

BLACK VALLEY: PENNSYLVANIA'S ALLE-KISKI AND THE GREAT STRIKE OF 1919

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FROM deep in the forests of Western Pennsylvania's Laurel Highlands clear rivulets descend and create the Conemaugh River. At Saltsburg, fifty miles downstream from Johnstown, the Conemaugh joins the Loyalhanna, forming the Kiskiminetas River. The Kiskiminetas enters the Allegheny River twenty-eight miles northwest of Saltsburg, uniting the Allegheny and Kiskiminetas valleys. Strategically located and richly endowed by nature, the Alle-Kiski¹ played an important role in the economic and social evolution of the greater Ohio River basin. Fur trappers, salt miners, the Pennsylvania Canal, and the Pennsylvania Railroad moved westward through the Alle-Kiski Valley. Orange sulphur water, slag piles, and subsidence problems bear mute testimony to the area's recent industrial past. Coal and steel interests exploited the region's natural resources without regard for environmental consequences. The labor force of the Alle-Kiski fared little better.

In September 1919, mill workers in Apollo, Vandergrift, Hyde Park, Leechburg, Natrona, Brackenridge, and New Kensington went out on strike. Their actions were a direct response to a nationwide strike call issued by William Z. Foster and the National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers. The events which followed in the Alle-Kiski Valley were overshadowed by conflict in the Pittsburgh district. Histories of the Great Steel Strike make but scant reference to the Alle-Kiski.² Yet while antiunion activity in Pittsburgh was overt and sensational, the obstacles faced by Alle-Kiski strikers were no less formidable.

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1 The Allegheny-Kiskiminetas Valley is known locally as the Alle-Kiski.

2 David Brody, *Steelworkers in America* (New York, 1969); David Brody, *Labor in Crisis: The Steel Strike of 1919* (Philadelphia, 1965).

For World War I-era union organizers, the Alle-Kiski was Black Valley.³ Its antilabor tradition began with an abortive Apollo mill strike in 1893. Subsequently the valley acquired a reputation as a source of scab labor for Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia. As in other steelmaking centers, Alle-Kiski strikers faced hostile local governments, Red Scare hysteria, nativism, ethnic divisiveness, and private police forces. However, local conditions in the Alle-Kiski made union organizing particularly difficult in 1919. In 1916, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) had launched an intensive organizing drive in the Alle-Kiski. Coal operators resisted the union, and for more than a year shootings, beatings, bombings, and sabotage were commonplace. Only American entry into World War I brought a suspension of hostilities. Following the European armistice, few in the Alle-Kiski desired a return to the state of industrial strife that was existent before the war.

In 1919, steelworkers confronted some of the same adversaries that the coal miners had challenged in 1916. Van Bittner, president of United Mine Workers District Five, identified the coal miners of Lewis Hicks as the chief targets of the UMWA organizing drive in 1916. Hicks's mines reputedly paid Alle-Kiski miners sixty-three cents per day less than Pittsburgh miners, even though the men worked two hours more per day.⁴ But coal mining was but a part of the Hicks family's Alle-Kiski economic empire. Captain Alfred Hicks, a Welsh immigrant, founded Allegheny Steel and also owned several banks. Captain Hicks died just as the United Mine Workers drive began in 1916. His son, Lewis, was thoroughly antiunion and spared no expense or effort to stop the United Mine Workers. He relented only when the war came. The end of the war brought renewed efforts by Hicks to rid the valley of its unions.

The common destiny of coal miners and steelworkers in the Alle-Kiski became tragically clear in the late summer and fall of 1919. On August 26, 1919, Fannie Sellins, a United Mine Workers organizer, and Joseph Strzelecki, a miner, were shot and killed by Allegheny Coal and Coke Company deputy sheriffs in West Natrona.⁵ Mrs. Sellins had been an active UMWA organizer in the valley since 1916,

3 William Z. Foster, *The Great Steel Strike and Its Lessons* (New York, 1920), 146-47; *Amalgamated Journal*, Dec. 18, 1919. Interview with John Grill, coal miner, Jan. 20, 1978; interview with Sam Mendicino, coal miner, Dec. 27, 1977; interview with Roy and Harvey Bruner, steelworkers, May 20, 1978 (hereafter cited as Bruner interview).

4 *United Mine Workers Journal*, Feb. 15, 1917, Sept. 21, 1916.

5 It was common practice in the Alle-Kiski for deputy sheriffs to be hired and paid by private persons or companies.

and had been directing picketing at Allegheny Coal and Coke, a subsidiary of Allegheny Steel. She apparently understood that the future of the UMWA was linked to a successful organizing drive by the steelworkers. Less than a week before her death, she participated in an open-air steelworkers recruiting rally held in Natrona. Steelworkers who observed subsequent events realized that the attack on Sellins was also an attack on them.⁶

The Sellins incident outraged miners throughout the Alle-Kiski. Philip Murray of the UMWA dashed off demands to the governor and the president for an investigation. Miners staged a protest march. Citing the fact that Sellins was killed outside company property, one local newspaper claimed she was "brutally murdered."⁷ But public outrage did not develop. The Allegheny County sheriff investigated the allegations against "his" deputies. The coroner also investigated and convened a jury. That jury justified the killing as an act of self-defense by the deputies and publicly condemned those who preached anarchy and Bolshevism to alien workers.⁸

In the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty generated by the Sellins affair, Alle-Kiski steelworkers struck the Apollo Steel Company, American Sheet and Tin Plate plants in Vandergrift, Leechburg, and New Kensington, and Allegheny Steel and West Penn Steel in Natrona and Brackenridge. Few in number and without adequate financial resources, union organizers challenged Black Valley in the late summer of 1919. Steelworkers were organized into five lodges under the aegis of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers. The Amalgamated was never strong in the Alle-Kiski. It was in fact a craft union which served the interests of white, American-born skilled steelworkers. The influx of Italian, Polish, Lithuanian, and Slovak-speaking organizers promised not only a change in image but in membership for the Amalgamated.

6 *Valley Daily News*, Aug. 23, 1919. Interview with Michael Petrak, steelworker, Aug. 9, 1977 (hereafter cited as Petrak interview).

7 *New Kensington Daily Dispatch*, Aug. 29, 1919. Interview with John Schrecengost, coal miner, Mar. 1, 1978 (hereafter cited as Schrecengost interview).

The Sellins affair evoked a curious response from the UMWA. District Five records for this period apparently do not exist, but her death received scant notice in the *United Mine Workers Journal*. Available evidence suggests that local protests were not followed up by more vigorous action by the UMWA national executive board. Nor was the obvious opportunity to bind together the common interests of miners and steelworkers used by either the UMWA or the steelworkers organizing committee. When the UMWA struck Alle-Kiski mines in November, their action had no discernible impact on the steel district in the valley.

8 Allegheny County Coroner's Office, Vol. 13: 629, Sept. 29, 1919.

When the strike began on September 22, 1919, the results of the organizing campaign were not altogether encouraging. The union could boast that all but a handful of more than fifteen hundred Slovak, Polish, and Lithuanian steelworkers in North and East Vandergrift were on strike. Union recruiters admitted they were less successful among native-born American workers in Vandergrift proper. Across the Kiskiminetas River, few Slavic or Italian men worked in the Apollo mill. Nevertheless, it closed down completely for ten days, even though organizers complained that the commitment of the Apollo men was thin because many of the rollers and heaters were "veteran scabs."⁹ It is clear that throughout the strike, company spokesmen, newspapers, and union organizers quoted strike statistics that suited their own purposes. The situation was so fluid in the Alle-Kiski that it seems improbable that anyone had accurate numbers of strikers and nonstrikers. In some communities, including the Vandergrifts and Natrona, immigrant strikers outnumbered native-born strikers by large margins. Throughout the valley, the strike was therefore viewed as primarily for and by "foreigners." That apparent alien quality stigmatized the entire conflict as un-american.

The union was never able to deal effectively with the charge of un-americanism or radicalism. As mills in Apollo, Vandergrift, and Natrona advertised for hard-working, loyal, American men, union organizers protested that the national origins of the striking workers of the district were evenly divided. They also complained that American-born strikers were being relegated to the "Uncle Tom" class.¹⁰ Local organizers had anticipated the issue of radicalism and worked diligently to recruit war veterans in order to insure respectability for their cause. That tactic did not succeed, and radicalism remained a consuming issue throughout the strike.

The local press exhibited an acute interest in radicalism long before the strike.¹¹ During the strike, however, antiradical editorial comment intensified. The *Valley Daily News* observed that "so much apparent radicalism" existed because "there were grievances to correct in the present economic system." Those injustices could best be alleviated without the assistance of "Fosters, Trotskys and Lenins." "In-

⁹ Interview with former burgess of East Vandergrift, Dec. 15, 1977 (name withheld by request); interview with Poleslan Stemplinski, steelworker, Dec. 15, 1978.

¹⁰ *Amalgamated Journal*, May 1, 15, Sept. 25, 1919; *Valley Daily News*, Sept. 27, 1919.

¹¹ *Vandergrift News*, Mar. 20, 1919; *Apollo News Record*, Mar. 14, June 27, 1919.

equality of hours and working conditions could be remedied — propagation of Red Doctrines could not.” The *New Kensington Daily Dispatch* attempted to take a conciliatory line. Its editors believed “a few people in labor had been deceived by radical agitation.” The solution to industrial strife was to be found in collective bargaining and government arbitration. “Americanization,” editorialized the *Dispatch*, “was the best antidote for radicalism.”¹²

There is little evidence to support the charge that radicals had inspired labor unrest in the Alle-Kiski. The United Mine Workers had campaigned effectively against the International Workers of the World and its one-big-union idea. IWW agents passed out literature in the coalfields,¹³ but had little influence in the valley. Federal agents swept down on the New Kensington Polish Singing Society, arresting its officers while confiscating liquor and radical literature. That hardly represented an epidemic of radicalism. Yet it seemed to be a problem. A. Mitchell Palmer, radical-hunting attorney general of the United States, made a personal appearance in the valley pleading for an absolute industrial armistice.¹⁴ American society appeared to be under attack. For many in the Alle-Kiski, “Americanization” represented a patriotic solution by which all citizens might contribute to the defeat of internal subversion.

An Americanization Club was established in Leechburg in February 1919. It sponsored a program of English instruction for the diverse ethnic community. The avowed purpose of the club was the reduction of hatred for foreign-born members of the community. “If we are to receive full value from our alien and foreign born subjects,” commented the editor of the *Leechburg Advance*, “we will have to educate them.” The local burgess organized the Americanization Day Parade. Italian, Slovak, Polish, Greek, Jewish, and Hungarian miners societies supported the parade and its theme: “America First — One Flag for All.”¹⁵

The advent of the strike brought forth calls for the adoption of Americanization programs throughout the Alle-Kiski. The *New Kensington Daily Dispatch* supported Americanization programs such as that sponsored by the American Legion, an avowed open-shop or-

¹² *Valley Daily News*, Nov. 20, Sept. 12, Nov. 11, Oct. 15, 1919; *New Kensington Daily Dispatch*, Nov. 18, Dec. 19, Nov. 3, 1919.

¹³ Schrecengost interview. Interview with Giuseppe R. Steri, coal miner, May 18, 1978.

¹⁴ *New Kensington Daily Dispatch*, Nov. 15, 1919; *Valley Daily News*, Sept. 22, 1919.

¹⁵ *Leechburg Advance*, Feb. 28, Apr. 25, May 2, 1919.

ganization. Removal of William Z. Foster and a government roundup of other "IWW types" would supplement the assimilation of aliens. Suspicious persons who refused to become American citizens should be deported to the land of their birth.¹⁶ The rival *Valley Daily News* lamented the return of ethnic prejudice:

Since the end of the war Americans are lapsing into the old careless habits of alluding to foreign speaking laborers as "Hunkies," "Wops," "Guineas," and "foreigners." When the war was at its height and several thousand of these individuals were in the American Army public speaking managers, newspapers and the like referred to them in terms of the highest dignity.

Why shouldn't this decency of language be continued? It is true these men are aliens in the sense that they were born in foreign countries. But now that they are in America and largely through an industrial system that is constantly seeking cheap labor, it is the duty of that industrial system and of the country wherein located to Americanize the workers. There will be "Hunkies," "Wops," and "Guineas," just so long as they are not taught American ways. . . .¹⁷

Whether born of benevolence or bigotry, aluminum companies, steel mills, chambers of commerce, school districts, local governments, and ethnic organizations supported Americanization. Night classes, movies, picnics, lectures, and integrated playground activities promoted ethnic assimilation into the mainstream of American life. A Polish Citizens Club was formed in New Kensington. Only naturalized American citizens were eligible for membership.¹⁸ The price paid for Americanization in some communities was an erosion of cultural and community identity.

At the Kiski Theater in Vandergrift, *The Red Viper* pitted Americanism against Bolshevism. In this piece of political *opéra bouffe*, David, an admirer of Theodore Roosevelt and his principles, joined a radical band after witnessing the eviction of a poor family. Yolanda, his sweetheart, and a fanatical agitator, was selected to kill a judge who was prosecuting the radicals. Meanwhile, David witnessed little Mary Hogan (a product of the East Side, but full of true-hearted American patriotism) endeavoring to break up a meeting of those opposing American ideals. David admired her for this and later learned of her death at the hands of the radicals. Convinced of the error of his ways, David rushed to stop Yolanda from murdering the judge. He arrived just in time to stop the bombing, but was shot by the radical chief. Yolanda then realized the error of her ways, and

¹⁶ *New Kensington Daily Dispatch*, Sept. 3, 14, 17, 24, 29, 1919.

¹⁷ *Valley Daily News*, Sept. 3, 1919.

¹⁸ *New Kensington Daily Dispatch*, Nov. 22, 1919; *Valley Daily News*, Jan. 7, 1920, Oct. 25, 1919.

aided by the judge, she and David started life all over, this time as true Americans.¹⁹

In an atmosphere charged by allegations of treason, subversion, radicalism, and un-americanism, steelworkers attempted to build a union in the Alle-Kiski. Chief prize to be won was the American Sheet and Tin plant located in Vandergrift.²⁰ All eyes were on that facility, which housed thirty-two hot mills and a work force of nearly five thousand. Vandergrift was unique in the Alle-Kiski inasmuch as it was a planned industrial community. Disgruntled steel-maker George McMurtry left Apollo during the final decade of the nineteenth century and brought his operation to the opposite shore of the Kiskiminetas. Frederick Law Olmsted designed the community, and entrepreneurs connected with the mill systematically sold off the real estate. Native-born Protestant Americans of Scots-Irish and German extraction dominated downtown Vandergrift. Italians settled in the Vandergrift Heights section. East Vandergrift, known locally as Morning Sun, was Polish and Lithuanian. North Vandergrift was a Slovak village.

Most of the skilled jobs in the mill were held by native Americans, and possession of a Mason's ring aided advancement. The padrone system functioned in Vandergrift, and established Italian families dispensed jobs in some mills.²¹ The Vandergrift mill was the most modern of its type in the nation, and its five thousand workers were renowned for their productivity. If any mill town was to establish trends for the valley during the strike, it was Vandergrift.

Union organizers appeared in Vandergrift in July. By the second week in August, the union claimed a membership as low as six hundred and as high as three thousand. The numbers game continued as newspapers reported that one thousand Vandergrift men had met at the Casino Theater in order to proclaim their allegiance to the open shop. Spokesmen, including the chairman of the Steel Workers Relief Association, denounced the work of "paid outside agitators." This group defended working conditions and wage scales in the mill and may have represented native American opinion in Vandergrift. Union insiders argued that the newspaper accounts of the antiunion meeting

19 *Vandergrift News*, Nov. 20, 1919.

20 *New Kensington Daily Dispatch*, Sept. 22, 1919.

21 Interview with Giacomo Bruno, steelworker, Nov. 11, 1978. Interview with Harold Douth, steelworker, Dec. 8, 1977 (hereafter cited as Douth interview). Interview with Everett Beck, steelworker, June 15, 1978 (hereafter cited as Beck interview).

were inaccurate. Unionists claimed the seating capacity of the theater was only six hundred, and that only twelve rollers and nine heaters present represented men actually employed in the mill.²²

If the numerical strength of the strikers in Vandergrift remains open to dispute, it is nevertheless clear that the union enjoyed remarkable success in East Vandergrift. Lodge Number 135 elected native American officers, but commitment to the strike emanated from the Slavic steelworkers. Residents of Morning Sun who remained at work were escorted to the mill by mounted state constabulary. The burgess of East Vandergrift was of Polish extraction, and protected his community from unwarranted intrusions by constabulary and deputy sheriffs.²³ The union had little difficulty holding its meetings in East Vandergrift because the Lithuanian Hall was available to the strikers. The men of Morning Sun were so confident as to allow the local chamber of commerce to hold an antistrike meeting in their community. Sixteen chamber members and two scabs were reported to have been in attendance. Indeed, it appeared to the East Vandergrift organizers that "Black Valley had become 'White Valley.'" ²⁴

The optimism generated by early successes among the ethnic steelworkers of the Vandergrift mill was premature. Strikebreakers from Clearfield, Jefferson, and Indiana counties were imported by management, augmenting the skilled American workmen who remained on the job. American men, including some of those who walked off the job in September, reported that the organizing effort aimed at them was weak.²⁵ The fact that the "foreign element" constituted the bulk of the membership made it that much easier for anti-union forces to cast opprobrium on the strikers. Strike-related agitation and violence was attributed solely to "foreigners." An East Vandergrift mob was rumored ready to march on Vandergrift. Italian strikers from Vandergrift Heights were accused of ambushing workers on their way to the mill. The *Vandergrift News* warned that there was "an intense feeling . . . against . . . radical troublemakers and if they started anything there was no telling what might happen. The

²² *Amalgamated Journal*, Aug. 7, Sept. 18, Aug. 21, 1919; *Vandergrift News*, Aug. 7, 1919; *Valley News Dispatch*, Aug. 7, 1919.

²³ *Amalgamated Journal*, Sept. 18, Oct. 16, 1919; *Vandergrift News*, Sept. 25, 1919. Interview with former burgess of East Vandergrift (name withheld).

²⁴ *Amalgamated Journal*, Dec. 11, 1919.

²⁵ Beck interview; Douth interview.

American people in this community would not stand for any Bolshevism.”²⁶

The tactics employed by the antiunion forces in Vandergrift reflected those used throughout the Alle-Kiski. The strike was condemned as a Bolshevik conspiracy. Strikers, particularly the foreign-born, were radical dupes. Strikebreakers, including blacks, who were especially feared and hated by Alle-Kiski miners and mill workers, appeared throughout the valley.²⁷ It seems that the blacks' importation was for the purposes of increasing the atmosphere of uncertainty rather than permanent job displacement. Antiunion activity by local civil authorities was subtle. The heavy-handed repression of civil liberties, such as that which occurred in the Pittsburgh district, rarely happened in the Alle-Kiski. No doubt local steelmakers deemed overt acts of violence unnecessary. They must have understood the organizational weakness of the union. The approach of winter and the traditional conservatism of the community were obvious allies. Management therefore ran the mills with what labor it could find and waited for the strike to collapse.

Amid local union elections and glowing reports of worker solidarity, support for the strike eroded swiftly. By late October, mills in Apollo, Leechburg, and Vandergrift were reported operating at near capacity. Leechburg's local admitted that its recording secretary had defected but continued to insist that its membership was standing fast.²⁸ Apollo Steel Company, a small independent mill located across the Kiskiminetas River from East Vandergrift, was shut down for ten days. Apollo had long been considered the heart of antilabor sentiment in the upper Alle-Kiski, and the initial success of the strikers at Apollo Steel was a cause for rejoicing. Organizers proclaimed that Black Valley would soon be “white washed.”²⁹ They asserted that if the Apollo mill went union, Vandergrift and the rest of the valley would surely follow.

Perhaps the Apollo men were carried away by euphoria, for there was little reason for anyone familiar with Apollo to believe that its mill could determine the outcome of the strike. Apollo Steel was small, its workers numbering in the hundreds. Survivors of the strike

²⁶ *Vandergrift News*, Sept. 25, 1919; *New Kensington Daily Dispatch*, Oct. 13, 1919; *Vandergrift News*, Oct. 2, 9, 16, 23, 1919.

²⁷ *Amalgamated Journal*, Nov. 20, 1919.

²⁸ *Leechburg Advance*, Oct. 3, 31, 1919; *Amalgamated Journal*, Oct. 24, 1919.

²⁹ Bruner interview. *Amalgamated Journal*, Nov. 13, 1919.

recall but a small number of Slavic and Italian workers in the mill.³⁰ Nevertheless, management attributed the strike to its "foreign" workmen and advertised for patriotic American workers to defeat the "un-american" strike. Native-born rollers and heaters, some reputed to be stockholders, voted to return to work on the seventh day of the strike. Skittish town fathers prohibited picketing and even postponed Halloween celebrations because of the strike. Crestfallen organizers were soon complaining that merchants were withholding credit and local newspapers were "scab to the core." Only the United Mine Workers Hall was open to union meetings. Discouraged officials of Local Number 141 admitted that attendance at meetings was dropping and that only diehards continued to hold out.

Union success in the lower Alle-Kiski was no less ephemeral. Local Number 115 of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers elected a slate of officers pledged to the complete unionization of the New Kensington mills. The Pittsburgh and Pennsylvania plants of American Sheet and Tin Plate were the chief union targets in New Kensington. A team of organizers, Italian- and Polish-speaking men among them, aided local president Amos Connor in a well-coordinated recruiting program. In order to win all segments of the mill community to the union cause, meetings were held at Odd Fellows, Polish Falcon, and Garibaldi halls. Worker solidarity was further strengthened when the United Mine Workers local allowed steel organizers to use their building as strike headquarters. By mid-September, the union claimed that 972 of the 1,100 employed by American Sheet and Tin Plate had joined the union. When rallies by antiunion forces fizzled and most of the men walked off the job, New Kensington's city fathers prepared to break the strike.³¹

Even as the local press defended the right of free speech and assembly, union organizers were arrested for "refusing to move when ordered." The burgess of New Kensington then called for a meeting with local strike leaders. That gathering was convened ostensibly for the purpose of formulating a plan to expedite the peaceful return of antistrike steelworkers to the idle mills. Following opening amenities, the burgess revealed his real intentions. He lectured strike leaders that 60 percent of the men employed by American Sheet and Tin Plate were "Americans," and they all desired to return to their

³⁰ Interview with Jim Kerr and Oscar Morrison, steelworkers, Dec. 1, 1977. *Apollo Sentinel*, Oct. 3, 1919; *Apollo News Record*, Oct. 10, 17, 1919; *Amalgamated Journal*, Nov. 13, Dec. 18, 1919.

³¹ *Amalgamated Journal*, Feb. 27, 1919; *New Kensington Daily Dispatch*, Sept. 20, 1919.

jobs. He planned to guarantee their safe return to work. If the strikers who remained out started trouble, the burgess vowed that the "authorities would finish it."³²

Two days after the meeting, fifty special deputies stood by as less than 100 men reentered the mills. The ploy by the burgess failed to end the strike immediately, but confident management "reopened" the mills. Afterwards, a small yet unmistakable trickle of men began to return to work. Rumors began to circulate that only Americans and men with citizenship papers would be rehired. Liberty Bond payments were returned to the strikers. The New Kensington Social and Philanthropic Society announced that only the "deserving poor," and not strikers, would receive food relief. Local authorities cracked down on "troublemakers" and "radicals." Police arrested Greek "terrorists" allegedly imported from West Virginia to bomb local steel plants. Authorities apprehended local steelworkers, union officers among them, following a rash of "terrorist" bombings and shootings. Most were later released for want of sufficient evidence, but the campaign of repression, though mild by Pittsburgh district standards, eroded the will of the strikers. As in Apollo and Vandergrift, local union organizers continued to insist as late as December that New Kensington remained on the "white map."³³ It is, nevertheless, clear that a combination of defectors and strikebreakers had American Sheet and Tin Plate running close to capacity by early November.

On the west bank of the Allegheny, steelworkers struck Allegheny Steel and West Penn Steel in Natrona and Brackenridge. The Sellins shooting made them acutely aware of the dangers involved.³⁴ Yet no more than four days after her death an estimated 1,000 workers attended an open-air rally in Natrona. As in other Alle-Kiski communities, the strike was attributed to the "foreign speaking" or "slavish" men. The meeting was indeed conducted in Polish and English. Eight organizers, some based across the river in New Kensington, were said to be at work in Natrona and Brackenridge.³⁵

Allegheny Steel and West Penn Steel wasted no time in making their feelings known to the men. They distributed open-shop posters liberally throughout Natrona, Brackenridge, and Tarentum. Anti-

³² *New Kensington Daily Dispatch*, Sept. 24, 1919; *Valley Daily News*, Sept. 25, Oct. 4, 5, 6, 7, 1919.

³³ *Valley Daily News*, Sept. 30, Oct. 4, 1919; *New Kensington Daily Dispatch*, Oct. 7, 1919; *Valley News*, Nov. 13, Oct. 10, 1919; *New Kensington Daily Dispatch*, Oct. 20, Nov. 3, 1919; *Amalgamated Journal*, Dec. 22, 1919.

³⁴ Petrak interview.

³⁵ *Valley Daily News*, Aug. 15, 30, 1919.

union mill workers were encouraged to meet on company premises to discuss the impending strike. Company spokesmen reported that secret ballots collected from sheet mills and open-hearth departments numbered ten-to-one against the strike. The superintendent of West Penn Steel promised his men an eight-hour day "as soon as practical." The president of the Allegheny Valley Chamber of Commerce appealed to the mill workers as "loyal Americans" to judge "soberly and carefully" the wisdom of the strike.³⁶

During the initial stages of the strike, 60 percent of the men failed to report for work. The union claimed that only "highly paid men" from the sheet mills remained at work. Seventy-five percent of the "foreign speaking" workers were said to have signed union cards.³⁷ Natrona and Brackenridge passed the first night of the strike without incident, as local police and firemen patrolled the streets. The Sellins affair had occurred less than a month before, and more violence was a distinct possibility. A small contingent of state constabulary took up stations in Natrona and Harrison Township. Deputy sheriffs also arrived in Tarentum and Brackenridge.

Ironically, the community in which Fannie Sellins was so brutally shot failed to adopt the repressive measures used in New Kensington. Apparently angered by the usurpation of local police powers by the county and state, local government officials demanded that the constabulary leave their community. On September 24, a large crowd had milled about the Polish Falcon Hall in Natrona, where Stephen Pajewski, the first Natrona soldier wounded in World War I, was being married. Union organizers used the occasion to deliver speeches to their constituents and were arrested by the constabulary for unlawful assembly. Although the constabulary was outnumbered fifty-to-one, no violence developed. Local authorities feared, however, that the mere presence of the constabulary might have provoked a riot.³⁸

A delegation of Harrison Township supervisors went to Pittsburgh and met with the Allegheny County sheriff, William S. Haddock. Sheriff Haddock, in concert with local civil authorities, had conducted a systematic program of repression against strikers in the Pittsburgh district. Harrison Township had received considerable notoriety in the Sellins case. The supervisors requested that the sheriff keep his men out of residential areas in Natrona and Bracken-

36 *Ibid.*, Aug. 29, Sept. 19, 20, 1919.

37 *Ibid.*, Sept. 22, 23, 1919.

38 *Ibid.*, Sept. 25, 1919.

ridge, and that those communities be patrolled by local officers. They also demanded the restoration of free speech and the right of peaceful assembly for all their constituents, including strikers. The sheriff ordered his men to report to the local police chief and police committee, but county deputies remained in the community. Strike benefits were to be paid once a week under the supervision of a sheriff's deputy and a state trooper. By the time the ban on public meetings was rescinded, union officials had arranged to hold their meetings across the river in Westmoreland County.³⁹

While local and county officials thrashed out their jurisdictional dispute, West Penn Steel and Allegheny Steel moved to defeat the strike. Supervisory personnel were armed and deputized. Mill cranes were operated to give the appearance that production was under way. Placards advertising job opportunities for American men appeared in Brackenridge, Natrona, and Tarentum.⁴⁰ As in other Alle-Kiski communities, the strike ground to a quiet stalemate by mid-October. Slowly the demoralized, exhausted, and fainthearted began to straggle back to their jobs. Reports of the employment of black, Greek, and Mexican strikebreakers at Allegheny Steel and West Penn Steel reflected conditions throughout the valley.⁴¹ Many of those who remained on strike had found jobs in distant mills, in the mines, or with the Pennsylvania Railroad.

The steel strike officially ended in Pittsburgh on January 8, 1920, but it had been defeated in the Alle-Kiski two months earlier. Long after their cause was lost, union locals continued to hold elections and bravely predicted the organization of a new labor party for the 1920 election.⁴² As his union dissolved, A. G. Shupe, poet laureate of Apollo Local Number 141, memorialized the hopes and dreams of Alle-Kiski labor:

There'll be no black valley in the U.S.A.,
There'll be no black valley in the U.S.A.,
There'll be no black valley in the U.S.A.,
When Union Labor wins the day.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Interview with W. E. Pavitt, foreman, Allegheny Steel, June 5, 1978. *Valley Daily News*, Sept. 27, 1919.

⁴¹ *Valley Daily News*, Oct. 17, Nov. 25, 1919; *Amalgamated Journal*, Nov. 20, 1919.

⁴² *Amalgamated Journal*, Dec. 7, 11, 18, 1919.

Trace its history back to 1893;
Scabs sent out o'er the land of the free
Wherever white men struck, they always have tough luck
Scabs from Kiski Valley they always had to buck;
But there'll be no black valley in the U.S.A.,
When Union Labor wins the day.

Kiski Valley, known far and wide in every countryside,
"Black Valley," they chide, "have no industrial pride?"
Go back home and be a man and stand up for the right.
Organize your mills and make your valley white.
Then there'll be no black valley in the U.S.A.,
When Union Labor wins the day.

With a Union of the States the question should appeal—
Why shouldn't we have a union in the U.S. Steel?
Why shouldn't we have a union in the Independent Mills?
Then we wouldn't have to swallow those autocratic pills.
Then we'll work with our might to make this valley white,
And there'll be no black valley in the U.S.A.,
When Union Labor wins the day.

Union Labor has been true to the old Red, White and Blue;
Worked and fought and saw the world war thru;
Worked and fought for Democracy,
Worked and fought that the world might be free;
Let these promises be fulfilled and let labor have some say.
Then there'll be no black valley in the U.S.A.,
When Union Labor wins the day.

We've worked and saved, bought bonds and stamps to help
foot the bills,
There's yet one task that's left till last, important tho' it be—
Call Gary's bluff, convert his scabs, and organize his mills.
Bring all the black sheep to the fold and make this valley free.
Then there'll be no black valley in the U.S.A.,
When Union Labor wins the day.⁴³

Shupe represented a numerically small but dedicated core of native American strikers who held out until the bitter end. Native Americans had directed the strike in the valley and continued to

43 A. G. Shupe, "There'll Be No Black Valley," *ibid.*, Dec. 18, 1919.

stand for election to local union offices even after it was apparent that the strike was lost. Like their ethnic brothers who elected them, the Americans fought for higher wages, shorter hours, better working conditions, and recognition of their union. The participation and presence of such men was masked by company propaganda and the sheer numbers of ethnic steelworkers involved in the strike.

The failure of the Great Steel Strike crushed the hopes of Alle-Kiski labor for nearly two decades. Strike committees that attempted to expedite the return of the men to the mills were rebuked by management. Steelworkers were rehired or blacklisted individually. Company unions appeared throughout the valley. Not even a receding Red Scare softened the blow. While editorials blasted the "blundering deportations," "gag laws," and "tomfoolery" produced by the "Red Menace,"⁴⁴ local coal operators intensified their campaign against organized labor. Buoyed by the success of the steel industry, and the failure of the coal strike in November 1919, emboldened coal operators attempted to rid the valley of the UMWA. The vicious bituminous strikes of 1922 and 1927 followed. When the Great Depression arrived, the last vestige of organized labor in the Alle-Kiski had been eliminated. In 1937, protected by both state and federal labor legislation, and with financial support provided by the UMWA, Philip Murray and the Steel Workers Organizing Committee entered the Alle-Kiski. Only then did organized labor find a home in Black Valley.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Jan. 15, 1920; *New Kensington Daily Dispatch*, Feb. 27, 1920.