
The Great Leadville Strike: Its Lessons for Labor (April-May 1897) ¹

A Brief Statement of Facts.

The strike of the miners in the Leadville district has passed into history. It was one of the longest and most bitterly contested battles ever fought between organized labor and organized capital. Beginning June 19th, 1896, and continuing until March 9th, 1897, the strike extended over a period of eight months and 18 days.

It is a trite declaration that a strike is a war. This is more or less true of all strikes, but it applies with peculiar force to the prolonged strike of the Leadville miners. It was, indeed, war and both sides so regarded it and made preparations accordingly. There are those who regard all strikes as unmixed evils. They are forever telling us about the losses entailed, the damage that has been done, the bitterness that has been aroused, and so on to the end of the chapter. It is admitted that in the great labor strikes of the past many things occurred that were to be deplored, but it is safe to declare that there was not one but had its good results. And so, whatever there may be to regret in connection with the Leadville strike, it is certain to be productive of good and to have its lessons for those who are capable of profiting by observation and experience.

At the time of the strike there were about 2,600 members in the local union, or about 97 percent of all the miners employed in the district. It will thus be observed that the miners were what may be called thoroughly organized, and it must be said to their credit that from first to last, through all the long and weary months, through good and evil report, they stood together, true to their organization, and only an insignificant number returned to work while the strike was in progress. Having been upon the ground and having had the opportunity of meeting and talking with these men, I speak advisedly when I say that they were impelled by pure and honest motives and that they conscientiously believed they were in the right, and this no doubt accounts for the facts that there were scarcely any deserters from the ranks and that the strike lasted so long a time.

What was the cause of the strike and were the men justified in declaring it? In answering this question as in all other matters which I shall discuss, it will be my purpose to be fair and to state facts. I quote as follows from the official report of the joint special legislative committee by whom a thorough investigation of the strike was made.² Under the head of "Grievances Before the Strike," the report says:

It is in evidence that for some time, at least several months, before the strike was declared, the miners complained that a miner and his family could not live on \$2.50 a day unless he worked every day, including Sundays, and that even then he would run in debt in case of sickness in his family or other temporary misfortunes and that these complaints were communicated to the mine managers from time to time in an informal way and the suggestion made that the scale be raised to \$3; it is also in evidence that there was a fear on the part of some miners that some of the mines paying \$3 per day would reduce the scale to \$2.50, and two officers and a member of the union testified directly and unequivocally that one of the mine managers who was paying the \$3 scale without discrimination had told them that unless the scale was raised to \$3 throughout the camp, he would be compelled to reduce the scale to \$2.50; this was unequivocally denied by the manager in question, but your committee is of the opinion that these officers of the union relied upon their understanding of the interview and entertained a fear that the general scale might be reduced to \$2.50.

It is not my purpose to enter into details, but simply to state the salient points in the causes that led up to the strike and when the reader has these fixed in his mind he will be better able to determine whether or not the miners were justified in their subsequent action. It will hardly be disputed by fair-minded persons that a miner with a family at Leadville must live with rigid economy on a wage of \$2.50 per day. Living expenses are perhaps higher than in any other city in the Union. Every item that enters into the household necessities, even to water, must be purchased. If sickness or injury falls to his lot, he is doomed. Wages cease and debt begins and a workingman in debt is no longer a free man. I am aware that there are those who declare that \$2.50 per day is a good wage and that a miner and his family should be able to get along comfortably at that rate, and for their benefit I quote again from the report of the legislative committee. In presenting the statement of the expenses of the soldiers who were quartered

at Leadville during the strike, which amounted to almost \$200,000 for a period or less than five months, or about \$40,000 per month, the committee says:

Taking the amount of the total expenses and dividing it by the number of days each man served, it appears that the average expense per man per day was \$2.71.

This statement, considered in connection with the matter of living expenses, is in the nature of an "eye-opener." A wage of \$2.50 per day of hard and hazardous work is sufficient for a miner to support his whole family, but the state is required to pay \$2.71 per day to support a soldier who has nothing to do but kill time. In other words, it costs a soldier 21 cents per day more for his own expenses while doing nothing than is allowed a miner who works like a galley-slave for the support of himself and wife and four or five children. Those who are interested in such affairs and are capable of fair play may ponder the proposition at their leisure.

Then again, there was a fear on the part of the miners, as reported by the legislative committee, that a general reduction to \$2.50 would be made if the scale of the \$2.50 miners was not raised to \$3. The miners declare that the statement was made by a prominent mine manager, the fact remains that the miners were under that impression. They felt that their wages were in jeopardy. Some of them knew by experience that when reduction begins it does not usually stop until the bottom is reached. They had seen coal miners in Pennsylvania gradually reduced from \$4 and \$5 a day to 65 cents per day and at last driven from the mines as if they had been wild beasts to make room for the degraded creatures who had been imported to take their places. They were anxious to maintain, if possible, an American standard of living. They desired to preserve their own self-respect and independence. They thought of home and wife and children and resolved to defend their rights by such proper means as they had at their command. They perfected their organization, appointed and authorized committees to present their complaints to the mine managers, which was done, but as the concessions that were asked were refused, the strike was declared and this by a unanimous vote of the miners in mass meeting assembled.

Much has been said about the strike having been caused by the "labor agitator," the "demagogue," etc., but nothing could be farther from the

truth. The abuse which was heaped upon President Boyce of the Western Federation of Miners and some of his associates was wholly unwarranted and grossly unjust. The miners themselves ordered the strike and if a single one of them was opposed to it, he uttered no word to indicate his opposition. Neither have the miners at any time attempted to shirk the responsibilities of their acts. They have avowed again and again that the strike was their own voluntary action and that win or lose, they had no regret for what they had done.

Harmony and Unity and Their Limits.

Rarely has so large a body of men as were engaged in the Leadville strike acted in all matters with such harmony and unanimity. I was particularly struck by this feature of the strike. During all the time I was at Leadville I never heard a single complaint. There was confidence in the leaders and mutual confidence among the members; and, feeling that they were battling in a righteous cause, they stood by one another as if bound together by hoods of steel. There is in this a beautiful lesson for those who are capable of rising above selfish and sordid influences and appreciating an exhibition of devotion to principle and fidelity to fellow man.

As I write these lines I remember the statements that were made and often repeated about the strike having been instigated by a few red-mouthed agitators. All the charge until the curtain fell upon the scene. A more flagrant falsehood was never uttered. It may be that those who made the charge repeated it so often that they themselves believed it, but there was not a scintilla of truth in it. In declaring the strike and carrying it forward, the men at all times *acted for themselves*. Whether the strike was wise or otherwise, the great body of the men ordered it by acclamation, and to this day not one of them can be found to avow the contrary, and to declare that it was precipitated by a few demagogues against the better judgment of the majority is to pervert the truth and insult the intelligence of men. I dwell particularly upon this point, for I know by bitter experience at what a disadvantage men are placed who are the victims of falsehood and misrepresentation at such a critical time. The "gullible public" is led to believe that the strike was wholly uncalled for, that it was incited by a few irresponsible creatures who are enemies of society and monsters of depravity, and while, perhaps, they may express some sympathy for the

strikers for being so easily misled, they are almost invariably against the strike and mass all their powers to crush it, not as much as dreaming that in so doing they are simply digging their own graves.

The agitator, the leader, the pathfinder has in every age paid the penalty imposed by the hosts of ignorance and superstition upon all self-sacrificing, sympathetic souls that ever sought to free and ennoble the race. Jesus Christ, the "Man of Sorrow," was nailed to the cross; Socrates was forced to drink the fatal hemlock; Columbus was chained in a dungeon as if he were a wild beast. Were it required, the list could be made as long as the track of the human race. Years, sometimes centuries after they are dust, monuments are reared above them in grateful memory of their service to mankind. Living, they are denounced as demagogues, and dead, they are metamorphosed into demigods, and the world pays them the tribute of its profoundest reverence. This has always been the way, and we have no reason to believe that a time will come when it will be otherwise. The only reason given why this should be so is that

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform.³

Taking a backward look, I am persuaded that the differences between the miners and the mine managers could have been easily adjusted had there been a mutual disposition to do so. It is safe to say, in the light of the fearful proportions to which the strike expanded and the loss of life and property, the paralysis of business and the suffering and distress which followed, that if it were to do over again the strike would not be called, and it is equally safe to assume that the mine managers, as well as the miners, would go liberally half way to prevent it. And this is one of the important lessons of the strike which it is to be hoped will be heeded by all.

From the testimony brought before the legislative committee, and from the evidence which came to me personally, I am satisfied that the trouble had been "brewing" a long time, that from small beginnings the situation became more serious and the relations more strained until mutual ugliness developed and made anything like reasonable consideration of the existing differences next to impossible. The miners were organized. So were the mine managers, the latter letting the example. The mine managers, some of them at least, bought large numbers of guns and transformed

their mines into forts and arsenals long before the strike was declared, while the miners made no purchase of arms until after the strike was on. The report of the legislative committee says:

The evidence shows that at the time of the strike the manager of the Little Johnny had about twelve rifles and five shotguns at the mine and 150 rifles which had been purchased on a former occasion, but which were not then at the mine; that immediately after the Coronado affair he purchased an additional 150 rifles and sent the 300 to the Little Johnny mine and armed and drilled the non-union men he was importing from Missouri to work in the mine.

That the Coronado mine, a year before the strike, had built an eight foot fence of one-inch boards around its premises, which occupied an area of about 200 feet square; and that early in August the owners of the Coronado constructed inside of and about six feet from the fence; that some time before the Coronado attack, the Emmet and RAM built a fence around their premises, and the Emmet also covered the tramway crossing the road with boards containing portholes and made other preparations.

In such a struggle workingmen are always at a disadvantage, and the odds are nearly always against them. They are so poor, and there are so many of them. Their surplus earnings, if any they have, are soon consumed. On the other hand, their employers are few in number and usually rich, or at least far above the "immediate want" line. They and their families can eat three times a day and fare comfortably for an indefinite period. They are shrewd, smart men. They meet in a small room and plan in secret and there is no danger of a paid emissary from the other side getting into their council and betraying their secrets. They understand the conditions that confront the strikers: that it is entirely a question of the stomach and that starvation will determine the contest, and give them the victory, and so they simply — wait.

How different the situation with the workingmen? There is an army of them and they are more or less poor and without resources. When their wages cease, hunger begins, and a hunger pang gnawing at his child will take the courage out of the strongest man, or drive him to desperation, one or the other. To feed and clothe and shelter this army, vastly augmented by the women and children who are dependent upon them, requires daily an enormous outlay. The organization under whose banner they are

struggling responds nobly, but being composed wholly of wage laborers, most of whom have all they can do to provide for their own families, the drain severely taxes the resources of the order and soon their "relief," upon which the life of the strike depends, has to be suspended and ignominious surrender is all that is left to the hapless strikers.

Another great disadvantage is that they make no plans that are not instantly communicated to the other side. They have got to take the whole big crowd into their confidence and they might as well hold their meetings on the public square, for the spies, spotters, and sneaks of the corporations are always in their meetings and report fully everything that is done and every move that is contemplated. Many of their number are ignorant and suspicious and can be easily persuaded that their leaders are designing knaves and getting rich out of the strike; or they can be arrayed against one another, or, worse still, influenced to desert their brethren, return to work, and turn against their former comrades by aiding to defeat them, sink all to the depths of slavery and degradation.

Then, again, every violation of law, every criminal act committed during a strike is charged upon the strikers. No matter though they be totally innocent. The press grossly exaggerates every incident that is calculated to prejudice and influence the public, and often lies outright to accomplish this end. Labor, having no press that reaches the great public, must submit in silence. Thus "public sentiment," often brutally ignorant and misdirected, turns upon the struggling, suffering poor, smites them to the earth, and plants its remorseless heels in their emaciated, prostrate bodies.

In the Great Railroad Strike of 1894 the riots were incited, the fires were started, and innocent people were shot by the murderous minions of the railroad corporations, but all this was charged upon the strikers, and it lost them the strike and sent them to jail. The proof is simply overwhelming. Only a few days ago William Bloom, who was arrested at Cleveland, Ohio, for arson, confessed that while serving as a militiaman at Chicago in 1894, during the Pullman strike, he set fire to a grain elevator and more than 50 railroad cars, and that he had committed similar atrocities under similar circumstances at a number of other points.

The Necessity of Solidarity.

Solidarity is one of the principal lessons to miners in the Leadville strike. The engineers, being separately organized and having no immediate

grievances, did not act with the miners, and in the course of developments became an important factor in their defeat. Had all been members of one organization there would have been complete cooperation and the cause of the strikers would have been indefinitely strengthened. The mine managers were not slow to see this opening and take advantage of it. they at once began to commend the organization of engineers for its "manly and conservative course" and to cultivate the goodwill of the members with the result that a wide and impassable gulf of hate was created between the miners and the engineers, and the latter became as zealous as the mine managers themselves in opposing the strike and defeating the miners.

The shrewd manager has always found a way of dividing workmen at the critical time, when concert of action was required to win the day for labor. This has been all the easier because of the minute division of organized labor. If there is only a "corporal's guard" engaged in some given occupation and it varies just the slightest from some other occupation, a *grand international* and *independent* movement must be at once launched and in this way numberless organizations of every conceivable character have been set afloat, and these are not infrequently in conflict with one another. While disputing about questions of jurisdiction or other trifling matters, the ever-vigilant enemy is at work, and when the hour strikes for action, the corporation is in readiness to the minutest detail, while the workmen find that from one cause or another they are in no shape for the contest. Then comes defeat, and another turn is given the wheel of oppression, and thus the process goes forward, day by day, while the lot of the toiler becomes steadily harder until he is finally reduced to helpless, hopeless servitude.

Again and again has one branch of labor been used to accomplish the defeat of another, and this was a commanding feature of the Leadville strike. And when defeat comes those who were "used" against their fellow workers are kicked for their thanks. While the strike is on and their services are needed they are flattered and made to believe that they are the chosen people, but as soon as the strike is broken and they are no longer needed, they are treated with scorn and contempt. If they dare complain they are promptly discharged. I have seen this very thing time and time again and could, were it required, cite any number of instances that came under my personal observation. Workmen may set it down that employers have no use for those who can't be used for tools to do their dirty

work, and when men consent to be so used they are certain to receive the reward their cowardly and contemptible conduct invites.

The course to pursue to overcome these evils is so plain that scarcely a suggestion is required. Every man of whatever occupation who works about a western mine should be admitted to the Western Federation of Miners. All should be united in one and the same organization. Instead of having men grouped according to occupation and subdivided into various class organizations, "each for himself and the devil for the hindmost," I would have them all in one compact organization ready to act together in all things requiring concert of action, the grievance of one being made the grievance of all, and the shibboleth being "each for all and all for each."

The miners of Leadville, as elsewhere, should in my judgment adopt at once this plan of organization. Let the past be forgotten, or at least forgiven. To nurse hatred for those who were against us because, largely, the creatures of circumstances, can do us no possible good, while the interminable hostility will create still further dissension in the ranks and ultimately disrupt the organization and make broad and smooth and downgrade the road to slavery. A wider scope for the organization, making it possible for all men who work in or about a mine to become members, a more liberal and progressive policy, is among the needs of the miners' union and I do not doubt these matters will have the earnest and intelligent attention of the delegates to the approaching convention at Salt Lake City.⁴

Meantime every man must do his duty. Defeat in a hard-fought struggle is one of the severest tests to which men are subject. The weak give up in despair and lament about the "lost cause." The brave and strong, they who are made of "sterner stuff," buckle on their armor and fight again and again till finally victory crowns their cause. The Leadville miners have been temporarily overcome, but they are not vanquished any more than the revolutionary patriots were subdued at Bunker Hill.

The Coronado Affair.

The armed attack on the Coronado mine on the night of September 20th [1896] was fatal to the interests of the union and the striking miners and removed all possibility of a settlement of the strike, if indeed any such possibility ever existed.⁵ From that moment the mine managers were triumphant and the strike was doomed. Had those who made the attack sought to play into the hands of the mine managers, they could not have

don so more successfully. The provocation was, doubtless, very great. The union miners were exasperated in every conceivable manner. Foreign labor was to be imported to take their places and armed toughs taunted and insulted them.

Of course, it is not claimed that the miners were entirely innocent. That in some instances they acted with indiscretion, goes without saying and that a few of them were guilty of criminal conduct is also admitted. It would be strange, indeed, if under all the excitement incident to a strike of such magnitude there had been no breach of the peace. But after all, the fact stands forth and should be given commanding prominence that as a body, as a union, the strikers were sober, peaceable, and law-abiding, and after the most searching scrutiny, the legislative committee was bound to exonerate them, as an organization, from any culpability for, or in connection with, any crime committed during the strike.

It was freely charged that the Coronado affair was instigated by the mine managers themselves. Whether this be true or not, I have no means of knowing and in the absence of proper proof to sustain so grave an allegation, I shall certainly not make the charge. I am bound to admit, however, that from whatever source the attack was inspired, it was a master stroke for the mine managers. For them it meant the protection and support of the militia and the civil power of the state and, if need be, of the nation. The strike was virtually taken off their hands, the state assuming control of the mine owners' interests and arraying all its forces against the strikers. It gave all their enemies the opportunity they longed for to open their batteries on the strike and hold up the strikers to public execration as criminals whose atrocities merited the gibbet.⁶ The mine managers were furnished by the Coronado incident with a strong pretext to reject all overtures looking to a settlement and they used it to advantage to the very close of the strike.

In this connection the conclusion of the legislative committee in reference to the attack on the Coronado is immensely significant. The committee says:

On the evening of September 20th the owners of the Coronado and the Emmet received some intimation that an attack would that night be made at these mines; *they did not communicate these rumors to the civil authorities, nor to the committee of twenty*, and there is no evidence that

the union of the committee of twenty had any knowledge of any rumored attack, *and the owners of the Coronado made no special preparations for defense.* (Italics mine. —EVD)

Here we find it in evidence that the mine owners were informed that the Coronado and the Emmet were to be attacked and yet no special preparation was made for defense nor was any report of the intended attack made to the civil authorities. This strikes me, to put it mildly, as having been a most singular proceeding and the conclusion can hardly be avoided that if the mine owners had nothing to do with instigating the attack, they at least did nothing to prevent it and this in face of the fact that they knew it was coming and had ample time to at least make an effort to stop it. Doubtless they foresaw what the effect of it must be and simply let it come.

If the Coronado was not a shrewdly laid trap for the miners, it was at least providential for the mine owners, notwithstanding the deplorable incidents that attended it. It was to the Leadville miners what the “sunken road of Ohain” was to the French army on the field of Waterloo.⁷

I have intimated that even if the unfortunate attack had not been made on the Coronado, it is extremely doubtful if a settlement could have been effected by mutual concession or compromise.

The mine managers were not friendly to the union before the strike, and when it was declared, they avowed their hostility to the organization and determined to disrupt it. Upon this point there is no room for doubt. Two days after the strike had been declared, on June 22, they entered into a written agreement which, among other things, provided as follows:

To not recognize or treat in any manner or at any time with any labor organization.

This settled the matter. It was, in fact, an agreement not to treat with the miners at all and a declaration of war upon their organization. The miners struck, of course, as an organized body and if they could not negotiate a settlement of their grievance as such, there was nothing left for them but unconditional surrender. This was the central, commanding issue, in fact the only issue, from the day the strike was inaugurated.

If the right of workingmen to organize be conceded — and the most implacable foe of labor dare not go before the American public in opposition to this right — can the arbitrary attitude of the mine managers be

justified on any reasonable ground? This “agreement” not to treat with the miners, for that was the purport and import of the compact, was not prompted by the lawlessness or violence of the strikers, for none had been committed. It was entered into in the very beginning of the strike, it barred the door of conciliation and made “unconditional surrender” the only possible basis of settlement. This indisputable fact effectually silences the claim of the mine managers that during the early stage of the strike they proposed arbitration as a basis of settlement, and that their proposition was rejected by the strikers. The “agreement” and the alleged proposal to arbitrate are diametrically contradictory to each other and hence the conclusion that the contention of the strikers that no proposal of arbitration was ever made by the mine managers was correct and must be admitted.

It is axiomatic that a rule, to be fair, must work both ways. Suppose that the miners immediately upon declaring the strike had entered into an agreement “not to recognize or treat in any manner or at any time” with any organization of mine managers? And suppose that in spite of all entreaties they had tenaciously adhered to this agreement and insisted upon the unconditional surrender and utter humiliation of the mine managers, even though such a policy meant misery to thousands, the loss of untold property interests, and the irretrievable ruin of the camp? In reviewing the Leadville strike these interrogatories are in order and are well calculated to challenge thought and reflection in the minds of all men who love justice and fair play.

The Degradation of Mine Labor.

In the article preceding this I said that the paramount issue with the mine owners was the disruption of the miners’ union. The question of wages could, and doubtless would, have been readily settled. Indeed, it is doubtful if upon this question alone the strike had ever been declared. The only effect of the question of wages was to speedily and thoroughly organize the miners. As soon as the matter of demanding increased wages was raised, men fairly flocked into the union and it is in order to remark that if the increase had been secured, many of them would have been as prompt to flock out again.

There are workmen who never join a union unless they have a personal grievance or want their pay raised and then they rush into a union

with a whoop and precipitate a strike and when the strike is over, whether it succeeds or fails, their fit of unionism is ended and they recede as unceremoniously as they appeared. Such men have no conception of union principles and are always a detriment to an organization. They are animated wholly by selfish motives. They do not join a union because they approve its principles or are in sympathy with its mission, or because of a desire to help their fellow men, but simply and solely to use it as emergency may require, to accomplish their own selfish ends. If the union happens to succeed they pocket the benefits but never attend another meeting, nor pay another cent of dues. If failure results, they are the first to pour their denunciations upon the leaders for having "sold them out" and to condemn and renounce the union for having "beat them out of their jobs."

In this, of course, they have a chorus of sympathetic "amens" from plutocrats and their hirelings and parasites, generally including the press and often the pulpit, who, while feigning to commiserate with the poor "dupes," as they are termed, for having been led astray by designing agitators, proceed to traduce the leaders and misrepresent and vilify the union and thus the organization is made to appear as a reprehensible conspiracy and is riven asunder and the now defenseless employees settle down to their tasks, dismayed and disheartened, while the screws are applied to them more vigorously than ever, and with accelerating rapidity they begin the downward course to degradation. I have neither time nor space to elucidate the point, but this is the outline of the process whereby the once independent, self-respecting American workman has been reduced to mendicancy and servitude.

The state of Pennsylvania affords a humiliating illustration. The investigation just authorized by the state legislature has disclosed a most shocking state of affairs. Twenty years ago the coal miners of that state could make from \$4 to \$6 per day. Now at the very best they cannot average to exceed \$1 per day; in many cases they cannot make more than 50 cents, while others are only able to average 25 cents per day. What a tragic enactment on American soil, wet with the blood of the world's noblest martyrs, that liberty, equality, and justice might be the heritage of all, and this to gratify the insatiate lust for wealth and power.

Is the situation overdrawn? Do I hear it said that such talk is merely the gabble of a walking delegate, the raving of a lying agitator who is trying to stir up discontent? Listen, ye Americans, and especially ye who

froth about organized labor and refuse to treat with it. Listen, I say, to what follows, for these workingmen are not organized. *Once they were*. They took the advice of some of our present day employers, including certain mine managers. They abjured organized labor and “preserved their independence” and *relied upon the honor of their employers to do them justice* and this has brought them to the 25 cents per day level, a rate of wages that an average chinaman would scorn to work for.

Here is a brief extract from the report just issued in reference to the legislative investigation:

The legislative committee that is investigating the condition of the miners of the Pittsburgh district completed its second day of personal inspection among the mines, and what the investigators witnessed would fill many large volumes. When the work was finished the members of the committee made the statement that no such suffering was ever known by them to exist before, and they are well convinced that something must be done and at once to alleviate the condition of the unfortunate thousands who are in the district.

The territory that was inspected today was in and about Banning on the P&LE Railroad,⁸ about 40 miles above Pittsburgh.

The mines are located at Banning station and are worked by about 100 miners. One half of that number could easily do the work, for the men do not get more than two or three days a week. When they do work, the cars are so scarce that no matter how hard they try they are unable to make more than \$1 a day at the outside, and very much more frequently their pay for the day is from 25 to 50 cents. The greater part of these employees are foreigners, there being but ten American-born families in the entire number.

After leaving the settlement in and about Banning, the committee went to Jacobs Creek, about three miles below Banning, where the Darr mines of Osborne and Saeger are located. The condition of the miners here is worse, if anything, than at the mines oat Banning. The men work from three to four days a week, but the wages they receive are so small that they can scarcely manage to exist. The greater part of the miners are foreigners, with a good sprinkling of Americans and negroes.

The company owns the miserable hovels which shelter the inhabitants. One of the most wretched is a shed about 18 x 12 feet. For this hovel the company received \$4 per month and it would cost about \$25 to build it. The occupants of the house are Peter Jones, his wife and child, and eight “boarders.” Where these eleven persons manage to find room

enough to stretch out at night is a mystery. Inside there was a varied assortment of furniture, for the cooking, eating, and sleeping is all done in one room. "We just manage to live," said Mrs. Jones, "but if it was not for the boarders that we keep Peter could not make enough in the mines to keep us from starvation."

Here is food for a whole freight train of through and for none more than for Western miners. Mine managers can also contemplate this appalling picture at their leisure and if they are not destitute of heart and soul and conscience (and some, I know, are not) they will not only cease their antagonism to union labor but will encourage the men to organize and with words of kindness and encouragement do their best to secure and maintain harmonious relations and present a solid front against such Siberization of the Western states. But aside from all ethical consideration, such a policy of degradation as reduced the once proud state of Pennsylvania to a plague spot is ruinous and destructive. The famishing miner is followed by the bankrupt operator. Read this dispatch which I clip from this morning's paper:

PITTSBURGH, April 29th [1897]. John M. Risher, the big coal operator, has confessed judgment to his wife for the sum of \$115,376 on notes given to her at diverse times. Mr. Risher was supposed to be one of the wealthiest operators in the district. No reason for the judgment is given except the disastrous condition of the coal business.

Here we have an exhibition of the logical consequences of the intolerant, impoverishing policy of crushing labor.⁹ This is the story briefly told: Organized capital — Organized labor — Strike — Nothing to arbitrate — Riots — Soldiers — Injunction — Labor vanquished — Reduced wages — Tramps — Bankruptcy — General demoralization and all around ruin.

But fortunately such calamities are not unmixed evils. They are not only fruitful of lessons to observant men but they are the means of shaking to their foundation and ultimately destroying old systems and decaying institutions and preparing the way for the new, and thus making possible the material progress and moral development of the world.

Mine Managers Were Culpable.

There is a chapter in the report of the legislative committee under the caption of "Mine managers blamed," page 38, which I deem it proper to reproduce in full as follows:

That the mine managers from the beginning and throughout the entire progress of the strike, have shown an unjustifiable antagonism to organized labor in general; that this committee is forced to the conclusion that the proposed agreement prepared and discussed by the mine managers prior to the strike was aimed at the existence of the union in much the same way as the agreement of June 22nd, above set forth, is; that with the existence of that agreement, which was kept secret until it was produced in the course of the committee's investigations, it is not likely that any agreement or arbitration could have been arrived at before the Coronado affair, even if the union had been less arbitrary in its demands; that a failure to bring about a settlement of the difficulty since the Coronado affair, and up to the present time, *is directly traceable to the unwillingness of the mine managers to treat with the union in any way that will recognize its existence*; that in considering the terrible outrages committed in Leadville, the injury and financial disaster brought to a number of mine managers by reason of these outrages, and the state of terror and fear of personal violence which a number of the mine managers have suffered during the strike, there is justification on their part for their feeling of bitterness towards the union, but even that does not justify a refusal to deal with any labor organization; that in the opinion of your committee a dissolution of the present union and the organization of a new union would be an idle form, because the new union would no doubt be composed of the same members, and that therefore, if the mine managers will recede from their position not to deal with labor organizations, your committee can see no further practical reason why they should not deal with the present union; and here it is proper to state that a number of the leading mine managers testified that they had no objection to organized labor, but on the contrary believed it was necessary for the welfare of the laborers and for the state, that laborers should organize to protect their interests.

The testimony of the mine managers who were examined at the hearing clearly indicated that they hold a large body of the union men in high esteem, and that they would be only too glad to give them employment. It is safe to say that reconciliation between the parties is rife and that it needs but reasonable concessions on both sides to bring it about.

This confirms what I have previously said in reference to the disruption of the Miners' Union having been the paramount issue. For some time the mine owners had seen the tide of organization rising. They viewed it with no little apprehension for they were shrewd enough to discern in the movement a power that might interfere with their plans and give them trouble. Among them were those imperious, self-willed men who would brook no interference from any source. They had always had their own way and they had become used to issuing orders and having them implicitly obeyed. They grew furious at the very thought that they were "to be dictated to as to how to run their own business," and this is what they construed the purpose of organization to be. They proposed to "run their business to suit themselves and if the wages and conditions were not satisfactory to the men, they might quit," and the sooner this was settled and understood the better for all concerned. This was the general spirit of the mine managers, although there were those who freely conceded the right of their employees to organize and to protect themselves in their rights and wages by all the lawful means that organization could provide.

The attitude of the mine managers is shown in the statement of the legislative committee "that the proposed agreement prepared and discussed by the mine managers *prior to the strike was aimed at the existence of the union*" and that "from the beginning and throughout the entire progress of the strike" the mine managers have shown an unjustifiable antagonism to organized labor in general, and that "a failure to bring about a settlement of the difficulties since the Coronado affair, and up to the present time, is directly traceable to the unwillingness of the mine managers to treat with the union in any way that will recognize its existence." These are strong words and the responsibility for the long continuance of the strike and its attendant crime and suffering is charged wholly to the policy of the association of mine managers in refusing to recognize or treat with the miners as an organized body. "For," says the report, "while there is justification on their part for their feeling of bitterness towards the union, even that does not justify a refusal to deal with any labor organization."

While organized themselves and made secure in their position by united action, they denied the miners the same privilege and refused to recognize or treat with them in that capacity. It is urged that the reason of this was that some of the miners had committed violence and that therefore, the union had forfeited the right to be recognized as a law abiding

body. Ah, but the mine managers had taken this attitude before any violence had been committed; indeed, before the strike had been declared, so that this plea cannot be made in extenuation of their implacable hostility to the union. And it was this element in the opposition to the union that engendered most of the bitterness which, as I believe, culminated in the Coronado attack and directly or indirectly led to almost every other breach of the law.

As I have previously stated, the miners who declared and carried on the strike were not infallible. That they made mistakes, some of them grave ones, cannot be questioned. In my opinion the most serious of these was in declaring the strike on such short notice, and not allowing the mine managers more time for consideration. Not that this would have prevented the strike, for this seems to have been inevitable and bound to come, but the miners would have been stronger in their position after having given the mine managers ample time and every reasonable opportunity to make the desired concession. That the men acted with undue haste is undoubtedly true, but this is readily understood by those who have attended similar meetings and know how men are swayed under the excitement incident to a recital of their grievances and the refusal of their employers to give them any satisfaction. However, as the purpose is to profit by the mistake of the past I quote as follows from the report, with which I fully agree:

Your committee believes that whatever the grievance of the miners may have been, the strike should not have been declared without further effort on the part of the union to bring about an adjustment, either by agreement or by arbitration, and that the strike should not have been declared without reasonable notice.

The strikes of the past three years have been fraught with great suffering but it has not been in vain. Although thousands have been

Forced from their homes a melancholy train
To traverse climes beyond the western main ¹⁰

the sacrifices have not been useless and some time they will have their compensation. In no other way can humanity reach higher elevations. Our antecedents suffered that we might enjoy and we can only bear testimony of our gratitude by doing something for those who are to come after us.

The Path Forward.

It was a year ago this month that the Leadville strike was declared. A world of history has been made since that time. The experience of the Leadville miners in encountering defeat after a long and weary struggle has been shared by hundreds of thousands of other workingmen, representing nearly all the trades known to modern industry. A few years ago, before the days of great combines, labor organizations were frequently able to not only prevent reductions but to secure increases in wages. They had a powerful restraining effect upon those who sought to reduce labor, for an organized strike was at best disastrous and a thing to be avoided. It is different now. the strike is now courted on the least provocation. It gives the corporation little or no inconvenience, for all it has to do is lay back until the government — municipal, state, or federal, as the case may be — suppresses the strike and starves or jails the strikers. *Capital has profited by the lessons taught by strikes, just as we want the miners at Leadville and elsewhere to do.*

The Leadville strike cost the miners in wages lost and in cash contributions about \$1.5 million. Think of this vast sum taken from the earnings of a comparatively small body of workingmen for the purchase of idleness and all the woes that follow in its train. I write in no spirit of lamentation or regret. In writing of labor's adversities, croaking is never in order. I simply call attention to certain facts as a basis to certain conclusions. The Leadville strike, if we are stupid and unreasoning, will be a total loss, but if we are wise, it will be worth every dollar it cost many times over.

The Leadville miners were as thoroughly organized as it was possible for them to be. They had the solid support of the Western Federation of Miners, the most aggressive and powerful labor organization in the West. They were able to hold their men together, practically without a break, for more than eight months., and yet they were defeated. Could they have won by holding out longer? No. Why? For several reasons.

First, the mine owners and managers' association was composed in the main of very rich men and they could afford to wait indefinitely. They had vast holdings elsewhere and whether the mines at Leadville were in operation for a year or two or not did not prevent them from eating three square meals a day. Theirs was simply to *wait*, and as long as they were

enduring no privations, they could afford to do that. The temporary loss thus entailed, whatever that might amount to, is always made good by reductions of wages after the strikers are starved back into submission.

Second, at the back (or in front) of the mine owners stood the state militia, the judicial guard, and all the resources of the state, and if this did not suffice, the President of the United States, the regular army, the navy, and all the organized forces of the national government. See? Organized capital is not only supported by the government, right or wrong, *it is* the government. They are synonymous terms.

Third, the country is swarming with idle men, miners as well as others, many of whom are verging on starvation. These are the product of the capitalistic system of production and they constitute a factor in labor strikes which decrees inevitably the defeat of labor.

No labored argument is required to demonstrate that to strike under such conditions is wasteful if not criminal folly. The contest is fearfully uneven. Labor is certain to be beaten and to have to foot the bill besides. What then? Let us reason together.

Suppose the miners now had the million and a half dollars the strike cost them, and suppose further that they concluded to go into the mining business themselves. Why not? Who dare say the proposition is not practicable? But it is not required to have so large a sum to begin with. A few thousand dollars would answer. The union could select three good members to supervise affairs and by judicious management, cooperative mining could soon be established and instead of miners working out their lives to enrich a few individuals they would be doing something for themselves. This would not be all there is in cooperative industry, for this, to have the proper results, must be general, but it would end wage-slavery among the miners and at the same time be a long stride in the right direction.

The wage system is at the foundation of labor's wrongs and these will not be righted until the system is abolished. As long as thousands of workmen depend for employment upon the assent of an individual, they are in fetters, and the Declaration of Independence is a falsehood and a mockery. There is no equality of men in such a situation. One is master in all the term implies and the others are slaves. One commands and the others obey and in these latter days even the opportunity to yield abject obedience has become a precious privilege.

This cruel, unnatural system cannot always prevail. Indeed, there are ten thousand evidences that it is even now in the grasp of dissolution. All

that is required to send it tottering to its fall, never to rise again, is a little common sense among the common people.

That the Leadville miners and the western miners in general will profit by the lessons taught by the Leadville strike, I do not doubt. Already the voices of the leaders are ringing out clearly in advocacy of more advanced ideas and more progressive policies, and when 12 months more have elapsed, the rank and file, remembering that a few mine owners had sufficient power to defy the Governor, the legislature, and the entire commonwealth of Colorado, will take an inventory of their own resources of intelligence, courage, and independence and resolve to be free men, and thus the Leadville strike will have contributed its full share toward the emancipation of labor.

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¹ Written in seven installments for *The Western Miner*, official organ of the Cloud City Miners' Union No. 33, Western Federation of Miners of America. The first piece was dated Terre Haute, April 5, 1897, with the final installment dated May 31.

² A special committee was named by the 11th Colorado Legislative Assembly to investigate the circumstances of the Leadville strike. It published its findings as *Report of the Joint Special Legislative Committee of the Eleven General Assembly on the Leadville Strike* (1897).

³ Opening lines of the hymn "God Moves in a Mysterious Way" (1774) by William Cowper (1731-1800).

⁴ Reference is the 5th Annual Convention of the Western Federation of Miners, held in Salt Lake City from May 10-19, 1897. The last eight days of the gathering were held in non-public session, which reelected Edward Boyce of Warner, Idaho as President.

⁵ At 12:30 am during the night of September 20/21, 1897, a mob of armed strikers attacked the Coronado mine, a facility reopened during the Leadville labor stoppage through the use of strikebreakers. A gun battle lasting almost an hour erupted between strikers and armed strikebreakers inside the mine, during which three dynamite bombs were thrown. At 1:45 am an oil tank ruptured and exploded into flames, engulfing the mine buildings and forcing the strikebreakers to retreat. During the battle and its aftermath three members of the Cloud City Miners Union and a Leadville fireman who refused mob demands not to attempt to put out the fire were killed; the surface structures of the Coronado mine were completely destroyed. A similar assault was conducted against the Robert Emmet mine, located about a mile away, although no fatalities resulting from that protracted gun battle. The attacks

caused Gov. Robert McIntire to reconsider his previous refusal to accede to mine owners' requests for deployment of the state militia to protect their property interests. The first troops arrived the very next night.

⁶ *Gallows*.

⁷ The Chemin d'Ohain was a deeply sunken lane that bisected the battlefield at Waterloo which enabled Field Marshal Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, to conceal his forces and entrap and defeat the advancing French army of Napoleon Bonaparte on June 18, 1815.

⁸ The Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad, established in May 1875.

⁹ While the economic condition of coal operators may well have been disastrous in this period, the example Debs cites here is far from prototypical. It involves financial machinations that were part of a dispute among siblings over disposition of the \$450,000 estate of coal operator John C. Risher, who died in 1889, leaving his mining operation and various real estate holdings in trust to his children. One of these children, John M. Risher, drew out more than his share from the trust fund, prompting legal action. The John M. Risher Coal Co. was liquidated in the summer of 1898, retaining a positive cash balance.

¹⁰ Couplet from "The Traveller" (1764), by Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774).