

The Coal Strike Surrender (March 31, 1904)

Terre Haute, Ind., March 31, 1904

Now that the threatened coal strike has ended in a tame surrender of a two years' scale at a reduction of wages virtually forced upon the miners by a coalition of their leaders with the operators, a certain small and obscure press dispatch — a mere word to the wise, yet sufficient at the time — takes on immense interest in its prophetic significance.

The delegates to the late Indianapolis convention of miners whom I had occasion to address will no doubt remember my words, and those who were angered because I told them in plain terms what has since come true almost to the letter will perhaps be willing to forgive me.

But to the dispatch. Here it is just as it was sent out by the Associated Press from Pittsburgh under date of March 6 “and just as it appeared in the morning dailies of March 6”:

PITTSBURGH, Pa., March 6 [1904].— The *Post* tomorrow will say:

There was by no means a hopeless spirit among the returning coal operators from the Indianapolis convention with the miners which closed Saturday [March 5] with a disagreement.

From the best of authority the *Post* was informed yesterday that the break in the negotiations between the two interests is not a permanent one and that by March 21, another meeting of joint subcommittees will be held quietly. The whole matter will again be discussed among them and a solution to the present difficulty sought. It was further said that there was every reason for believing that the ultimate end of the whole matter would be the acceptance of the lower rate by the miners, or the 85 cents a ton base for pick mining, for the next two years.

Here we have it that the operators knew *in advance* that there would be *no strike* and that the miners would accept the reduction and this they knew notwithstanding the fact that the convention, by a solid vote of the state, had refused to accept the reduction and virtually declared for a strike.

let us examine the question a moment. The joint convention of miners and operators adjourned *sine die* March 5. No agreement had been reached. All negotiations were ended. A strike, so the papers declared, was inevitable. Only a miracle could prevent it.

The miners and operators returned to their homes. Preparations began for war. It was at this juncture that the above dispatch went out from Pittsburgh. It was doubtless intended as a "tip" to the capitalists and stock gamblers of the country, and was issued immediately upon the return of the Pennsylvania operators from the Indianapolis convention.

Pittsburgh, be it remembered, is the home of President Robbins of the Pittsburgh Coal Co. and floor leader and spokesman of the operators in all joint conventions with the miners. It is quite evident, therefore, that "*the best of authority*" quoted in the above dispatch was none other than Robbins and it is equally evident that he knew what he was talking about for his prediction of surrender, made in face of the fact that the national convention had virtually declared for war, was fulfilled to the letter.

The question is, did Robbins, chief of the operators, have an understanding with Mitchell, president of the miners? it must be admitted that it looks that way. Proof may be lacking, but the circumstances combine to make that conclusion almost inevitable.

When the miners first met in convention President Mitchell and the other leaders were quite aggressive. They were going to sweep all opposition before them and get what they wanted, for they had an organization that could and would carry the day.

A set of demands, including increased wages, was at once formulated and the performance began. Mitchell, taking the floor for the miners, proved by the facts and figures that they were asking only what was reasonable, that the financial reports of the coal companies showed *large increases in profits* over the preceding years, that the operators could well afford to make the concessions, and that they, the miners, were "terribly in earnest" and that the United Mine Workers of America would under no possible circumstances "take a backward step."

As the fight progressed the leaders of the miners made one concession after another until they had finally surrendered everything. But the operators were not satisfied. They had come with love in their hearts and a made-to-order, warranted-to-fit reduction of wages in their grips, just because they were all in the same economic class and their interests were

therefore identical, and to prove it they permitted their own leaders to scale down the bulging wages of the opulent coal diggers.

But the delegates, having given up everything, balked at least. Even Mitchell's "masterful effort" in behalf of the operators fell flat.

The reduction would not go down.

The convention voted to fight and the delegates went home to prepare for hostilities.

Now read the dispatch again in the light of what followed.

As soon as the convention adjourned, the leaders of the miners began to work upon the rank and file, very many of whom are so pitifully ignorant that they look upon a union official as a Chinaman does upon his joss.ⁱ

President Mitchell, from being "terribly in earnest" in behalf of the miners, became the special pleader of the operators.

Oh, what a transformation!

Mitchell, the labor leader, and Robbins, the labor exploiter, pooling issues and joining hands to force down the wages of mine slaves!

Oh, what a spectacle!

With all possible haste the national and state leaders made the rounds among the faithful. The "dangerous" locals and districts were all visited and mass meetings held to save the operators.

The slaves had instinctively rebelled against the wage cut and the rebellion must be put down by their own leaders if they expected the plaudits of the capitalist exploiters and the "well done" of the pulpit, press, and "public."

Alternate please, warnings, and threats were turned on until the fires were put out and the day was saved for the operators.

Only a little while ago Gompers warned the capitalists that reductions of wages would not be tolerated and solemnly enjoined his followers to resist them to the last.

Mitchell, Shaffer, and other lieutenants of Gompers are the active allies of the capitalists in enforcing reductions. Watch the developments!

To conclude: the United Mine Workers of America has been struck by lightning.

Published as "Were the Coal Miners Headed Off?" in *Social Democratic Herald*, vol. 6, no. 50, whole no. 297 (April 9, 1904), p. 1. Republished in Bruce Rogers (ed.), *Debs: His Life, Writings, and Speeches*, pp. 157-160.

ⁱ *Idol of worship.*