UNITED STATES COMMISION ON INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS: REPORT ON THE COLORADO STRIKE

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GEORGE P. WEST

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United States

Commission on Industrial Relations

Report on the Colorado Strike

By GEORGE P. WEST

WASHINGTON, D. C.
1915

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INTRODUCTION.

Of the conflicts between employers and workmen that occurred during the life of the Commission on Industrial Relations, the most serious and portentous was that which followed the strike of about 9,000 coal miners in southern Colorado.

The Commission has devoted more time to an effort to ascertain the causes and all the circumstances of the Colorado strike than to the study of any other particular situation, not only because of the numbers involved and the wide public interest aroused, but because the struggle in Colorado presented an unequalled opportunity to study some of the major problems that must be considered in an attempt to discover the underlying causes of industrial unrest.

To understand the Colorado situation in its relation to the general problem, it is necessary first to draw a rough line between the two principal classifications into which industrial disturbances fall. On the one side are the spontaneous revolts and the organized strikes of wage earners who are impelled to act by the pressure of economic necessity, or by the conviction that their collective power is sufficiently great to force an increase in wages or other purely material advantage. On the other side of the line are those revolts that are animated primarily, not by the need and desire for higher wages and greater material blessings, but by resentment against the possession and the exercise by the employer of arbitrary power.

The struggle in Colorado was primarily a struggle against arbitrary power, in which the question of wages was secondary, as an immediate issue. And the merits of the strikers' cause must be judged by an answer to the question of whether they and their representatives demanded arbitrary and tyrannical power for their collective organization, or whether they sought only that measure of control over their own lives that

is guaranteed by the spirit and letter of American constitutions and statutes.

Involving as its major issue the demand of the miners for a voice in determining the conditions under which they worked, the Colorado conflict was also a struggle for a voice in determining political and social conditions in the communities where they and their families lived. The strikers passionately felt and believed that they were denied, not only a voice in fixing working conditions within the mines, but that political democracy, carrying with it rights and privileges guaranteed by the laws of the land, had likewise been flouted and repudiated by the owners. It was this latter belief that gave to the strikers that intensity of feeling which impelled them to suffer unusual hardships during their stay in the tent colonies, and which gave to the strike the character more of a revolt by entire communities than of a protest by wage earners only.

In judging the merits of the miners' demand for collective bargaining, for that share in the management of the industry itself which is called industrial democracy, the Colorado strike must be considered as one manifestation of a world-wide movement of wage earners toward an extension of the principles of democracy to the work shop, the factory and the mine. And because this issue is not local or peculiar to the particular industry, and because it is the root from which the other issues spring, it must be regarded as of chief importance.

Briefly stated, and in a phrase commonly heard, it is the issue of whether or not the owners of an enterprise commanding the labor of hundreds or thousands of men have the right to run their business in their own way, without consultation with or dictation from their employees, or their employees' chosen agents.

Closely related, however, is the other issue of whether or not political democracy and that degree of personal liberty promised by American institutions existed in the Colorado coal camps, of whether or not the miners and their families

enjoyed their full social and political rights, as distinguished from the industrial rights for which also they contended. It is an issue that has arisen time and again in communities given over to a single industry, or to closely-related industries under centralized control, and it raises the question of whether or not political liberty be possible in a community where every man's livelihood depends on the good will and the favor of a handful of men who control his opportunity to work. Experience in the Colorado coal camps and in many similar communities proves that all the safeguards yet devised for the free exercise of the popular will are futile to prevent political domination when corporations or individuals control absolutely the industrial and economic life of the community. The secret ballot, direct primaries, the initiative, referendum and recall, are alike powerless to secure an effective means of expression for the popular will and interest. Democratic government in such communities can be defeated without resort to illegal practices such as ballot box stuffing and corruption on the part of election officials. This is true because the right of suffrage can be effectively exercised only where there exist free speech, free assembly, and a free press. Not even the most intelligent groups of voters can be informed regarding their rights and interests in relation to the issues and candidacies of a political campaign unless there be free discussion and agitation, and these things are impossible where free speech, free assembly, and a free press are denied. These three essentials of democratic government can be denied with ease by a corporation or individual possessed of the power to discharge an employee without cause. Company spies can easily identify employees who express offensive political opinions, who read newspapers or periodicals that express political views contrary to the interests of the employer, or who attend public meetings that are addressed by speakers or candidates opposed to the interests of the employer.

It is true that a few states provide for the transmission to each voter of short printed arguments for and against certain measures on which the people are to ballot. This is done only when the initiative, referendum and recall are invoked, and

the practice has not been extended to issues involved in candidacies. But it cannot be considered seriously as a substitute for active agitation through personal and public discussion and a free press. This is true even for the most intelligent of communities. But many large groups most in need of legislative and executive consideration from the political government are not yet sufficiently familiar with the language to understand and to weigh short printed arguments, although they might be quite capable of arriving at an intelligent decision if they could meet together, formally and informally, for a free discussion of the issues.

And because the denial of political liberty in such a community rests firmly on arbitrary control of the opportunity of the wage earner to work, it is plain that political and social domination, where it exists in such cases, is but the child of industrial domination, of arbitrary control in the workshop. Thus it is apparent that the paramount issue in this and similar strikes is the demand for a more democratic control of the industry itself. For political and social liberties in isolated and privately-controlled communities like the Colorado coal camps can be secured only through the securing of a measure of industrial liberty. By industrial liberty is here meant an organization of industry that will insure to the individual wage earner protection against arbitrary power in the hands of the employer.

The Colorado coal mining industry presents an instance of the development of natural resources in isolated and unsettled territory by private capital organized in large companies and operating on a large scale. The industry had attained a considerable development thirty years ago, and many of the camps are from fifteen to thirty years old. The testimony of operators that at the outset it was necessary for the owners to perform all the functions of the civil government and in addition to supervise all the activities of community life is plausible and worthy of credence. But to justify the continuance up to the present of this all-inclusive company control, it is necessary to show that the inhabitants of the coal camps

were unwilling or unfitted to perform for themselves those functions which ordinarily, in an American community, belong to the citizenship. Before considering this question further, it will be well to discuss a proposal frequently advanced as a remedy for private domination in such communities.

In addition to other arguments in favor of public ownership of such natural resources as coal mines, proponents of public ownership urge that only the State or Federal Government can be permitted to wield the power that necessarily is lodged with the management of a newly-created industrial community situated in isolated and unsettled territory. The subject of private ownership of such resources in its relation to industrial unrest is considered elsewhere by the Commission. It need not be considered here. For while public ownership doubtless would have prevented many of the evils that arose in Colorado, the issue is in reality between the workmen and the management, and public ownership with the same men holding control and responsibility might have offered no solution. The important thing is to discover how the workshop and the mine can be organized in relation to the wage earners in such fashion that the employees may be assured of justice and the greatest possible degree of liberty, regardless of where the title to the property rests. Unless this is done, there can be no guarantee of industrial justice and peace. For the experience of certain European countries where state ownership exists proves that public ownership alone is no cure for industrial evils.

Coming as amazing evidence of the repudiation of American principles by certain small but powerful groups, is the allegation frequently heard during the Colorado controversy that the inhabitants of the coal camps, being largely of foreign birth and speech, were incapable of either political self-government or of exercising a voice in determining their working conditions. Such an acceptance of the political philosophy that justified slavery half a century ago hardly needs serious consideration. Granting that social and political conditions in the coal camps could be worse than those which existed un-