

Evolution of the Anthracite Miner (February 1906)

The particular part of the address delivered by President [John] Mitchell of the United Mine Workers, at the tri-district convention of the anthracite miners, held at Shamokin, Pennsylvania, on December 14th [1905], that pleased the “public” and inspired lavish comment was as follows:

I have watched during the time I have been associated with you the evolution of the miner, the development of his manhood, the gradual uplifting of the great masses of the people who for generations have been oppressed and crushed. I do not know whether you fully realize what a wonderful transformation has taken place among the anthracite mines. Everywhere are evidences of increased intelligence, of a better manhood, of a nobler womanhood, of a better and more cheerful childhood.

It is not probable that many are gifted with optimistic vision sufficient to see this “wonderful transformation.” Quite natural, therefore, that Mr. Mitchell should express his doubt as to whether others besides himself are conscious of it.

It is more likely that Mr. Mitchell is the victim of an optical illusion than that all the rest of us who have been in the anthracite regions are afflicted with defective visual organs; or, as seems more probable still, the “wonderful transformation” has taken place in Mr. Mitchell himself, instead of the miners, and he no longer sees them as he did when as an Illinois coal digger, fresh from the mines, manly and wholesome, his heart was filled with the suffering and his whole being throbbled with the aspiration of his class.

Mr. Mitchell, since that time, like many other leaders of labor, has inhaled the poison fumes of plutocracy; has been patronized and pampered by its saints and has feasted at its banquets, and may himself be blissfully unconscious that he no longer sees through proletarian eyes the class from which he sprang and without which his name would never have been known.

The close and cordial relation Mr. Mitchell maintains with the exploiters and oppressors of his class makes it necessary that he shall see a “wonderful transformation” in the slaves of the mines, and every predatory

plutocrat of the pits will bear eager testimony to the truth of the transformation.

If but the miners can be impressed with the miracle of the “transformation” they will hug their chains in calm content and continue to pay the salaries of the transformationists and diligently dig coal for their masters.

Oh, no, there has been no transformation in the anthracite, wonderful or otherwise, and only a civic federationized vision can conjure up a consummation so devoutly to be wished.

I would like to travel over the anthracite wastes with Mr. Mitchell and have him point it out to me, that I might rejoice with him over the “wonderful transformation.”

The naked fact is that the miners in the anthracite are in an infinitely worse condition than they were 35 years ago. I have met in the Rocky Mountains and in the far West many of the old time anthracite miners, sturdy specimens of the working class, filled with the spirit of manly independence, and have heard them tell of the early days in the anthracite when work was steady, wages high, and they were both respected and feared by the mine owners.

It is far different today. The poor devils of all nationalities, half starved, many of them suspicious from repeated betrayal of even one another, in fear and trembling obey the behests of the brutal masters.

For these wretched slaves there is no “transformation” in capitalism; and the “increased intelligence,” “better manhood,” “nobler womanhood,” and “more cheerful childhood” Mr. Mitchell thinks he sees are illusions born of his own pathetic transformation.

It is true that there is “increased intelligence” in the anthracite, but it is not the kind that Mr. Mitchell sees, nor is it due to his efforts, or those of his lieutenants, but to the revolutionary agitators who are firing the spirit of the slaves and molding the mass into solidarity to overthrow the monstrous system that brutalizes them; and when they are at last triumphant there will be a transformation, but Mr. Mitchell and his conservative associates in the support of capitalism and wage-slavery will be entitled to no credit for it.

A few weeks ago the air was filled with reports of a great impending strike in the coal fields at the expiration of the present contract. This has quieted down and little is now heard except that there is not likely to be a strike. Probably not. The thing will no doubt be “amicably arranged” in due time and peace and slavery will have another lease in the anthracite.

But there is now another factor to be reckoned with. Revolutionary socialism is in the field, and it is no respecter of peaceable relations based on slavery.

The anthracite regions are the chosen field for action and in good time will be reclaimed by the proletarian revolution.

Published as "Evolution of the Miner" in *The Industrial Worker*, vol. 1, no. 2 (February 1906), p. 2.