

Smash the Frame-up Against The Anthracite Miners

FREE BONITA, MENDOZA AND MOLESKI!

By B. E. Gebert

REVOLVERS and machine guns in the hands of hired gunmen have blazed forth their deadly bullets and taken the life's blood of three courageous and honest members of the United Mine Workers of America. A fourth hovers between life and death in a hospital, his body torn with lead.

They are Thomas Lillis, former treasurer of Local 1703, United Mine Workers in Pittston, Pennsylvania, one of the biggest locals in District One; Alex Campbell, leader of Local 1703, checkweighman at Colliery No. 6 of the Pennsylvania Coal Company and a leader of the opposition to the reactionary union machine; Pete Reilly, the young secretary of Local 1703 who succeeded Lillis; Sam Grecio who was wounded by the same gang of gunmen, and is now lingering in the hospital.

Three others are being held under charges of first degree murder—of which they are entirely innocent—to be legally assassinated by the state with the aid of the reactionary union machine.

They are the martyred victims of the murder plot organized by reactionary conspirators who believe that by systematic slaughter they will be able to wipe out the progressive and militant movement that is even now sweeping the anthracite coal district where, in the city of Pittston, Pennsylvania, the paid thugs of the reaction took their toll of blood.

The entire anthracite coal region is aroused, and there is anger in the breasts of the coal miners. Enough of the blood of their fighters has been shed by the reactionary cowards who fire from ambush. They are determined that an end be brought to the assassination of progressive workers. They are creating a strong movement to smash the frame-up against Sam Bonita, Steve Mendola and Adam Moleski, who are charged with killing Frank Agati, the personal body guard of Capellini, for they know that the only "crime" was the one committed by Bonita when he fired to defend his own life from the assaults of Agati.

The International Labor Defense, a national working class organization in which workers of all opinions and affiliations are united, has already pledged its wholehearted support, at the anthracite conference of the Save-the-Union Committee and in its public statements, to the defense of the three indicted miners, whom it considers the victims of a vicious frame-up, and the International Labor Defense has already arranged to mobilize its full power behind the fight for their vindication and release.

In the meanwhile a reign of terror exists in Pittston and the surrounding territory. The life of every militant who fights in the interests of the miners, and against the encroachments of their coal barons, has become so cheap that it can be bought with the money paid by those higher up to the local and imported gunmen. Revolvers have been used; rifles

and high-powered Remington shot-guns have been used; the bodies of Campbell and Reilly were riddled by bullets from a machine gun mounted in the body of a speeding automobile.

None of the murders of these progressives was accidental. They were a part of the struggle that is now being waged inside the miners' union, the culmination of which will mean either the life or death of the organization; for if the reactionary machine gains the upper hand, it will mean the degeneration of the union built by the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of miners and their families and a successful conclusion to the coal operators' smashing offensive; if the progressive forces win, it means new life and vigor to the union, the infusion of renewed militancy and fighting ability, the rebuilding and strengthening of a once powerful union that will be able to take the offensive against the slave-driving coal kings.

To understand the basic causes behind the carnival of death that occurred in Pittston, it is necessary to review briefly the conditions of life and struggle among the anthracite miners.

* * *

For many years, the anthracite, or hard coal, districts of Pennsylvania have been among the best union organized-regions in the country. Some one hundred and fifty thousand miners were organized in the ranks of the United Mine Workers of America, in districts One, Seven and Nine. Their conditions were relatively better than those of the mine workers in the bituminous, or soft coal, fields. Their closely-knit, and organized strength enabled them to exercise a stronger influence upon the questions of their working conditions.

The drive of the capitalist class against labor, however, particularly after the end of the war, combined with a blundering and scandalous "leadership" of the union, served to sap the foundation of the conditions of the anthracite miners. The pressure of the union bureaucracy forced anthracite miners to remain at work while the bituminous miners struck. In many cases, coal companies or their subsidiaries and affiliated concerns would be producing anthracite coal at full blast while their bituminous mines were being picketed by striking miners. Such a procedure could lead to nothing but the division, weakening and demoralization of the ranks of the miners' union.

Another factor added to the seriousness of the situation. New machinery, such as mechanical loaders and the like, which replaced the labor of miners, was—and is—steadily introduced into the mines. Many miners were forced into unemployment in the anthracite, or forced to find jobs in other industries or sections of the country. Now, the unemployment threat has become a sharp and widespread menace in the face of the general crisis in the mining industry, and the growing general industrial depression in the country.

. The only solution to this situation that was offered by the operators and the union officialdom was an agreement between themselves that there were far too many miners for the industry! As to what this surplus of miners were to do for a living, instead of a fight led by the union officials for shortening the working day, maintenance of the wage level, equal distribution of work, nationalization of the mines with workers' control, they shrugged their shoulders, called the condition "unfortunate" and, like Pontius Pilate, washed their hands of the whole business...

The increase of unemployment was made still worse by another mal-

ignant anthracite disease. This is the infamous "contractor system" which has become particularly widespread in District One, in which the recent shootings have centered. It can be said that the killings that have occurred are due more to the fight of the miners against the contractor system than any other single factor. It is the keystone of the situation.

The institution of the contractor system is one of the most cunning methods used by the coal operators to demoralize and break the union. It has become the basis for the building and maintenance of the reactionary union machine. The manner in which the contractor system is worked is as follows:

The management of a mine releases part of a colliery to an individual contractor, a member of the union, who in turn employs a number of men, chiefly laborers under his supervision or the supervision of a miner, all of whom are members of the local union under whose jurisdiction the colliery comes. The contractors will employ from eight to twenty men or more in one instance, as many as 150 men who receive their wages directly from him and not from the company.

Because these men are working in groups they are able to use modern mechanical loaders, jack hammers and other economic and efficient machinery. The result is that the contractor gang is able to produce as high as three times the amount of coal that an equal number of miners working individually could produce. But the heightened production is of no special benefit to the laborers themselves! The miner who works by himself gets paid by the ton or by the car, that is, by the amount of coal he turns out. But the laborer who works for the contractor gets paid by the day, no matter how much coal he produces. The contractor, on the other hand, is paid by the company by the tons he turns out.

The result is that a contractor will make as high as \$500 a week, and many of them never even work in the mines!

The miners who work on the contractor basis are therefore constantly speeded up, sweated and rushed by their contractor boss. Their grievances can be presented neither to the union nor the company, but only to the contractor, who thus has them at his mercy in any disputed question.

And what is worse, this evil system has resulted in a widespread unemployment among the anthracite miners, whose places are being taken by the sped-up contractor laborers. The contractor system, combined with other factors, including the shutting down of numerous mines by coal companies which own three or five or more collieries, has introduced a situation where, *out of the more than 150,000 anthracite miners, upwards of 70,000 are completely out of work or working only one or two days a week.*

The bitterness of the masses of the anthracite miners against the contractor system is not of recent date. As far back as 1920, Capellini, the present president of District One, and Alex Campbell led outlaw strikes in the Pittston district against the Pennsylvania Coal Company for introducing the contractor system. The miners struck for six months, and despite the fact that the Lewis machine revoked a number of charters in an effort to crush the movement, the strike ended with a victory for the men. The company was beaten, the contractors were withdrawn and the strikers were reinstated in the union.

During that strike, one of the fighters against the contractor system,

Sam Lucchino, was brutally murdered for taking his stand. Two gunmen were electrocuted for his murder, but the man higher up, who was known to have directed the assassins, Charles Consagro, was allowed to go free by the authorities,—for very good and mysterious reasons,—and disappeared from the scene never to be heard of again.

Following the strikes, Capellini's popularity increased greatly, and on the basis of his fight against the contractor system, he was elected president of District One, and Alex Campbell was elected International Board member from the same district. But Capellini turned out to be the hero of a passing hour, and he was soon found in the camp of Lewis and Company. In the subsequent election, united with the Lewis machine, he defeated Campbell who had refused to go along in the treacherous somersault on the contractor system that had been turned by Capellini.

Capellini was building up a powerful machine in the union, based on the very contractor system to the fight against which he owed his rise in the organization! Dominating the laborers by economic pressure, the contractors used them in the union for their own purposes, that is, against the interests of the miners as a whole. In some union locals, the contractor would become president, and in some cases they would even get control of the grievance committee—that is ordinarily the most popular expression of the rank and file.

But even a powerful machine cannot forever maintain itself in the face of growing opposition from the mass of the membership. Under Capellini's regime, the contractor system developed like a hothouse flower. Graft and corruption, extending through the contractors, reactionary district union officials, the management of the coal companies, local business men, and politicians developed like a cancer in the movement. But with its growth, came also the growth of the resentment of the ranks of the union. And as this resentment began to assume organized expression, the bureaucracy of the union, not having any convincing arguments to defend their course, began to use the type of "strong" arguments which culminated with the reign of terror in Pittston recently.

In 1924 before the last international election, in which John Brophy ran against Lewis for president of the union, the house of Alex Campbell was dynamited. In 1926, in Mayfield, a mining town near Scranton, a miner was shot down in the local union meeting by contractor gangsters because he voiced his opposition to the contractor system. The slayers were freed. The miners replied to this terrorism by electing Alex Campbell, in 1926, as checkweighman of Colliery No. 6, of the Pennsylvania Coal Company, but the company refused to accept him. They knew who were their friends, and who were the defenders of the interests of the miners.

Two years later, the local of which both Campbell and Capellini were members, Local 1703, Pittston, and of which Agati, Capellini's bodyguard was president, held its election and swept out the administration officers and overwhelmingly voted in the opposition, with Campbell as checkweighman again, on the basis of the fight they were to lead against the contractor system. The Pennsylvania Coal Company, true to its instincts of friendship for the reactionary machine and hatred for the progressives, replied to this election by shutting down Colliery No. 6, and keeping it shut since December 31, 1927.

But the determined stand of the opposition to the contractor system continued, and the reactionary murder squad was made ready to institute

a reign of death and terror in an effort to oust the progressives and regain their black control.

The first victim of the murder squad was Thomas Lillis, the newly-elected opposition treasurer of Local 1703. A week after his election, after walking home with Alex Campbell, he was shot down after midnight with a fatal bullet wound in his body. "It is openly said in upper end police circles," said the Wilkes-Barre Times-Leader (February 16, 1928), "that Lillis, a former secretary of No. 6 Local, was marked for death and the price of \$200 it is alleged was paid to 'imported' gunmen for his killing." But the slayer escaped, and the police could not find him. . . The local authorities did nothing to apprehend the murderers or prevent the recurrence of such a crime. They are quite active however, in suppressing meetings of militant miners.

Less than a month after, Samuel Bonita, progressive president of Local 1703, Adam Moleski, member of the local grievance committee, and another union member, Steve Mendola, went to the office of the U. M. W. in Wilkes-Barre to take up with district union officials the question of the shutting down of Colliery No. 6. In the office were a number of district officials, including Frank Agati, organizer for the union, personal bodyguard of Capellini, and, according to the local press, despite the fact that he did not work in the mines, a silent partner to one of the contractors!

Agati attempted to bully the representatives of the Local, and in the course of the argument that followed, he struck heavily at Bonita's face. Guns were pulled, and when the smoke cleared, Agati lunged to the floor mortally wounded. Bonita HAD BEEN FORCED TO FIRE IN SELF-DEFENSE! In court later, it was proved that besides the guns of Bonita and Mendola (none of the bullets in Mendola's gun were fired) there was an additional weapon used. A third revolver in addition to Bonita's .38 automatic and Mendola's .25 was found in the fight, and it was undoubtedly used by Agati. Furthermore, this is substantiated by the evidence of the investigation by Captain Jones of the New York Police department who declared that the sixth bullet in one of the windows was not from the same gun as the other five that were fired. Bonita and Moleski surrendered themselves voluntarily to the authorities. The three of them were charged with murder and held without bail. All of them pleaded not guilty to the charges. The indictment against Bonita, Moleski and Mendola is nothing but an attempt to railroad to the electric chair three courageous union fighters in a frame-up, in which it is conceded that only one of the three even fired a gun, and when it is known that Agati was the attacker and Bonita fired only to save his own life.

The murder machine did not halt with the killing of Lillis and the frame-up against the other three members of the local union. Two days after the affair with Agati, on February 18, Samuel Grecio, known to his friends as "Big Sam," a member of the grievance committee at No. 6 Colliery, whose brother-in-law, Joseph Cicero, was found dead with a slashed throat on the same day that Agati was killed, was walking home with his wife. Suddenly two assassins sprang at him, and while one held him in a firm grip that rendered him powerless, the other thug poured bullets into his head. The miner, his skull fractured, sank to the ground while his attackers escaped into the night. Grecio is now in the hospital, his life held by a thread. Why have the authorities failed to lay hands on his assailants despite the fact that he has given them their names?

The murder gang did not rest with the toll of blood they had already taken. Ten days later, there was a renewed outburst, exceeding in brutality and horror all that had happened before. When Sam Grecio was brought to the hospital, he called Campbell to his bedside and said: "You are the next, my friend, watch out." It was a fateful warning and prediction. On February 28, while Alex Campbell and Pete Reilly, the secretary of Local 1703, were returning in an automobile from a visit in jail to Bonita, Mendola and Moleski, another car, filled with gangsters followed them. At Railroad street, they drew alongside and let loose a fusillade of bullets which ended only when both Campbell and Reilly slumped in their seats—dead. Unarmed themselves, they were the victims of the hired murderers, who sent volley after volley of revolver bullets, bullets from Remington pump guns, and machine gun shells into their defenseless bodies. They died as martyrs of labor, in the course of their duty of defending the interests of the exploited slaves of the mines. Their names shall forever be written large in the books of the working class when the names of their persecutors and assassins will be remembered only with curses and bitter hatred.

It is not difficult to place the responsibility for the murders of these workers and the frame-up against the three who are awaiting trial. Rinaldo Capellini, the president of District One and the leader of the fight against the progressives and in favor of the scandalous contractor system, has stated with hypocritical piety: "I pray to God for the return of peace and harmony to the Pittston district." But every miner knows that those lips lie, for Capellini, and the reactionary Lewis machine of which he is a part, is directly responsible for the frightful conditions in the Pittston district. The deaths can be laid directly at the door of the man who surrounded himself with the elements that are bringing division and destruction to the union, the death ring of contractors, reactionary officials, politicians and coal operators who seek to break the growing progressive movement in District One with the clubs of terror and revolver violence.

Now Capellini and his machine are aligning themselves openly with the frame-up prosecution of Bonita, Moleski and Mendola. Before even the formal hearing to charge the three men was held, a secret conference took place between City Detective Kittrick, County Detective Powell and Assistant District Attorney Goldberg on one hand and Anthony Figlock, August Lippi, John B. Gallagher, John Kemetz and Frank Shiffka, representatives of the official union machine of Capellini's district, on the other. Plans were discussed on how to send the three defendants to the electric chair, and (according to the Wilkes-Barre Times-Leader, February 22, 1928) the prosecutors "were given the promise of the labor leaders that they would give the commonwealth their whole-hearted support!"

SUPPORT TO GUNMEN: "WHOLE-HEARTED SUPPORT" TO THE LEGAL GUNMEN OF THE CAPITALIST CLASS! That is the "leadership" offered the miners by the Capellini machine.

The miners are demanding that Capellini, the little Mussolini of the anthracite shall go! The grievance committee of the Glen Alden Coal Company, representing 20,000 workers has adopted a resolution calling for his resignation. The entire anthracite is in a tumult of struggle, but Capellini remains solid with the operators and their efforts to break the union. Wages are being cut throughout the district. Men are forced

to double up. The contractor system proceeds without a halt. Strikes are occurring with increasing frequency. 3,000 miners are threatening to strike in the Lorree division of the Hudson Coal Company in the Plymouth and Larksville sections, because of the discharge of 77 men whose work the other miners were asked to do. In Nanticoke, another 3,000 miners employed by the Susquehanna Collieries Company went out because men from other cities were brought in to work while local miners were out of jobs.

The press reports further that 1,000 men are out on strike in Nanticoke because of a wage dispute with the Alden Coal Company there which sought to reduce their daily wage from \$7.10 to \$5.22. Is it to be wondered at that the profits of the operators rise (the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company has just reported a net income of \$2,932,296 for 1927, and dividends coming to \$2,924,340) while the conditions of the miners become steadily worse?

The miners are no longer looking to Capellini and his gang for leadership, but are turning more and more to the progressives and left-wing organized in the "Save-the-Union Committee" with which brave Alex Campbell and his comrades were associated, and which aims to cleanse the union of reaction and corruption and terror.

The miners are determined to put an end to the rule of gunmen and murder. The first step in this fight has been made the building of a powerful movement for the defense of Sam Bonita, Steve Mendola and Adam Moleski. Their brothers were murdered by gunmen, and the miners are determined that these three shall not be LEGALLY MURDERED by the capitalist courts and their aids who have framed-up on them.

The frame-up against Bonita, Moleski, and Mendola is not an isolated case, limited to the anthracite. In the bituminous regions of Pennsylvania and Ohio, the reactionary union machine in an unholy alliance with the coal operators, the state cossacks and the legal machinery of the government have brought about the arrest and indictment of leading militant and progressive miners, including such well known fighters as Anthony P. Minerich, John Brophy, and Pat H. Toohey and others who are aiding the heroic struggle of the coal miners.

The fight for the freedom of these three workers who are innocent of any crime but their loyalty to the miners and the labor movement is not a fight confined to Pittston, or the anthracite, or even the entire mining region. It is a fight of the whole working class of this country. Every worker must immediately join in the movement for their defense. Every worker must be on guard, bearing in mind the torture of hell that the miners have passed through, bearing in mind the other frame-ups in the history of the labor movement that have resulted in the imprisonment or legal murders of the best fighters of the working class. Every worker, in every part of the country, must come to the aid of these three miners, extend to them the hand of solidarity.

The International Labor Defense has already pledged its complete support to the defense. Its invaluable experiences in the cases where the lives and liberty of Sacco and Vanzetti, and Greco and Carillo were fought for has demonstrated that the courts and other legal institutions of the capitalist class will not scruple for a moment in taking the lives of these three workers of Pittston. There will be the usual lies, the perjury, the prejudiced judge and jury, the corrupt machinery of capitalist

law and "justice" that will be used to send these fighters to their death. The International Labor Defense appeals to all workers to keep close watch on the proceedings in this case, to place all their reliance on the solidarity and the protest movement of labor, and not in the courts that are the enemies of the working class. Particularly the Sacco-Vanzetti case showed us the class character of the capitalist courts and we must be on guard against another tragedy, this time in the anthracite.

Energetic and swift steps must be taken to cheat the reaction of its prey. There must be a nation-wide protest against gunmen rule and murder in the anthracite. The capitalist and union-bureaucratic reaction must not be permitted to add three more names to the already too-long list of working class martyrs.

Fight to free Bonita, Mendola and Moleski!

We want them back in the front ranks of the labor movement!

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