

The Arbitration Farce (January 24, 1903)

The performance at Scranton is proving the futility and folly of arbitration as a method of harmonizing the conflicting interests of capitalists and wageworkers.¹ Be the finding of this commission what it may, the condition of the mine workers remains the same and there will be no appreciable change in those infernal regions. It goes without saying that the commission will “do something for the miners.” Oh, yes, there’s no doubt about that, and the capitalist press will exploit the “great victory” to the delight of many ignorant workingmen and all the capitalist politicians. But after the “victory” is celebrated the slaves will return to their pits and the strongest magnifying glass would reveal no difference in their condition before and after the arbitration.

They have lost more than five months of working time and many of them are hopelessly in debt. The leaders are marked men, and if not already denied employment, they will have to go as soon as a pretext can be made to discharge them, and the blacklist will doubtlessly follow in their footsteps and see to it that they do not stop this side of famine or crime.

Those needed in the mines will receive a few pennies more a day by the grace of the commission and twice the amount of increase thus allowed, or more, will be added to the price of coal. The operators remain on top and the miners at the bottom. Their relative positions remain precisely the same.

The operators get immediate returns from the increased price of coal. The miners will have to work steadily five years, assuming that they get an increase of 10 percent to make up the five months’ loss of their wages.

Oh, the farce of “arbitrating” such a damnable crime! And yet we must pass through just this sort of thing to prove its hollowness, and so the Scranton show will eventually be worth its price.

Next to the operators — who had determined to make no concession, and having so declared themselves, had to resist arbitration — the chief beneficiary of the deal will be President Roosevelt. It was for him a capital political stroke and the returns of the next national election will doubtless prove it.

Of course, there is not upon this commission — a purely capitalist device — a single representative of the working class. The specifications for the commission were provided by the operators and the personnel by a president elected by them. Under such circumstances the simple duty of the commission is to take considerable time in “investigating” this very complex case, taking particular pains to impress the open-mouthed millions with the gravity of the situation and the solemnity of the proceedings.

No wonder the lawyer who so far forgot the sanctity of the seance as to allude to the president as “Teddy” Roosevelt was so fiercely rebuked for his blasphemy.

If the commission really wanted to “investigate” they should have, after going through the hovels of the mine slaves, made a tour of the palaces of their masters. Why not? These are the parties to the contest, and if it is necessary to know how the coal diggers live in order to determine if they are sufficiently robbed, why not see how their exploiters live to arrive at the same conclusion.

Take the photographs of five of the miners’ shacks and place them in a row with their occupants before them; then the photographs of the palaces of as many of the barons with their imperial families in the foreground; place the latter above the former and you have a true picture of the issue involved, the nature of the struggle, and the utter farce of “arbitration.”

The final settlement will be delayed, but not defeated, by such schemes. *We socialists are after those mines and we will never rest until we have them and the parasites go to work and the workers are emancipated.*

That the long strike of the miners will be productive of far-reaching results there is not the slightest doubt. It was an extraordinary contest and will be so chronicled in the history of the American class struggle. To my mind the most wonderful thing about it was the “stickability” and discipline of this vast proletarian mass of all tongues, and for this President [John] Mitchell² and his colleagues deserve no small credit.

The fact that the working class, organized and unorganized, were back of the miners, and supplied them with the sinews of war; and the further fact that the middle class, who had been charged extortionate prices for coal, were in sympathy with the strikers, served to greatly strengthen the strike and increase its chances for success. Indeed, no other strike approaching this in magnitude ever had so little opposition and such general

support. The time was opportune and all the conditions were peculiarly favorable for the revolt; and my judgment is that under such circumstances the strike could have been won. This, however, would have necessitated a general strike of all the coal miners of the country, and had this occurred early in the beginning there would have been no five months' game of freeze-out; there would have been far less suffering; the miners would have achieved a substantial victory and it would have been all the better for the country at large. However, this is but my opinion, and the present outcome, the result of Mr. Mitchell's conservative policy, may work out all the better in the end. Still, I cannot but feel that a vigorous fight, backed up by all the resources at the command of labor, even though it had resulted in defeat, would have been better than the long-drawn game of endurance and final submission to the chloroforming process of arbitration.

For President Mitchell personally I have the highest regard. He is conscientiously devoted to the men who trust him, and his conduct during the strike, especially his unwavering fidelity and remarkable self-possession, merit the commendation of all men, but I think he will find in time that there is something wrong with a war policy — and every strike is a battle — that is hailed with satisfaction and elicits the hearty approval of the enemy.

President Mitchell and his policy have the unqualified approbation of the capitalist press — that is to say, the capitalist class who live out of the labor of the working class, and whose robbery of the anthracite miners has stripped and degraded them and their wives and children, until many of them are but ghastly remnants of the human species, and might properly be classified as hole-inhabiting human animals. I have been there often enough to be able to surround myself with the awful pictures when anthracite mining is the theme, and so it is easy to account for my contempt for “arbitration” of such hellish atrocities as are enacted in those worse than Siberian torture regions.

Walter Wellman,³ the celebrated correspondent, in one of his letters to the Chicago press, quotes Mark Hanna as saying: “The operators are making a great mistake in not dealing with Mitchell. They ought to be thankful that he is where he is, and should be willing to contribute a million dollars to keep him there rather than risk having some radical agitator in his position.”

This is certainly flattering to Mr. Mitchell from the capitalist point of view, but at least a doubtful compliment from the workers' standpoint. Mr.

Hanna is one of the capitalistic friends of labor; he wants harmony — and the capitalist system; and he understands how to set about getting the one and prolonging the other.

The “sacredness of the contract” was permitted, in the critical hour, to paralyze the strike. Nothing was said about the sacredness of human life. The property of the capitalist must be regarded with reverential sanctity and awe, but the lives of the proletarian herd are of small consequence.

All honorable men live up to their contracts, but in certain exigencies these lose their binding effect. A strike is war, and a measure of war has little regard for previous “contracts.” If John Mitchell had backed up the anthracite strikers with all the miners in the country he would have had a precedent in Abraham Lincoln. The proclamation of emancipation was wholly in violation of constitutional law and in utter contempt of millions of legal contracts entered into in good faith.

To return to the commission, the testimony of non-union miners, the dummies of the operators, about the “crimes” and “outrages” of the strikers is now being heard. The operators are having their inning and Chairman [George] Gray⁴ and his colleagues are in the clover.

The running comment of Chairman Gray on the minute description of his corrugated brow when he emphasizes the testimony against the strikers by interjecting his opinion of the “coward” who would engage in a boycott and the “criminal” who would interfere with the “honest workingman” who had taken his job, is doubtless very impressive to the man who has not the visual penetration to see the sham behind it all.

It also gives Chairman Gray, the well-fed corporation lawyer and capitalist judge, the inspiration to disport himself and give full play to his capitalist instincts. He has taken repeated advantage of his position as arbitrator and judge to denounce the “outrages” of the strikers, but has he had a single word to say about the outrages of criminal and law-breaking corporations that own the mines? Compared with the atrocities of the anthracite coal trust, the notorious law-defying combinations, in bribing judges, debauching legislatures, robbing the miners, starving their children, and holding up the public, the “outrages” of the strikers which so shock the judicial sensibilities of Chairman Gray are as a zephyr to a tornado or the ripple of a rivulet to the roar of the sea.

According to the published comment of Chairman Gray on the non-union testimony, the United Mine Workers is a criminal organization and its members are “cowards” and “scoundrels.” Certain it is that the acts

Chairman Gray denounces as “outrages” were the acts of union miners and in perfect accord with the policy of their organization.

A strike is simply war. The capitalists rely upon the power that private ownership of the means of production confers upon them to starve the strikers to death or defeat.

Of course, they are perfectly “law-abiding.” They have the power of life and death over their slaves and act wholly within their “legal rights” in starving them and their families into submission. They would be idiotic indeed to use pistols or knives or clubs in slaying a few of their slaves, when they can slaughter them all by waiting until they are hungry.

From the workers’ side the case is wholly different. His condition and environment confer no special degrees for the refinement of ethics. Hunger looks him in the eye, and if he is a man instead of a vassal, as he thinks of wife and child, his blood begins to warm and his pulse to quicken, and he is ready to fight his enemy in any way he may have a chance, law or no law; and if Chairman Gray were a corporation slave instead of a judicial tool he would understand this, and not make himself ridiculous in the eyes of every thinking man by expecting an anthracite miner to be as polite and suave as a Chesterfield⁵ in dealing with the capitalist concern that robbed him and threatened with starvation his wife and child.

What a pity, indeed, that the American proletariat cannot imbibe the beautiful spirit of servility inculcated by Chairman Gray. In that case they would never strike and always submit; but if in some evil hour they did strike they would first buy a work on “law and order” and another on “morals and ethics,” spray themselves with rosewater, cover their coarse paws with kid gloves, swear of swearing, and go to Sunday school and stay there until “public opinion” announced their “glorious victory” and the utter route of the capitalist enemy.

Lassalle said: “You can’t produce a revolution with eau d’cologne.” Every labor strike is a battle in the class war, an outbreak in the social revolution.

We, too, deprecate violence, deplore misery, and abhor bloodshed, and this is why we are radical and aggressive in the struggle to put an end to the barbarous system whose normal estate is the oppression and suffering of the human race.

¹ An extended strike of anthracite coal mines was called off in October 1902 in favor of the decision of a seven member arbitration committee appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt. From November through the following January the committee heard testimony in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Clarence Darrow, lead attorney for the miners, bringing a series of 125 witnesses to the stand to state the workers' case, with the operators following with their own barrage of testimony.

² John Mitchell (1870-1919) was president of the United Mine Workers of America from 1898 to 1908.

³ Walter Wellman (1858-1934) was the Washington correspondent of the Chicago Herald who engaged in adventures for his readers such as attempting to locate the exact landing place of Christopher Columbus and taking part in an expedition attempting to reach the North Pole.

⁴ George Gray (1840-1925) was a former Democratic United States senator and judge of the US Court of Appeals who chaired the coal strike investigating committee of 1902. Gray's name was twice placed into nomination for president of the United States at the Democratic National Convention, with his best result a second place finish to William Jennings Bryan in 1908.

⁵ "Suave as a Chesterfield" was a commonly used turn of phrase alluding to the 4th Earl of Chesterfield, Philip Stanhope (1694-1773), whose posthumous book *Letters to His Son on the Art of Becoming a Man of the World and a Gentleman* (1774) collected 400 erudite and nuanced letters dealing with the social code of the day and how a gentleman should behave.