

## AFD Ep 333 Links and Notes - The Coal Strikes of 1902 and 1919

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coal\\_strike\\_of\\_1902](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coal_strike_of_1902) (May 12 - Oct 23)

"Anthracite coal strike" Anthracite coal burns more efficiently, less smoke than bituminous coal  
Workers threatened the nation's winter fuel supply

First major labor dispute mediated by the federal government acting as a neutral party.

Strikers sought an 8-hour work day, wage increase and union recognition.

Strike resulted in 9-hour work day (reduced from 10) and wage increase of 10% for workers, higher price from coal and not recognizing the union for the owners.

Background: bituminous mine strike in 1897 and minor anthracite mine strikes in 1899-1900 increased labor power for United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). However, anthracite owners were more formidable due to formation of oligopoly (fluctuations in market led to consolidation, same process that we've seen in oil, steel, and railroad industries). In 1900, UMWA struck for wage increases and union recognition in September. Owners refused to negotiate, until J.P. Morgan met with them to persuade them to end the strike so as not to hurt President McKinley's re-election. Strikers got a wage increase, but no union recognition, effectively kicking the can down the road until 1902.

1902: George Baer, president of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, refused to negotiate with John Mitchell, president of UJWA, mediated by the National Civic Federation, a group of progressive business owners who approved of collective bargaining.

Roosevelt sent his Commissioner of Labor, Carroll Wright to investigate. Wright's report recommended 9-hour work day and limited collective bargaining. Roosevelt hid the report to not appear too pro-labor. Roosevelt wanted to stave off a disastrous winter, and even considered nationalizing the mines, putting the U.S. Army in control!

J.P. Morgan, reprising his role from the 1900 strike at the behest of Secretary of War Elihu Root, reached out to Baer to persuade him to agree to arbitration by a commission. Baer agreed because it meant he didn't have to recognize the union; all discussions would be through the commission. Commission consisted of 7 members: a military engineer, a mining engineer, a judge, an expert in the coal business, and an "eminent sociologist". The employers were willing to accept a union leader as the "eminent sociologist," so Roosevelt named E. E. Clark, head of the railway conductors' union, as the "eminent sociologist." After Catholic leaders exerted pressure, he added a sixth member, Catholic bishop [John Lancaster Spalding](#), and Commissioner Wright as the seventh member.

The strike ended, and the Anthracite Coal Strike Commission got to work. They toured the coal region, and Commissioner Wright used the DOL to collect data on the cost of living for the workers. The commissioners held hearings in Scranton over the next three months, taking testimony from 558 witnesses, including 240 for the striking miners, 153 for nonunion mineworkers, 154 for the operators, and eleven called by the Commission itself. Baer made the closing arguments for the coal operators, while lawyer [Clarence Darrow](#) closed for the workers.

Although the commissioners heard some evidence of terrible conditions, they concluded that the "moving spectacle of horrors" represented only a small number of cases. By and large, social conditions in mine communities were found to be good, and miners were judged as only partly justified in their claim that annual earnings were not sufficient "to maintain an American standard of living."

Baer said in his closing arguments, "These men don't suffer. Why, hell, half of them don't even speak English".<sup>[17]</sup> Darrow, for his part, summed up the pages of testimony of mistreatment he had obtained in the soaring rhetoric for which he was famous: "We are working for democracy, for humanity, for the future, for the day will come too late for us to see it or know it or receive its benefits, but which will come, and will remember our struggles, our triumphs, our defeats, and the words which we spake."<sup>[18]</sup>

In the end, however, the rhetoric of both sides made little difference to the Commission, which split the difference between mineworkers and mine owners. The miners asked for 20% wage increases, and most were given a 10% increase. The miners had asked for an [eight-hour day](#) and were awarded a nine-hour day instead of the standard ten hours then prevailing. While the operators refused to recognize the United Mine Workers, they were required to agree to a six-man arbitration board, made up of equal numbers of labor and management representatives, with the power to settle labor disputes. Mitchell considered that *de facto* recognition and called it a victory.

Aftermath: the behavior of the private Coal and Iron Police led to the formation of the Pennsylvania State Police in 1905, signed into law by Governor Pennypacker. Union membership soared for UWMA and AFL. UWMA was contrasted with the violent strikes of WFM. Roosevelt used the success of the commission in providing a "Square Deal" as his motto for his administration. There were no major coal strikes until 1919.

<https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/coalstrike>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_Mine\\_Workers\\_coal\\_strike\\_of\\_1919](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Mine_Workers_coal_strike_of_1919)

- [I think this was a precursor to the 1937 steel strike and once again tied the miners and steelworkers together. Bituminous [coking coal](#) is involved in steel production so mine unionists viewed a supply chain connection.]
- There had been less strike activity in coal mines since 1902 because of how successful the strike outcome had been then
- From Nov 1 1919, about a year after WW1, to Dec 10 1919, there was a strike of about 394,000 coal miners in 21 states, representing about 64% of all bituminous coal miners. The strike was victorious with a 14% wage increase, despite court injunctions and a falter in leadership by [John L. Lewis](#) (newly acting head) of the United Mineworkers of America, who at one point tried to call off the strike while it was in progress.
- It occurred during:
  - [the first Red Scare](#) (Jan 1919-April 1920)
    - Newspapers dutifully repeated mine owner claims that the strike was being funded and directed by Lenin and Trotsky themselves, according to research by Robert K. Murray in his 1955 book "Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919–1920"
  - [Woodrow Wilson's incapacitation from stroke](#) (Sept/Oct-onward)
    - Incredibly, when the strike was resolved, it was supposedly through an agreement proposed personally by Woodrow Wilson, who would likely not have been in a condition to do so, although he did meet in bed very briefly 5 days earlier with a delegation from Congress investigating his condition. Wilson as the solver of the coal strike on December 10 was the official version of events in reporting at the time:  
<https://www.nytimes.com/1919/12/11/archives/miners-finally-agree-only-one-dissenting-voice-when-leaders-vote-to.html>
    - Analysis of the timeline of Wilson's 1919 stroke and incapacity period:  
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/woodrow-wilson-stroke>

- Technical continued state of war (Nov 1918 ceasefire was repeatedly extended through peace treaty negotiations and the US didn't officially end wartime powers until March 1921), which gave extra emergency powers to the government (via Atty Gen. Palmer, claiming Wilson's consent) against strikers, despite promises from several years earlier to the AFL that these would not be used to break organized labor
- and also the Steel Strike of 1919, which had begun on September 22 and collapsed on Jan 8 1920. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steel\\_strike\\_of\\_1919](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steel_strike_of_1919)
- The Steel Strike led by the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers was a skilled workers strike. This was their final attempt to recover from Homestead in 1892 and the fiasco in 1901 where they won almost all their demands from US Steel but then kept pushing and ended up losing everything. **Miners in Pennsylvania played an important role in steelworker organizing in early 1919 by going on strike to protest local governments refusing to allow steelworkers to rent spaces for meetings on the pretext of controlling the spread of the third wave of Spanish Flu.** Although the steel companies were shocked by how widespread the steel strike was, especially given the incompetent efforts by AFL to control all steel organizing nationally and not let the local workers make decisions, they rapidly regrouped and began a propaganda campaign in the public to denounce the striking steelworkers as dangerous immigrants and communists, especially highlighting William Z Foster (formerly of the IWW and future General Secretary of the Communist Party USA after WW2) who was unusually dangerous because of his WW1 and then-ongoing efforts to integrate every single union related to the meatpacking industry in Chicago. The AFL was broadly unhelpful throughout. There is a detailed analysis of the factors in the failure of the 1919 steel strike in this article from History.com: <https://www.history.com/news/steel-strike-of-1919-defeat>
- The 1919 coal strike was concentrated in bituminous coal mines, unlike the anthracite focus of the 1902 strike. Anthracite was much more important for home heating than bituminous so I am not sure that the winter timing was a huge factor in 1919, but it might have played some role.
- After the 1919 strike, UMWA continued organizing more miners with the success of the 1919 strike, and from 1920 to 1921 there was spectacular violence in Matewan WV perpetrated against the miners by the owners (including shootouts, assassinations, and private plane bombings) until federal troops arrived to stop it: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/forgotten-matewan-massacre-was-epicenter-20th-century-mine-wars-180963026/> It is now home to the West Virginia Mine Wars Museum opened in 2015: <https://www.wvminewars.com/about>
- John L. Lewis had stumbled a bit in the 1919 strike but went on to rule the UMWA with an iron fist for 40 years, including through the Great Depression and World War II, and controversially expelling socialists and other leftist radicals during the 1920s, before then inviting some of them back to participate in the organizing drives of the 1930s and the Congress of Industrial Unions