

Coke Miners in Revolt

By Arne Swabeck

"STRIKE!"—"Refuse to accept the wage cut."—The call went from camp to camp in many tongues and the miners in the heart of the coke region between Uniontown and Brownsville, Pennsylvania, dropped pick and shovel and came out from pit and shaft on Monday, March 16th, unorganized but ready to fight the wage cut. The coal operators had already prepared their battle lines.

Notices of this wage cut were posted by the W. J. Raney Coal and Coke company, the Hillman company and the Oliver Snyder Steel company in all their mines in this territory on March 14th, and the next few days the strike spread. At the Oliver camps it took about a thousand leaflets, "Strike Against Wage Cuts," well distributed by a few militant miners, but they come out to a man. Although the H. C. Frick company, the largest operator in the coke region, still maintained the old scale, the wage cuts made by the others mark one additional part of the encircling onslaught now being prepared; hitting heaviest in the unorganized fields and drawing constantly nearer to the central competitive field, the stronghold of the United Mine Workers Union. The coke miners have formerly borne the brunt of such attacks and experienced the class struggle in all its grim realities.

Almost everything within the coke region is company-owned. The soil with its wealth below the surface, the camps, buildings and all, on the lower slants of these black hills, the stores and supply depots are company-owned. During strikes the companies assume control over the public highways and decide who may pass. Naturally the few small so-called independent towns which have grown up where a number of camps are closely concentrated, are completely in the hands of the companies, politically and otherwise.

This iron-controlled field produces a high grade coke, supplying all the mills around Pittsburgh which crowd the banks for miles of the Ohio, Monongahela and Allegheny rivers. Between the hills lie dotted numerous of the old type bee-hive coke ovens, stretching their low-built structure for blocks with the rows of open fires resembling miniature open-hearth steel furnaces. Daily these ovens belch out smoke blackening everything in sight, while during night hours the radiant, flickering glare pierces the sky. The whole of this Fayette County coke region seems to have become accustomed to the conditions under which the miners live here, almost completely at the mercy of the operators. The company sets the price for their labor and sets the price for their necessities of life. It owns the homes in which they live and controls the form of education and amusement which they may enjoy. It demands that each applicant for a job in the mines or at the ovens undergo a physical examination to make sure that the buying of the labor power becomes a profitable investment. If any limbs are weak it is discounted at future possible claims for accident compensation.

Every company maintains an up-to-date blacklist system. Once a miner gets his name on the list his jobs will last just about as long as it takes to thoroughly compare records. In this manner one of the militants in this strike was kicked out of the mines eight times during a short period

last year. Firmly to solidify its control, each company has its own police force of deputized plug-uglies who are kept well supplied with arms and ammunition from its own store room in the office. Yet these miners have made many brilliant fights in the past. This soil, with applied labor power, not only produces coke but it also produces militancy and revolutionary ideas.

Strikers' Families Evicted.

When the miners went on strike in refusal to accept the wage cut the operators prepared for action. The "yellow dog deputies," the popular name for the coal and iron police maintained by the companies at the royal salary of \$3.00 per day, were posted at the mines, the ovens, the camps, and took possession of the highways, questioning anybody whom they thought suspicious. Following the usual ruthless policy and



MINER — CLEANING UP AFTER ACCIDENT: DOWN HERE WE'VE GOT TO KEEP ON CLEANING UP THE WHOLE GOD DAMNED TIME—UP THERE WE'D ONLY HAVE TO CLEAN UP ONCE.

with no regard whatsoever for women and children, eviction notices reading like the one herewith reproduced were served upon the strikers:

"ORIENT COAL AND COKE COMPANY...
"Orient, Pa., March 19th, 1925.

"To Toney Urich,

"Sir:

"You are hereby notified and required to move from and deliver up possession of the premises known as House and Lot No. 00, located at Orient, Redstone Township, Fayette County, Pennsylvania, within ten days from the date hereof which is in accordance with the lease under which you occupy the property.

"Respectfully yours,

"ORIENT COAL AND COKE COMPANY.

"By A. W. Young,

"Superintendent."

On the first day of the walk-out the difference in the mental makeup of the men became apparent. All had experienced victimization by the treasonable conduct of the United Mine Workers officialdom and the ruthless suppression of the operators in 1922. But they had not all drawn the proper conclusion. As it was, they became sharply divided. The more conscious elements, led by the Communists, insisted on a strike against the cut, to be conducted in complete understanding with the United Mine Workers and on the basis of re-establishment of the union. They recognized that there must be only one union in the mining industry. A second and larger group were for the strike but would hear nothing of the United Mine Workers, thus confusing the union with the bureaucratic machine. They spoke of a union of their own. One Stanley Ketty became the spokesman for the tendency of the second group. During 1922 he was a coke field organizer and a staunch supporter of the machine, up to the conference at New Salem, Pa., January 18, 1923, when the betrayal was finally sealed and the coke region strike called off. He has since been out of the union and out of the mines. Now he just happened to blow in.

Negro Miners Solid with Strikers.

About 40 per cent of the strikers were Negroes, remnants of the fifteen to twenty thousand Negro workers brought in from the South to work in the Fayette county coke mines during the strike of 1922. Witnessing the victimization of many of their race as soon as the strike was broken and the experienced miners returned to become better objects of exploitation for the operators, coupled with the two years of further experience working in the mines, had taught these Negro workers an important lesson regarding class interests. They now stood solid as a rock.

The operators continued, however, by all means available, to harass the strikers. Eviction notices increased in number, the "yellow dog deputies" were active chasing pickets, rump meetings were called to advocate going back to work, stories were spread of men returning in various camps. The opposition to re-establishment of the formerly existing locals of the United Mine Workers, as a policy to be pursued, hampered the organization of the strike. Local strike com-

mittees for each mine were organized but the linking up into one central committee was delayed. The strikers became isolated within their own camps, their ranks began to break, and on March 27th the mass meetings scheduled for the following day had to be called off and those still remaining out advised to go back. At that critical moment, when Stanley Ketty was sought by the men, he could not be found.

Now these coke miners have been set back to the scale of 1917. With one stroke the operators cut wages on day work from \$7.55 a day to \$5.05 and 33 per cent on tonnage work, which will amount to an average reduction of \$3.00 per day. It is the usual thing that when the coke operators settle accounts after the fight the most militant workers become the first victims of their efforts to crush all future attempts at resistance. So this time again many miners were told on twenty-four hours' notice to pack their belongings and move on.

1922 Betrayal by Union Bureaucracy.

To place the responsibility for the present unorganized condition of the Fayette county coke miners it is necessary to recall the brilliant fight made by them during the strike of 1922 which evoked the admiration of the whole labor movement. Within three weeks after the issuance of the strike call by the United Mine Workers' Union, on April 1st, and the appeal to the unorganized fields to join, every coke miner had come out. Local unions were established as fast as organizers could handle the job. The coke miners made common cause with their fellow workers in the rest of the industry, and demanded the same working conditions. The operators replied with the most ruthless repressive measures and evicted 6,000 families.

The officials of the United Mine Workers had promised to make no settlement of the national strike which would not include the coke field. The men believed their words and kept on fighting, moving their families into tents and barracks, until on August 17th the first treasonable blow was struck at the vitals of this splendid young movement. John L. Lewis signed the Cleveland agreement leaving out the coke region and these miners found themselves sold out, caught in a death trap. Still they kept on fighting with yet greater determination.

Financial support to continue this struggle was promised by the officials of the United Mine Workers and the members paid assessments mounting up to nearly \$2,000,000. Official reports, however, show that from Sept. 5th, 1922, to March 1st, 1923, only about \$220,000 were paid out for relief, and lately, internal revenue agents have been camping on the trail of the two fakers, Feeney and O'Leary, who were in charge of the distribution of funds, and have since succeeded in heavily increasing their personal deposits in so many banks that these agents have had great difficulty in determining their income tax assessments.

It was during these days of despair in the midst of heroic struggle that the Miners' Relief Committee, organized by Pittsburgh Communists, became known as a real friend of the striking coke miners. All through that following winter the battle continued and the Miners' Relief Committee brought food and clothing and gave encouragement in the fight. Not only that, but it also brought the message of Communism. Naturally, the Miners' Relief Committee became hated by

the Lewis machine and labeled dual union, destructive, and so forth.

As the struggle went on, the coke miners completely lost faith in this whole machine. On several occasions they asked, through their established locals, that they be given a District charter and permitted to elect their own administration. But their requests were promptly rejected and they were kept under provisional government with an appointed member of the family of bureaucrats in charge.

In proof of how much these rank and file coke miners recognize the need of organization, at a monster mass meeting held on Labor Day, 1922, at Uniontown, Pa., they proposed to go back to work on whatever terms obtainable, and thus keep their organization intact, if sufficient funds were not available to continue the strike. But they were told to carry on and promised relief. So it went on until the betrayal was completed and the strike officially called off at the New Salem conference held January 18th, 1923, which was composed of officials appointed for the coke field, and officials representing the union. Still living in tents during the bitter cold winter, suffering repression and persecution, it took nearly three months before the coke miners finally surrendered. Their organization blew to the winds, and thus a splendid fight was turned into a dismal defeat through treasonable leadership.

While the experiences have been bitter, the lessons learned by the 45,000 coke miners have been valuable. Those who go among them say that they are as ready to organize as ever. Once again during this last strike they proposed to John L. Lewis that they be granted a District charter, but on the condition that they elect their own administration and support their own organizers. Once again it will receive the same fate as the former requests made. John L. Lewis will not consent to this field being organized unless he can control it through his own appointees.

The Parasite

I'M a happy-go-lucky son of a reckless brood:

Painter of smoke stacks, steeples, flag poles and skyscraping cornices.

Give me a piece of rope and I'll climb to God-knows-where, and dance a sailor's hornpipe a' top of it;

For I'm at home where the eagle soars, where the aeroplanes purr and zoom.

Guess my thoughts as I clutch for dear life any windy afternoon.

Here they are: "Stick it out old kid, you got to bring home the bacon."

I never think of falling

Till I'm on my way.

One Blue Monday I fell a hundred feet, struck three roofs on the way down, and landed neck deep in a pile of coal.

I dug myself out and walked home with this thought in mind: "I'm off that Hungarian bootlegger for life."

Communists Work for Shop Committees.

Undaunted by these obstacles the militants, the Communists, are working diligently to crystallize the sentiment for organization. Smarting under the effects of this new wage cut, the coke miners have become willing listeners. The organization of shop committees as applied to the mines is being proposed, and here is how it is being explained by the militants.

All grievances arise in the mines, that is where the struggle takes place, and it is also where the working class forces must be united and organization begin. Each mine is naturally divided into various sections. Where the main entry is driven into the mine from shaft to shaft, crossing the coal vein, the butt entries branch out into the vein itself with the rooms laid out in which the miners dig the coal. Each such butt entry constitutes a section. Under the mine (shop) committee organization each of these sections would elect its own delegate, the committee thus becoming the direct representative of the men, responsive to their needs, expressive of their desires and responsible to them. All actions of the mine committee would be reported back directly to the men for them to act upon and easily understood by them, and thus the most close and intimate connection would be established. These mine committees would become the basic instrument of the power of the workers, controlled by them, increasing their militancy, solidarity and confidence in their ability to meet the struggle. The next development would necessarily be to connect these committees within each section of closely located mines and throughout the whole territory. The preliminary organization for the establishment of the union in the coke region would be brought into life and become the basis of the union once it was created.

The Communists are organizing shop nuclei and taking the leadership in forging ahead toward the complete organization of the coke miners to prepare them for the coming struggle.



READING ROOM IN RUSSIAN TRADE UNION BUILDING.