcat strikes and labor agitation the miners of the region might be ready to embrace radical activism. In any case, the newly formed executive board of the NMU debated the request and then agreed to send Minerich to the hard coal fields. A few party people opposed the idea, stating openly that it would hurt Minerich’s future career in the movement because the anthracite was such a difficult assignment. The new NMU leaders also decided to concentrate on building the NMU in the southern fields of UMW District 7. This area, where the two chief NMU leaders, John J. Watt and Pat Toohey, were sent, had the worst unemployment and underemployment, and the most oppressive working conditions in the region. One Communist operative, NMU officer V. Kemenovich, wrote to the Comintern that “The situation in the anthracite is still confused and close attention must be paid to this region, which is the last stronghold of the Lewis machine. . . . The policy of the Party in the anthracite is correct and results are to be expected in the very near future.”

Hoping for these positive results, Minerich and other NMU leaders spent a good deal of time in the anthracite during the fall of 1928. They met with a unique situation. There they found that UMW insurgents in Pittston, under the leadership of Frank McGarry, had organized a non-Communist dual union, the Anthracite Miners Union of Pennsylvania. The Communists

37 Scranton Times, Sept. 8, 9, 11, 12, 1928. For the party's official version of the founding convention, see John J. Watt, “Launching the National Miners Union,” Labor Unity (Oct. 1928), 2–6.
38 There were two reports submitted to party leaders: V. Kemenovich, “Report on Convention,” 1928; and n.a., “Report on National Miners’ Union Convention,” 1928, CPUSA Papers, Moscow, fond 515.
sought a merger with the new organization, but at the last minute McGarry vetoed the proposal. Subsequently, the spurned Reds bitterly condemned the insurgent union as no better than the “Lewis gang” who ran the UMW. On October 17, CPUSA leader Jay Lovestone visited the anthracite to assess the NMU’s progress and speak at an election rally for the party’s national ticket. He learned that a few locals of the NMU had been founded in the region, but the new union and the party itself faced much opposition. In mid-October anthracite subdistrict organizer Gardos submitted a report to the *Daily Worker* explaining how powerful anticommunist forces stifled the party and the NMU. Still, he asserted, the NMU “will survive.”

On the regional labor holiday of “Mitchell Day,” October 29, UMW speakers lashed out at Communism and dual unionism. These speakers included Phil Murray, international vice president of the UMW, Kennedy, Fowler, and John Boylan (president of UMW District 1). Another speaker, John J. Casey, president of the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor, praised the UMW as “the only organization of its kind in the United States that has successfully combated Communism, Socialism, and Bolshevism.” In October, the *Scranton Times* praised the virtues of “capitalism” in an editorial that stated: “One out of every thirty persons in the United States is a ‘capitalist’.... The solidity of the American republic rests largely on the actual ownership which such a large number have in its affairs.” In spite of the forces allied against them, at the end of the month, area comrades greeted presidential candidate William Foster, who delivered a campaign speech over the air waves as the first Communist candidate in the region to speak on local radio.

In November, the NMU conducted its first “raiding” effort when it sought to take over leadership of a wildcat strike in Pittston. McGarry and his insurgents led the walkout. The NMU turned to the aforementioned Tony Minerich, one of its best organizers, in an attempt to accomplish the task of acquiring control of the strike. The state police, however, learned of this plan and on November 27 promptly arrested the NMU operative as he exited Butera’s Hall in Pittston where he had addressed a gathering of close to a hundred mine workers. The press informed the public that “Minerich as far as can be learned, has been in this section for the past few weeks”

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41 *Scranton Times*, Oct. 10, 16, 30, 1928.
working on behalf of the NMU. The state police held Minerich for several days at the Wyoming Barracks until the International Labor Defense (ILD, the legal arm of the CPUSA) and the American Civil Liberties Union secured his release.\(^2\)

In 1929 a core of Communist miners in the anthracite eagerly supported the NMU. Motivated by anger over corrupt UMW officialdom, unsafe working conditions, and sharply painful mine closings, they embraced the new Red union. An unemployed miner from the southern anthracite, "Anthony," wrote the *Daily Worker* in March 1929 that he feared for the many starving families and children who received insufficient help from the UMW, charities, and community groups. He also stated that the Communists and the Workers International Relief (WIR) were "the only hope" for the miners.\(^3\) In April, Frank Vrataric, the party's subdistrict organizer who succeeded Gardos late in 1928, reported on the suffering: "The NMU, because of the bad conditions in the anthracite, is growing and will grow faster in the future. The NMU will wage an intensive fight in the coming struggle. It is the only hope of bettering the conditions of the miners."\(^4\)

Led by the new subdistrict organizer, regional Communists marshaled their resources and energies behind the NMU. They established a few locals in Pittston, Ashley, and the Panther Valley; in all areas of the anthracite small NMU cells worked inside UMW locals. Moscow records suggest that most NMU members were Lithuanians, Italians, Ukrainians, and Poles. As the newest of the immigrants, these ethnics found themselves most vulnerable to exploitation. Furthermore, the local party put an organizational structure of the TUEL in place early in the summer of 1929. The anthracite TUEL convened a regional meeting on May 26 in Wilkes-Barre. Perhaps fifty delegates from NMU locals, the party, and representatives of the newly formed National Textile Workers Union (recently organized around a series of silk strikes in Wilkes-Barre) attended the gathering. As part of their anti-racist campaign the Communists issued a special invitation to African American workers, and some were present at the meeting. Although a small racial group, about three thousand in 1930, blacks in the anthracite were not

\(^2\) Ibid., Nov. 5, 28, 29, 1928.
\(^3\) *Daily Worker*, March 20, 1929.
\(^4\) Frank Vrataric, "Conditions Worse than Ever in the Anthracite," ibid., April 30, 1929.
an invisible minority to the Communists who did what they could to combat racial prejudice among white miners.\footnote{Ed Scharfenberg, "Economic Conditions of the Anthracite Mine Workers," April 15, 1926, CPUSA Papers, fond 515; Wilkes-Barre Record, April 1, 1929; and Daily Worker, May 25, 1929. The anthracite's small black communities were victims of a northern version of racial proscription and segregation. See the numerous files of Scranton's and Wilkes-Barre's NAACP branches located in the NAACP collection at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. See also Joe W. Trotter and Eric Ledell Smith, eds., \textit{African Americans in Pennsylvania: Shifting Historical Perspectives} (Harrisburg, 1997).}

In the summer of 1929 the TUEL and local Communists aided Tony Minerich, the NMU's full-time organizer in the anthracite. He targeted the southern coal fields where downsizing by coal operators had caused the most harm to workers. In July, authorities in Schuylkill County arrested Minerich in the midst of his organizing drive. The local press reported that Minerich and the NMU had called for a general strike against the coal operators in the anthracite. Although no mass walkouts occurred, the earnest militancy of the NMU, and the apparent inadequacy of the UMW, won converts among some of the miners in the lower fields. In fact, by the end of the year these dissatisfied coal diggers stood ready to side with the new dual union. Moreover, the Lithuanians in the vicinity of Minersville and Tamaqua showed a special affinity for the new radical union.\footnote{\textit{Daily Worker}, July, 25, 29, 1929, and Tamaqua Evening Courier, July 22, 1929.}

In the fall of 1929 anthracite Communists worked with TUEL and NMU activists to prepare for the upcoming Cleveland convention and the founding of the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL)—successor to the TUEL. In spite of police harassment, Communist organizers worked a dozen or so coal towns and communities. Following repeated arrests, Minerich defiantly declared that the NMU would send a strong delegation from every coal district of northeastern Pennsylvania to the Cleveland Convention. NMU supporters Dave Gorman and his spouse found themselves in jail in Wilkes-Barre during the campaign. They went on a short hunger strike that attracted a great deal of public attention to themselves and the NMU cause. The front page headline of the August 1 Wilkes-Barre Times Leader read: "COMMUNISTS ON HUNGER STRIKE IN CELLS." Press reports of verbal exchanges in the courtroom publicized aspects of Marxist-Leninist ideology, especially atheism and materialism, that offended middle-class sensibilities. In fact, the judge, Alderman James Brennan, told the Gormans that he considered Communism a form of
“insanity,” and that “the best place for such people is prison,” and deportation would be better still. 47

In spite of jailing and harassment, a handful of NMU members and Communists from the anthracite did attend the Cleveland convention that created the TUUL. That the NMU was under the new trade union center, however, did not make matters easier for radical adherents of dual unionism in northeastern Pennsylvania. Nevertheless, they traveled home from Cleveland with a renewed interest in building the NMU. In the final days of 1929 anthracite Communist miners achieved a minor breakthrough in the southern fields where they openly organized their new labor organization. One newspaper, the Tamaqua Evening Courier, ran a story on December 7, titled “NMU UNION IS LAUNCHED HERE,” that stated “The first official meeting of Local 912 of the National Miners Union, of Tamaqua, was held last night in the Odd-Fellows Hall. This mass meeting was attended by hundreds of miners. . . . Pat Toohey, National Secretary-Treasurer of the NMU, was the principal speaker. . . . A miner from the Silverbrook local brought greetings and pledges of solidarity and called on the miners to keep up the fight and sign up in the NMU.” Editors published the names of the officers of the new local: Charles Miscavage, Charles Sungalis, and Stiney Milbut. They also printed the aims of the NMU that clearly specified standard union goals of improving wages, hours, and working conditions. Finally, they noted the absence of revolutionary sloganeering and references to the Soviet Union. 48

In 1930 anthracite Communists and their new subdistrict organizer Phil Frankfeld—who replaced Frank Vrataric at the end of 1929—faced stiff resistance in their efforts to build the NMU into a viable trade union. In January, reflecting rank-and-file sentiments, Frankfeld publicly implored the party to “realize the splendid opportunities that exist for building up the National Miners Union, the Trade Union Unity League, and the Party. . . . The Party still has sufficient time to mobilize the miners for struggle.” Many Communist miners in the hard coal fields felt that national party leaders “in

47 Wilkes-Barre Record, Aug. 10, 1929; Daily Worker, Aug. 12, 1929; the plight of Gorman and his wife was detailed in the vertical files of the International Labor Defense Papers at the Tamiment Institute, New York University. See also Wilkes-Barre Times Leader, Aug. 1, 1929.
48 Tamaqua Evening Courier, Nov. 13, 14, 21, 23, 29, 1929; Dec. 6, 7, 9, 21, 1929; and Jan. 5–7, 1930. See also Daily Worker, Sept. 14, 1929, and Nov. 18, 27, 1929.
the past were contented with leaving the anthracite go its own way, and
when sharp, bitter struggles would develop, a sudden splurge of attention
and activity, and then back again to an attitude of ‘hands off’ and passivity.”

The rank and file, as well as Frankfeld, clearly needed the party’s help as
they encountered a united front of opposition mounted by the UMW, coal
operators, law enforcement, and the press. In January 1930 an aroused
UMW launched a campaign in the southern anthracite to identify and
punish NMU men and any miners who sympathized with them. After New
Years’ Day 1930, UMW officers instructed loyal miners in District 7 to wear
a special button declaring their allegiance to the AFL-UMW. The
newspapers related that in Tamaqua, an NMU stronghold, coal operators
fired six radical miners for refusing to wear UMW buttons. Also, in January
1930, the editors of the Tamaqua Evening Courier published a front-page
plea to the miners of UMW District 7, beseeching them to disavow the
Communist-associated NMU.

In the spring of 1930 the established powers of the anthracite took
measures aimed at repressing the NMU and its Communist supporters. On
March 1 police arrested NMU and Communist organizers in Luzerne
County at a union rally, and then again at the March 6 Unemployed Day
demonstration in Wilkes-Barre. On March 16 law enforcement officers
detained Frankfeld and TUUL men at a meeting of the Russian Mutual
Benefit Society in Wilkes-Barre. And on March 22 the Wilkes-Barre
Record ran an editorial, “No Union Insurgency,” that savaged Communists
in the UMW whether they bored from within or resorted to dual unionism:
“Most of the insurgents have been imbued with such socialistic tendencies
that their success would have meant constant strikes and chaos in line with
the Communistic plan of revolutionizing industry by a reign of terror.”

Communists countered by setting a September 1 target date for a general
strike in the anthracite. They also reacted to pressure from the press and
police by attacking Lewis and the UMW. On March 24 the Daily Worker
published a Frankfeld article, “Lewis Pledges to Betray Anthracite Miners,”
that lauded the NMU as the only union that miners could trust to fight the
greedy coal operators. Frankfeld also relayed an admonition from the rank

50 Tamaqua Evening Courier, Jan. 4, 6, 1930; Daily Worker, Jan. 1, 2, 9, 20, 1930; and Scranton
Times, Jan. 6, 1930.
51 Wilkes-Barre Record, March 22, 1930, and Daily Worker, March 1, 8, 20, 1930.
and file to party leaders: “The NMU must undertake a real and serious organizational campaign to establish itself as a factor amongst the masses of miners in the anthracite. The NMU’s base is a very narrow one at present.” He then revealed the party’s plans for the NMU in the anthracite, “The NMU must base its entire strategy for the development of a general strike in Sept., 1930, on the struggle here.” Frankfeld spoke plainly and with candor: “The NMU must definitely decide to issue the strike call (Sept. 1) for the anthracite region in its own name. This question cannot be left hanging in the air until the last moment. The NMU must come forward with a whole series of immediate demands, and the fact that this has not been done to date deserves the sharpest criticism.”

In April Frankfeld and his anthracite comrades welcomed the new NMU organizer, Dan Slinger, to the region (Tony Minerich was reassigned to various bituminous fields around the country, including Harlan County, Kentucky) and continued their counterattack. NMU literature accused Lewis of “selling out” to the operators in collective bargaining negotiations underway at the time. It also sent out a call for a tri-district NMU conference set for May 18, and urged miners to “prepare for the strike on September 1.” The NMU proposed the following program for the anthracite miners:

1. $8.80 basic, minimum day wage for all miners and laborers.
2. $8.80 day wage for all outside men.
3. 6 hour day and 5 day week.
4. abolition of the contractor
5. unemployment insurance and old age pension
6. abolition of Conciliation Board, and all class collaboration schemes.
7. all tools to be supplied by the company free of charge to the miners.
8. no discrimination against young and Negro workers—equal pay for equal work.
9. rigid enforcement of all safety laws.
10. against the speed-up system.
11. organization and recognition of rank and file pit committees of the National Miners Union, and full mine control and job distribution by the

52 Daily Worker, March 24, 1930, and April 10, 24, 30, 1930.
53 “Draft Program of NMU for the Anthracite,” ibid., April 30, 1930. Minerich went on to become co-editor of Narodni Glasnik (the Croat CPUSA paper) in the late 1930s and 40s; John Kraljic to the author, April 12, 2000.
12. no child labor in the mines.
13. 2 weeks vacation with pay.
14. installation of sprinkler system for all elimination of dust.
15. full sanitary conditions in mines.\textsuperscript{54}

The NMU’s program in the anthracite was ambitious and progressive, but clearly not revolutionary. Frankfeld and the regional Communists sought to channel the class anger of rank-and-file anthracite miners (Communist and non-Communist alike) into a protest for reform against the status quo. They directed this articulated challenge against Lewis and the UMW, the coal operators’ control over the workplace, a social arrangement that sanctioned Jim Crow segregation and permitted child labor, as well as a political setup that denied workers unemployment insurance and old-age pensions. Not surprisingly, many NMU members and their sympathizers fervently embraced this program that promised them a measure of class empowerment.\textsuperscript{55}

Rank-and-file zeal for the NMU’s progressive program inspired local Communists. Frankfeld and the new NMU organizer in the anthracite, Dan Slinger, worked diligently with their regional comrades in May 1930 in making arrangements for the coming tri-district conference. They moved the date for the meeting from May 18 to June 1 to allow extra time for preparations. Frankfeld and Slinger spoke at numerous union meetings (NMU and UMW) and before various ethnic societies. They flooded the region with their literature, wrote several long articles and notices in the \textit{Daily Worker}, refining and expanding the NMU’s anthracite program while highlighting the issues of wages and hours. They also appeared at the UMW’s tri-district convention in Hazelton to criticize its leadership, and welcomed national leader William Dunne to the area to speak to miners on behalf of the NMU.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} 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), April 29, 1998. Author’s interviews with 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, Jane Ross, Edwin Stair, Roy Keeler, and Bill Bartholomew, April 30, 1998.
\textsuperscript{56} Dan Slinger, “NMU Conference May 18,” \textit{Daily Worker}, May 3, 1930; ibid., May 5, 12, 14, 15, 19, 27, 1930.
Anthracite Communists called the NMU tri-district conference of June 1 a “success.” Frankfeld reported that fifty-eight delegates attended the meeting in Hazleton, “representing many towns in the hard coal region, and representing over twenty locals and united front committees of action.” He also reported that “There were at least 2 dozen more elected [NMU delegates] in Shenandoah, Port Carbon, Mt. Carmel, etc., that did not attend due to lacks of finances, and means of transportation.” Frankfeld exercised restraint in his assessment of the gathering. He surmised that “This was the first Tri-District Conference ever held in the anthracite by the NMU. It laid the base for the establishment of the NMU amongst the hard coal miners. It was a consolidation of all the forces of the rank-and-file miners’ union and proceeded to develop the beginnings of a real, local, rank-and-file leadership.”

At the conference the Communists gave voice to the miners’ discontent. Workers spoke about conditions in their collieries: they reported on the wage cuts, speed-ups, acute unemployment, and general worsening of conditions that were prevalent everywhere. The NMU delegates spoke bitterly about UMW practices that ignored rank-and-file concerns. The miners also chose six rank-and-filers to attend the next scheduled Profintern meeting in the Soviet Union. They understood that the conference was only the beginning of their work:

The NMU must now proceed to establish its loose committees of action into locals of the NMU; and its locals into broader and better functioning organizations in the mines. The NMU must pick up the daily issues of the masses of miners, and lead them in their struggles. . . . The main task is the actual organizational preparation for the Sept. 1 strike. . . . The holding of the NMU conference in the very heart of the anthracite, with a powerful machine of fakers, with their thugs and gunmen, etc., was certainly an achievement—but only a step that needs to be followed up.

Frankfeld laid out the surest way to continue. According to his reckoning, organizers should build the NMU through sound organizing practices that avoided shortcuts. Frankfeld advocated patient grass-roots organizing among the ranks of the miners though progress was sure to be slow and tedious.

57 Phil Frankfeld, “NMU Establishes Base in Anthracite,” ibid., June 7, 1930.
58 Ibid.
Impatient for success, however, national Communist leaders would adopt a familiar, but risky, strategy of attempting to assume leadership of ongoing strikes. The strategy worked for a time in the Gastonia, North Carolina, textile job action, but it would not succeed in the anthracite.

Just days after the tri-district meeting, the regional NMU would be presented with a tempting shortcut opportunity. In a ten-day wildcat strike in Pittston, UMW dissidents had walked out over the issue of "equalization" of work—that is, the miners' desire to decrease unemployment by spreading available work to a maximum number of laborers. Communists offered no ideological critique of this reformist idea; they were more interested in encouraging and supporting the strikers. During the ten days of the Pittston insurgent strike for equalization, prominent NMU leaders converged on the anthracite. The belief among Communists appeared to be that this ongoing walkout in Pittston might be a better organizing opportunity than the hoped-for general strike that had been set for September 1. They apparently hoped to take over this strike the way they had in Gastonia. Local and national NMU spokespersons held mass meetings in the coal towns of Pittston, Jessup, Dunmore, Wilkes-Barre, and the like. The list of NMU luminaries—Freeman Thompson (the new national NMU leader), A. Sabatini, Dan Slinger, Joe Tashinski—impressed the local press who published the names of the radicals in the newspapers for all to read. If the NMU hoped to turn the Pittston strike into a wider general strike against the anthracite coal operators, it did not succeed.

NMU unionists and their Communist co-workers watched uncomfortably as the short June strike brought unforeseen difficulties. There were numberless instances of police officers manhandling and abusing striking miners on the picket lines. Observers sometimes falsely accused strike

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59 From the beginning of the job action, NMU activists encouraged UMW strikers and offered help. John Victor Fornier, a Communist miner and veteran of past NMU struggles in Pittston, was among the many workers on the street doing picket duty. Fornier allegedly hurled a beer bottle at a police officer who was part of the law enforcement contingent sent to protect miners who crossed the picket line. In any event, there was a scuffle between the Pittston radical and deputies that led to Fornier's arrest. The Scranton press reported that "the police say that Fornier has been active in the Communist movement here for the past few years." The deputies charged him with attempted assault, gave him a hearing in Pittston police court, and held the radical under $1,000 bail in county jail. When taken to the Wyoming Barracks of the state police he was photographed and then shown records indicating previous arrests as a Communist. This was typical treatment accorded NMU and Communist organizers in the anthracite. Scranton Times, June 12, 14, 20, 21, 1930, and Daily Worker, June 20, 21, 1930.

60 Scranton Times, June 23, 24, 1930.
supporters of dynamiting the homes of scabs, as well as “beating up” on them. The UMW reacted to the violence by formally and publicly distancing itself from the entire affair, and denying any liability for damage or harm caused by the miners carrying out an unauthorized strike action. Pittston Mayor Ambrose Langan’s ban on public mass meetings and demonstrations in his city significantly diminished opportunities that might have accrued to the NMU and Communists. The crucial development, however, was the insurgent miners’ rejection of Communist overtures to lead the strike. This rejection of the radicals was all the more disappointing because anticommunists executed it so publicly. The Scranton Times published insurgent miner George Molesky’s damning rebuke of “so-called radical organizations (NMU and CPUSA) now endeavoring to conduct a series of meetings in this region while the Pittston strike is in progress.” He loudly proclaimed: “We didn’t want the Communists before and we don’t want them now.”

NMU organizers characteristically decided to ignore both the anticommitist clamor of Molesky as well as the mayor’s ban on public meetings. By the end of June, the Pittston strike was rapidly sputtering out, but that did not keep radical unionists and their supporters from attempting to hold a public, outdoor meeting. On the afternoon of June 29 state troopers and Pittston police arrested seven Communists as they tried to hold an NMU rally at the Broad Street Park. Before the NMU and CPUSA speakers arrived, law officers had already acted to prevent a crowd from gathering, and then took the seven into custody when they refused to move on as ordered. NMU head Freeman Thompson unsuccessfully attempted to explain to the authorities that it was his and the others’ prerogative to hold a meeting if they wished. Those arrested this time were V. Lichterman (Daily Worker correspondent), Ignatz Bancan (he gave a Scranton address), John Little (representing the TUUL), Frank Uratone (Luzerne Communist), Michael Orlando (Dunmore Communist), Joe Tashinski, and Phil Frankfeld.

After UMW insurgents called off the Pittston equalization strike, the situation worsened for the NMU. On July 1, 1930, state, county, and borough law enforcement agencies combined their efforts to carry out early

61 Ibid., June 23, 24, 27, 30, 1930.
62 Ibid.
morning raids of CPUSA headquarters in Scranton, as well as on the private residences of top anthracite Communists. The goal seemed to be shutting down the NMU and other radical elements who, officials believed, had been largely responsible for stirring up so much trouble during the wildcat Pittston strike in June.63

Anticommunist feeling ran high in the region and the nation in the summer of 1930.64 Widespread public consternation about NMU and Communist activities in the anthracite stimulated a large measure of paranoia. This is best illustrated by the bizarre war game staged by "Scranton soldiers" in a mock "attack on the Red Enemy." The account in the local press began by setting the stage for this anticommunist fantasy: "Acting on the theory that Red infantry forces are concentrating at Manheim . . . to attack the 110th Infantry, which is removing military stores from the ordinance warehouse, the 109th Infantry regiment, with headquarters at Scranton, moved out of camp yesterday afternoon at 2 o'clock to protect the 110th infantrymen from the enemy's advance." The scenario reported by William H. Newhart, Scranton Times staff correspondent, continued: "The third battalion of the regiment with headquarters at Milton moved out of camp first under the command of Major Edward L. Davis to act as an advance guard for the main detachment of the 109th Infantry regiment in its move forward to attack the Red forces, which are supposed to be

63 Zealots such as Joe Tashinski stubbornly continued organizing efforts on behalf of the NMU. On July 1 this tenacious young organizer took the floor and spoke boldly to a UMW local in All Saints Hall on Warren Street in Dunmore. One account relates that "without invitation" he launched "into a bitter tirade against capital when someone shouted, 'throw him out!'" In the ensuing melee the NMU speaker found himself roughed up, outside the hall, and in the custody of local police who evidently had been standing by. The well-known Dunmore Constable "Battler Flynn" (notorious for his violent handling of prisoners) arrested and searched the NMU man before lodging him in jail. Local officers found a key on their prisoner that apparently tipped off county and state authorities as to the exact whereabouts of the headquarters of the Communist network in the Scranton vicinity. Scranton Times, July 1, 2, 1930.

64 Informed residents of the anthracite knew that Father Charles Coughlin, the radio priest from Detroit, had charged that Henry Ford had unwittingly aided the Communist cause by "brutalizing" his workers who had organized and picketed Ford plants. Coughlin also insisted that Ford's $13 million business contracts with Russian concerns was an aid to Bolshevism. Further, the Pope, who always held a captive audience among the region's Slavs and Italians, in mid-July solemnly warned the United States to "beware lest Bolshevism spread in America at this moment of financial depression and unemployment." At about this time, Representative Hamilton Fish, the anticommunist crusader in Congress, declared that Moscow planners formulated and issued regular, detailed orders regarding subversive activities which were "instantly and implicitly carried out by Communists in the United States." Wilkes-Barre Record, July 15, 26, 28, 29, 31,1930, and Scranton Times, July 7-8, 14-19, 25, 30, 1930.
concentrated at Manheim...." Finally, he concluded, "The troops camped on the mountains about three miles from camp last night and early this morning staged an attack on the imaginary Red forces." The depth of anticommunist sentiment in the anthracite stood as the major impediment to NMU progress. At times approaching a mania, it was deeply woven into the political and cultural fabric of the region, and ultimately doomed the NMU to failure.

During the second half of 1930 the NMU in the anthracite plunged into a downward spiral that led to its virtual destruction in 1931. The debacles of the Pittston equalization strike, police repression, and anticommunist paranoia were not the only difficulties that confronted the Red miners' union. In the summer of 1930 there was a major change in national leadership of the NMU that may have distracted anthracite radicals. Further, for whatever reason, the party dropped the idea of a September 1 general strike. Perhaps most destructive of all, however, discouragement and apathy evidently overcame subdistrict organizer Phil Frankfeld. The party, heeding his pleas to be relieved of the anthracite assignment, replaced Frankfeld with Steve Nelson at the end of 1930. This change in leadership meant that rank-and-file anthracite Communists had to deal with four subdistrict organizers, Emil Gardos, Frank Vrataric, Phil Frankfeld, and Steve Nelson between 1928 and 1931. The rank and file was naturally resentful of this turnover in leadership, and did not hesitate to say so. Moreover, Communist officials at the national level had relegated the anthracite to a low priority as they focused in 1931 on events unfolding in Harlan County, Kentucky.

In January 1931 regional Communists recognized just how weak the NMU was in the anthracite. Steve Nelson, the new subdistrict organizer, evaluated his assignment at the time, stating "The NMU, which never had much of a foothold in the region, was smashed and retained only a small group of CP members and sympathizers." While Nelson may have slightly exaggerated the NMU's weakness, he was essentially correct. By 1931 there may have been only thirty or forty members of the NMU in about a half dozen locals and nuclei in the UMW. At this point Nelson decided to focus most of the local party's time and attention on organizing the anthracite's

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65 Scranton Times, July 9, 1930.
jobless legions into a mass unemployed movement instead of trying to build up the dual miners' union. He moved in this direction though many rank-and-file Communists in the NMU were not yet ready to give up on their new organization and return to the UMW. 67

In March 1931, the diehards were presented one final opportunity to make the NMU a success in the anthracite. Toward the end of the month a major coal strike broke out in the Wilkes-Barre vicinity. On Saturday, March 21, in protest over a longer work day, angry miners walked off the job at Glen Alden's Maxwell colliery in Ashley. By Tuesday, the wildcat strike had spread to nearly twenty Glen Alden mines and involved close to 20,000 workers. UMW stalwart John Boylan, not surprisingly, branded the unauthorized strike as illegitimate, and ordered the men back to work and to send their grievances on to the Anthracite Conciliation Board. The UMW insurgents, however, operated under the determined leadership of two young, non-Communist progressives in charge of the strike committee, Thomas Maloney and Frank Tomichak. They defied Boylan's order and continued the walkout. 68

Local NMU supporters immediately mobilized to take control of the strike, but they ran into one obstacle after another in their attempt to do so. To be sure, from the first day of the job action the NMU and Communists had exhorted miners to spread the strike and organize mass picket lines to ensure victory. By Wednesday, March 25, the public learned that law enforcement authorities were on the lookout for NMU and CPUSA opportunists who might try to move in and "take advantage of the labor conflict." The press also informed them that state troopers might be called in to keep the "Reds" under control. 69

By the end of the first week of the walkout, the strike committee leaders had clearly articulated the grievances motivating the unrest. They charged Glen Alden with various violations of the existing contract between the

67 Nelson, Barrett, and Ruck, Steve Nelson, 95.

68 Daily Worker, March 18, 19, 1931, and Scranton Times, March 23, 1931. The party's intention to assume leadership of this strike can be found in the report to the Comintern titled "Miners' Resolution," March 18, 1931, CPUSA Papers, Moscow, fond 515.

69 On the first day of the job action, two anthracite Communists and members of the NMU, Stanley Kawastnich and George Pewkits, were arrested near the Maxwell colliery, to where they had rushed to hand out radical leaflets imploring the strikers to join the NMU. On the evening of March 24 the police broke up a party meeting in Wilkes-Barre that had been called to formulate plans for reacting to the big strike. Scranton Times, March 25, 1931, and Daily Worker, March 27, 1931.
anthracite operators and the UMW: specifically, with perpetuating unsafe working conditions, the dismissal of old employees, the bosses compelling miners to "clean" their loaded coal on their own time, the "order which requires drivers to have their mules at working places at (the) hour of starting, necessitating extra employment without pay, and compelling drivers to remain on the job until quitting time and then returning mules to the barn." S. D. Dimmick, Glen Alden's general manager, replied that contrary to the workers' claims, the company was indeed living up to the terms of the contract and "is ready to confer with the union's district officers relative to (the) grievances." Furthermore, the strike divided the community, and many citizens expressed their views in heart-felt letters to the editor in the Scranton Times. Moreover, that Socialist Norman Thomas spoke in Scranton on March 29, and his lack of impact on the labor crisis revealed how marginalized the few anthracite Socialists were when it came to the region's trade union conflicts. 70

In spite of their best efforts, NMU activists and their Communist supporters never came close to gaining control of the strike. The Gastonia strategy again failed. While the Daily Worker assiduously promoted the strike, individual NMU members and rank-and-file committees worked through UMW locals pushing them whenever possible to be ever more militant. Radical unionists held a series of "mass meetings" around the Wilkes-Barre area in an attempt to tap into the insurgency to bolster their numbers and influence. The NMU even went so far as to challenge Maloney and Boylan to a public debate on the proper strategy for the strike. Needless to say, both leaders ignored the invitation. When these efforts failed, party members blamed expelled Lovestonites, insurgent leaders, and UMW officials for betraying rank-and-file militancy. In their disappointment, anthracite Communists claimed that without their aggressive leadership Maloney and his insurgent associates would eventually "sell out" to the coal operators. For their part, Boylan and the UMW insurgents both denounced the Communists with equal vehemence. 71

In the early days of April, the Communist press reported that regional authorities brought powerful forces to bear on the strikers and their dissident leaders. It noted that the police and fire departments had unleashed a violent

70 Scranton Times, March 28, 29, 1931.
71 Daily Worker, March 30, 31, 1931, and Scranton Times, April 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 1930.
physical assault on picketers in several localities and that John L. Lewis himself had ordered the strike broken. It also took notice that local papers condemned the strike and called for its immediate cessation. The implication of these reports was that Maloney and associates would be sorely tempted to give in and compromise. This analysis of the situation proved essentially correct. After Maloney and Tomichak met secretly with Boylan and received assurances that the UMW would aggressively press the miners’ grievances, they called off the Glen Alden strike on April 8. The Communists declared in frustration, “This is what the National Miners Union had warned against almost from the first day of the struggle.” The April 8 Daily Worker placed Lewis’s picture on the front page with a caption labeling him “The Arch Betrayer.” Lewis, Vice President Phil Murray, and Secretary-Treasurer Thomas Kennedy traveled to Wilkes-Barre and met privately with W. W. Inglis, Glen Alden’s director, about these grievances, but were unable to obtain any commitments by the company to redress the grievances.  

Communists had dared to invest a great deal of hope in the possibility that the NMU could take control of the Glen Alden strike and advance its militant agenda in the anthracite. When it failed, they characteristically reproached themselves and tried to learn from what they perceived as their mistakes. In a Labor Unity article, “Lessons of the Glen Alden Strike,” the party’s analysis led to the conclusion that so-called insurgents could not be trusted to carry out the militant will of the rank and file, and that in similar circumstances in the future, the NMU and CPUSA must somehow be more successful in capturing control of similar walkouts at the earliest possible moment. The NMU’s shortcomings were freely admitted: “The NMU must of course take its responsibility for this failure because it was not sufficiently active among the miners prior to the strike. Because in its activity prior to the strike and for some time it did not come to the miners with the policy of the united front of all the miners on the basis of a program of struggle against the operators and the UMWA officials.” Communists, however, would not have to wait long to score a dramatic NMU success. By the end of April, anthracite newspapers were carrying the story of the dramatic Harlan County, Kentucky, epic that pushed the Glen Alden conflict out of peoples’ minds.  

72 Daily Worker, April 2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 1930.  
73 Labor Unity, April 4, 11, 18, 1931; Draper, “Communists and Miners,” 377; and Daily Worker, April 24, 25, 30, 1931.
After the 1931 Glen Alden strike, Nelson and local party leaders took steps to dissolve the NMU and send Communist miners back into the UMW to bore from within. NMU diehards resisted this change in policy. National CPUSA leaders, who essentially left this matter in the hands of regional Communists, were called in eventually to persuade resisting rank-and-file miners to abandon their new union and return to the UMW. The Communist members would work within “Unity Committees of Action” in UMW locals to which they belonged. In other developments, radical miners who had been members of the dissolved entity now found that they had little impact on the Boylan-Maloney feud that exploded at the UMW District 1 summer conference in Wilkes-Barre. In the Communist press, the Harlan County NMU drama pushed Communist activism in the anthracite off the front pages of the *Daily Worker*. Despite all these discouraging developments, anthracite Communists persevered. They implemented the decision of the 9th Plenum by conducting anti-war demonstrations; in fact, in August law enforcement in the lower anthracite communities of Minersville and Shamokin broke up two such Communist gatherings. The anthracite also sent delegates to the Pittsburgh Workers International Relief meeting; and Scranton Communists collected and sent relief funds to NMU strikers in Kentucky.\(^7^4\) Nevertheless, by August the NMU in the anthracite had completely disappeared as a formal organization.

The Unity Committees of Action did what they could to influence the UMW. Their first test came in the autumn of 1931 when regional Communists witnessed the year’s second major Glen Alden strike. On Monday, September 21, some 2,000 Loomis mine employees in Luzerne County called a wildcat strike against the giant coal company “because of a dispute over (pay) rates.” Predictably, they disregarded Boylan’s and the UMA’s orders for the men to return to work. On Wednesday, September 24, Maloney, again the dissident leader, called a general strike: “The insurgent side contends that the walkout was decided upon in an effort to secure equalization of work at all operations, a point in controversy for a long time.”\(^7^5\)

\(^7^4\) Nelson, Barrett, and Ruck, *Steve Nelson*, 125–56; *Daily Worker*, July 23, 31, 1931, and Aug. 4, 1, 21, 22, 27, 31, 1931. As in 1930, the Pennsylvania National Guard’s seasonal training exercise staged a mock war game pitting local guardsmen against the imaginary “Red” enemy. In spite of all these discouraging developments, however, anthracite Communists persevered.

\(^7^5\) *Scranton Times*, Sept. 22, 25, 1931.
When the job action brought widespread violence, the public and the police wrongly blamed the "Reds." On the third day of the walkout, picketers and "scabs" engaged in a series of bloody skirmishes; and after an attempted dynamiting, the police picked up some 146 striking miners for questioning. Law enforcement announced on October 1 that they would deport "alien radicals" caught in raids on mine picket lines. Concerned citizens who wrote passionate letters to the editors of the regional newspapers also blamed Communist "agitators" for the turmoil of this violent conflict. Anthracite Reds actually had little to do with the spontaneous outbreaks of labor violence. From the outset of the job action, Communists warned that "the only danger is that Maloney, who betrayed the last Glen Alden strike, will assume leadership for the same purpose." As Communists in the Unity Committees of Action appealed to striking miners to be wary of insurgent leaders, they set about organizing rank-and-file strike committees within the UMW locals in a vain attempt to keep the strike going. The Reds, however, were so hamstrung by police harassment and press hostility that it was all they could do to find a secure meeting place. When police in Hazelton closed the hall where the local Anthracite Unity Committee was to assemble on September 27, it had to expend valuable time and energy finding a relatively safe gathering site in order to avoid a police raid.76

Finally, on October 10, 1931, what the Communists had predicted happened. In early October, Lewis himself came to the anthracite to assure Maloney and the other insurgent leaders that if they called off the strike, a special miners-operators commission would be set up to investigate "equalization." When the walkout leaders accepted this assurance and called off the job action on October 10, the Communist press called it a "sell-out" and recruited a small number of disgruntled insurgents from the rank and file into their Unity Committees of Action.77

The Communist-led National Miners Union functioned in the Pennsylvania anthracite from 1928 to 1931. In September 1928 the CPUSA set up the NMU to comply with the official Comintern dual union policy mandated by "Third Period" ideology. Accordingly, the NMU in the

76 Daily Worker, Sept. 9, 26, 1931, and Oct. 1, 2, 1931; Scranton Times, Sept. 22, 26 29, 30, 1931.
77 Daily Worker, Oct. 2, 8, 9, 10, 12, 21, 27, 1931.
anthracite was supposed to quickly build a revolutionary organization of miners strong enough to challenge and defeat the AFL-UMW. This was 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 history in northeastern Pennsylvania. Regional NMU members set aside revolutionary rhetoric and generally ignored unrealistic expectations that might have 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 miners union that addressed a variety of progressive issues, including wages, hours, working conditions, union recognition, union democracy, and broad social reforms.

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