

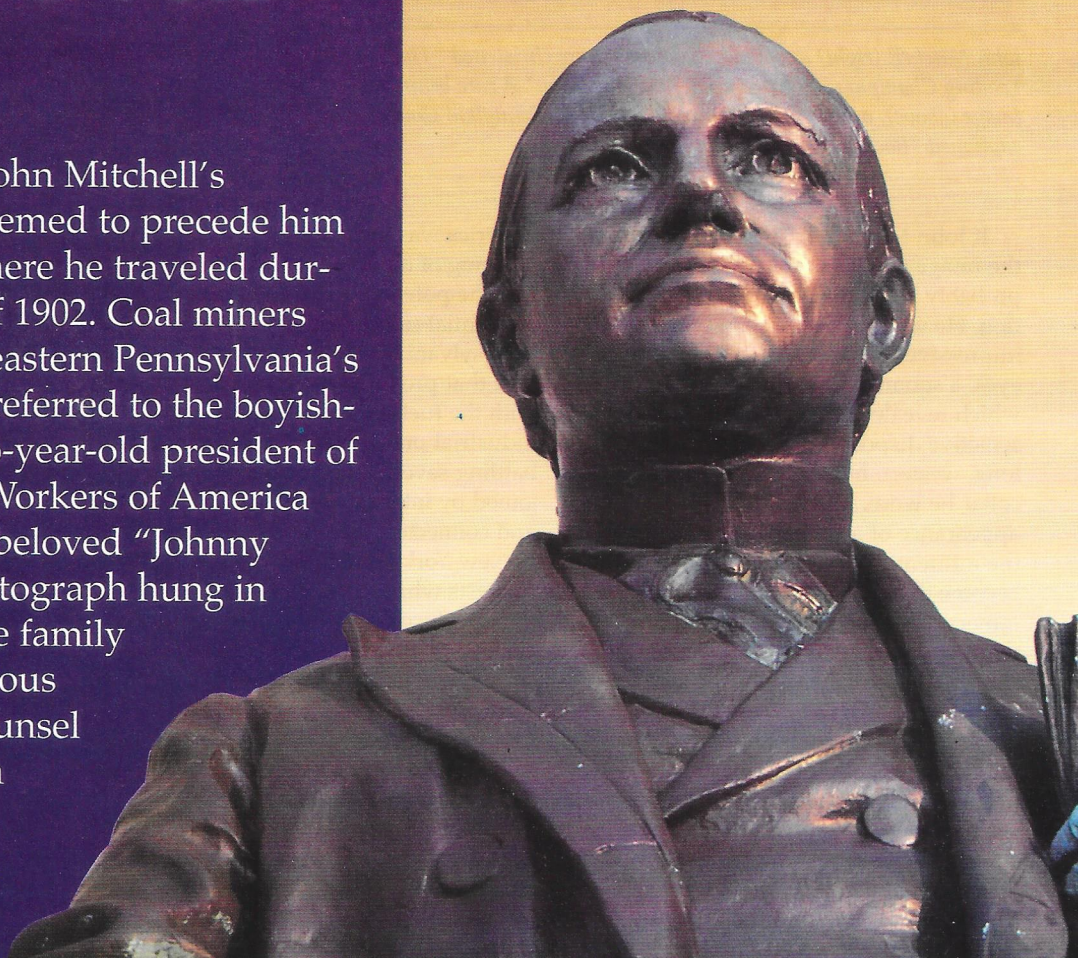
The UMWA Wins America's Approval



John Mitchell and the Anthracite Strike of 1902

by William C. Kashatus

Labor leader John Mitchell's reputation seemed to precede him no matter where he traveled during the summer of 1902. Coal miners throughout northeastern Pennsylvania's anthracite region referred to the boyish-looking thirty-two-year-old president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) as their beloved "Johnny d'Mitch." His photograph hung in their homes beside family pictures and religious prints. And his counsel was accepted with reverence usually accorded the local parish priest.





John Mitchell (right) and Teddy Roosevelt were christened "The World's Leading Champions of Arbitration and Fair Play." A rare behind-the-scenes image (above), probably taken near Shenandoah, Schuylkill County, is captioned "Back at Camp, 3 P.M. 1902 Strike."

If John Mitchell (1870-1919) evoked the image of a spiritual leader, it was probably because he well fit the description. He was a stalwart man with impressive features: expressive brown eyes, a square jaw, and a distinctive face, which revealed a highly intelligent but sensitive disposition. Together with the long, western miners' coat and straight collar he wore, Mitchell gave the appearance of a clergyman rather than the influential labor leader he had become during the past three years. Coal miners and their families greeted him warmly wherever he visited during the summer-long strike of 1902. In Hazleton, Luzerne County, the daughters, wives, and widows of miners showered him with flowers and baked goods. Further north, an honor guard of breaker boys ceremoniously escorted him through the streets of Plymouth. Wherever he went, the rank and file of Mitchell's UMWA turned out to cheer him with almost feverish hysteria and listened reverently to his every word. Their future depended on it.

By 1900, the United Mine Workers of

America was the fastest growing of all the unions and had the potential to be the most influential since it toiled in Pennsylvania's hard coal region, an area that provided the entire East Coast with the fuel needed for heating and industrial production. The union was battling seven large railroad companies joined by interlocking boards of directors and connected, by joint stock ownership, to New York and Philadelphia banking interests which owned mining operations that produced seventy percent of the coal. In 1880, their total workforce was seventy-three thousand; by 1900, there were nearly one hundred and seventy thousand men. Nearly sixty percent of these workers were foreign-born and included Irish, Lithuanian, Polish, Ukrainian, Slavic, and Italian immigrants. If Mitchell could dispel the animosity that existed between this largely Catholic workforce and the English and Welsh Protestant laborers whose families had long been in America, he would forge the solidarity he needed to confront the railroad companies.



Although the UMWA had recently won higher pay scales from soft coal operators, the hard coal owners were in a much stronger position, especially the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad Company and the Reading Railroad Company. Their power was nearly absolute, firmly rooted in a medieval-like structure of company servitude. Coal miners and their families, many of whom lived in company-owned housing negotiated on day-to-day leases, purchased their goods from company-owned stores and were paid wages arbitrarily calculated by the weighing of the coal the miner loaded each day. A miner's salary averaged three hundred and seventy-five dollars yearly. To make ends meet, miners' wives

sometimes became domestic servants of foremen and managers, and male children as young as seven worked as breaker boys, striding dangerous chutes through which the coal hurtled in order to pull out slate and rocks. Working conditions proved perilous; thousands suffered death or disability because of cave-ins, runaway mine cars, underground flooding, and explosions.

In spite of the poor living conditions and even poorer working circumstances, the public hesitated to support the miners in their demands. Ever since 1876, when members of a group of Irish miners known as the Molly Maguires were hanged for their terrorist activities against the coal companies' supervisory personnel, unionization was associated with anarchy and violence (see "The Molly Maguires: Fighting for Justice" by William C. Kashatus III, Fall 1987, and "Old Johnny's Vision for an Industrial Society" by Louis M. Waddell, Winter 2000). Public opinion began to change in 1897, however, because of the Lattimer Massacre near Hazleton, Luzerne County (see "A Massacre at Lattimer: Interview with Michael Novak" by Brent D. Glass, Fall 1997). Three hundred striking miners, mostly Poles, Slovaks, and Lithuanians, were assaulted by the

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county sheriff and his gun-toting deputies. Although nineteen miners died at Lattimer, the posse was tried for only one death, and when the court did not determine the specific triggerman, all the indicted deputies were acquitted. Public outrage led to a reaction in favor of unionization, and many Eastern European immigrant miners joined the UMWA.

Born in the small coal-mining town of Braidwood, Illinois, in 1870, Mitchell knew the poverty and exploitation rampant in the coal regions. An orphan raised by an abusive stepmother, Mitchell, at twelve of twelve, began working in the coal mines. He developed a reputation as a loner who never involved himself in the rowdiness of the company town. He possessed a sharp intelligence which earned him the respect and confidence of fellow laborers.

In just five years, Mitchell rose from the rank and file of the UMWA to its presidency. Beginning as a local union organizer, who worked without pay, Mitchell traveled through every mining village in Illinois. In 1897, he was named to the Illinois State UMWA board and was involved in the first interstate agreement between the soft-coal operators and the union. This was the opening salvo in an on-going battle for higher wages and reduced working hours—and it also

made him the most attractive candidate for the UMWA presidency in 1899.

John Mitchell's organizational abilities, as well as his calm, insightful judgment in the tensest situations, earned him the begrudging respect of the operators. It was his youth and limited experience in union politics that earned him the trust of the miners. At age twenty-nine, he was not identified with any one faction within the rank and file. This was critical to his success in establishing a bureaucratic structure to centralize decision-making at the national level, away from the local and district levels where individuals and goals frequently conflicted. Mitchell realized that the creation of a national board to transcend local interests was the only way to assure a permanent and effective union. While his rhetoric depicted the UMWA as the purest expression of democracy, he actively worked to limit competing interests within the rank and file. It was not an enviable position. Mitchell confided to a close friend the ambivalence he felt over assuming the UMWA presidency.

There is a wonderful change in my life in the last few years, from practical obscurity to the presidency of the strongest labor organization, numerically, in the world, is indeed a long stride. But I cannot say that I feel any personal gratification in my elevation. . . It seems to be the lot of those engaged in the labor movement to be idolized

by some and stigmatized by others. . .

His first task as union president was to unite Pennsylvania's anthracite miners by appealing to their common desire for economic justice. To do so, he would have to transcend the ethnic and religious barriers that divided them. Catholic miners, for instance, traditionally fought with Protestants, American-born workers with newly-arrived immigrants, and immigrant groups with each other. His whirlwind tours through communities in northeastern Pennsylvania became legendary for the sense of unity he managed to create among miners. "The coal you dig," he reminded them, "isn't Slavish or Polish or Irish coal, it's coal." He listened to everyone and answered him or her thoughtfully. In each region, he identified local leaders who exercised the most influence over their respective ethnic groups, as well as clergymen and editors of foreign language newspapers who assisted his recruitment efforts. Regardless of their ethnicity, immigrants came to respect Mitchell, who gave them the feeling that he was genuinely interested in their welfare. During his first year as president, Mitchell, working out of a small hotel room in Hazleton, personally enrolled nine thousand immigrant miners in the UMWA.

In September 1900, Mitchell led the anthracite miners in a strike that was partially victorious. Since some soft coal miners had gained a twenty percent pay



By fighting Pennsylvania's hard coal operators, Mitchell rose to

increase in 1898, Mitchell insisted on an increased wages scale of twenty percent for the lowest paid and ten percent for the highest paid day laborers. He demanded that a sliding scale that tied wages to the price of coal be dropped, along with several other devices used to cut miners' pay or give preferential treatment to particular miners who were management favorites. Companies penalized some miners by calculating their production in "long tons" of thirty-three hundred and sixty pounds, instead of the generally recognized standard ton weighing in at twenty-two hundred and

in trouble, and the coal miners can benefit by their trouble, I am willing to see the coal miners benefit, even if the political organizations suffer."

With the Republican Party applying political pressure on the hard coal operators to grant concessions, the miners resumed work on October 29. They had won a ten-percent wage increase, abolition of the sliding scale, and promises from the operators to meet with employee grievances committees. The victory attracted one hundred and twenty-five thousand new union members, giving anthracite workers equal



During his career, Mitchell (right) dealt with the country's influential leaders, such as (from left) steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, political evangelist William Jennings Bryan, and railroad titan James J. Hill. The four were photographed in 1905 at a labor conference.

forty pounds. Mitchell also wanted the company stores system abolished and the weight checkers who decided how much each man had produced to be paid by the miners themselves. When the operators refused to comply, more than one hundred thousand union and non-union miners walked off the job. Mitchell had timed the strike perfectly. Autumn brought not only increased demand for coal, but also political activity because this was a presidential election year.

Ohio's Senator Mark Hanna, chairman of the National Committee of the Republican Party and the driving force behind the re-election bid of President William H. McKinley, became important to Mitchell. Hanna understood that economic prosperity would keep McKinley in the White House. Avoiding labor unrest became a pressing concern. "We cared nothing for one political party or another," admitted Mitchell. "It made no difference to us who won or lost. If the political organizations of this country are

weight with bituminous coal miners in the UMWA. It also won for Mitchell the friendship of Senator Hanna, who would prove a staunch supporter in 1902.

The Strike of 1900 failed to win the UMWA recognition as the institutional spokesman for miners. The coal operators consistently refused to confer with Mitchell. In fact, the ten-percent increase was announced only by notices posted by the individual companies. Mine owners thought they legally contracted only with individual miners, and no tradition of bargaining negotiations had been established. The operators regarded the 1900 concessions as little more than a temporary retreat. To prevent another union victory, they stockpiled coal, constructed stockades around their collieries, hired additional guards to protect company property, and renege on their agreement to meet with the miners' grievance committees.

Urging the operators to recognize the UMWA as a "responsible institution

conducted on conservative business lines," Mitchell also warned of another strike. To avert another strike, Senator Hanna arranged an interview between Mitchell and financier J.P. Morgan in February 1902, but Morgan promised nothing more than to remain neutral. "If the railroad presidents are wrong," said Morgan, "I will not sustain them. But if the miners are wrong, I will not help them." Displeased, Mitchell took the matter to the miners. At the national UMWA convention in March, he conceded that tensions were high and that he was prepared to lead a strike if the operators refused to negotiate. "The paramount issues in anthracite," he contended, "are the eight hour day, a minimum wage scale, and union recognition."

Only after the miners called for a strike did the operators agree to meet with Mitchell. Even then, they declared that they would go bankrupt before recognizing the UMWA. Despite their obstinacy, Mitchell privately agreed to lower the wage demand from an increase of twenty percent to five percent. The owners, seeing this as a sign of weakness rejected the offer. Disgusted by the stalemate, the miners forced the owners' hand. On May 12, 1902, Mitchell agreed to a "temporary suspension of work, and three days later nearly one hundred and fifty thousand miners walked off the job.

When soft coal miners spontaneously resolved to walk out in a sympathy strike, Mitchell stopped them. Instead, he arranged a system for soft coal miners to contribute from their wages to assist their fellow workers in the anthracite trade. The sympathy strike would have meant breaking UMWA negotiated contracts with soft coal owners, making the UMWA appear to the public to be unreliable and dishonest.

Business dropped dramatically throughout the anthracite region. Strikebreakers were hired and workers and sympathizers hurled rotten tomatoes and death threats at them as they made their way to work. Strikebreakers' properties were damaged by explosions or decorated with makeshift tombstones bearing the derisive term "scab." Occasional violence also erupted, the most severe case occurring on July 30 at Shenandoah where a deputy sheriff was attacked by a band of strikers while escorting two non-union miners to work. The sheriff contacted Governor William A. Stone who promptly dispatched the National Guard. The entire Pennsylvania

National Guard, with the nearly three thousand Coal and Iron Police—many recruited from the criminal elements of Philadelphia—controlled the anthracite region and increased the resentment of the miners.

The incident at Shenandoah proved to be isolated. Urged on by Mitchell's call for a firm but even-tempered stand, the miners generally refrained from physical violence. In so doing, they demonstrated to the general public that the operators' talk of an anarchist plot to destroy American industry was unfounded. By mid-August the striking miners had won the sympathy of some of the nation's most prominent reformers. Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, urged his organization's constituent unions to contribute to the anthracite cause. Their aid amounted to more than two and a half million dollars. Celebrated labor lawyer Clarence Darrow also came to the aid of the anthracite miners.

George F. Baer, appointed president of the Reading Railroad Company by J.P. Morgan, served as the spokesman for the financier's enormous investments in the

anthracite region. A reactionary, Baer took an uncompromising stand. In June, when the Reverend John J. Curran, popular pastor of a Catholic Church in Wilkes-Barre who was serving as a liaison for the UMWA, approached him with a compromise proposal, Baer was nothing less than blunt. "The operators will give no consideration to any plan of arbitration or mediation, or to any interference on the part of any outside party." Baer added that the strike was a "private issue" and that any arbitration directly interfered with the operators' "right to manage their own property." Father Curran persisted, traveling to Philadelphia and New York to meet with other operators and using his influence within the Catholic Church to appeal for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Baer took exception to the clergyman's efforts to mediate for the UMWA, an organization he said was founded on "mob rule."

Baer then damaged his own cause by carrying his comments to a deeper level. He was quoted as having written that, "The rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for—not by labor agitators, but by the Christian

men of property to whom God has given control of the property rights of the country, and upon the successful management of which so much depends."

Baer's presumptuousness appalled even the most conservative elements of society. "A good many people think that they superintend the earth," opined the *New York Times*, "but not many have the egregious vanity to describe themselves as its managing director." The *Chicago Tribune* contended that it was "impudent," "insulting" and "audacious" of coal operators such as Baer "to speak of 'lawlessness' in the coal regions when they themselves are the greatest offenders." Baer's derisive statement—which he publicly denied making ten years later—shifted public opinion squarely over to the miners' cause.

By mid-September, widespread fears of an impending fuel shortage, as well as a suspected alliance between the striking miners and socialist groups forced President Theodore Roosevelt to grapple with the stalemate. While he believed that the coal operators were violating the Sherman Anti-Trust Act in restraint of trade, Roosevelt was more concerned





and ancient Roman law, spoke for the right of the owners to manage as they pleased and condemned the crimes and intimidating tactics of the striking miners. An impassioned

Charles Keck's bas relief serves as a backdrop for his statue of John Mitchell, erected on Scranton's Courthouse Square.

about the social upheaval a prolonged strike might cause. "If this strike lasts another month," he confided to his Attorney General Philander Knox, "there will be an outbreak of the most awful riots which this country has ever seen."

October 3, Roosevelt invited Mitchell and the leading anthracite operators to meet in Washington, D.C. Appealing to the patriotism of both parties, Roosevelt asked that "there be an immediate resumption of work in order to meet the crying needs of the American people." Mitchell agreed to accept the ruling of a government-appointed board of arbitration. The operators, on the other hand, considered themselves victimized by the UMWA and refused federal arbitration.

John Markle, scion of a prominent Hazleton mining family, who represented the independent coal operators, dared to lecture Roosevelt on his presidential responsibilities. "I now ask you to perform the duties invested in you as President of the United States, to at once squelch the anarchistic conditions of affairs existing in the anthracite coal regions by the strong arm of the military at your command." Insulted, Roosevelt later admitted that "if it wasn't for the high office I held, I would have taken [the operators] by their breeches and chucked them out the window."

The following week the president threatened to use the Army to seize the mines. Only then did the owners rescind their inflexible position. Morgan drafted a memorandum to Roosevelt to appoint an arbitration commission, and conveyed the operators' promise to accept its recommendations.

On October 23, the miners returned to work. By November 14, the arbitration hearings began, alternating between Scranton and Philadelphia. A total of five hundred and fifty-eight witnesses testified. George Baer delivered the most eloquent defense and, quoting Cervantes

Clarence Darrow directed his summary remarks to the operators, speaking for the rights of the working man and the need to unionize.

Gentlemen, this was an industrial war. You, on your side, were fighting 147,000 men with their wives and children. The weapons you used to bring them to your terms were the most cruel, deadly weapons that any oppressor has ever used: hunger and want. These men, in return, precipitated the greatest conflict between capital and labor which the world has ever seen, the most gigantic strike in history. They did so because, in their minds, it was a question of whether they should be the masters of their own toil and no one else... you are fighting for slavery, while we are fighting for freedom. . . .

The Anthracite Coal Strike Commission announced, on March 22, 1903, its award—to which the coal companies had to yield—accompanied by a lengthy report containing advisory recommendations. Convinced by U.S. Department of Labor cost-of-living statistics, the commission specified a ten percent wage increase and a nine-hour day for all miners except the water-hoisting engineers, firemen, and pump men, some of whom received an eight-hour day and some Sundays off. A new sliding scale was imposed, but this time only to

provide further increases in pay if the price of coal rose. These standards were fixed for three years. A safeguard against management clipping wages by altering car sizes was imposed, but no action was taken against the "long ton" or the other wage-docking devices often imposed by harsh management. The weighing checkers, who had the final say on how much a miner produced each day, were now to be paid by the miners themselves, a safeguard against their conspiring with management against the workers. There was still no legal recognition of unions, but the commission established a grievance conciliation board, replacing the system the coal companies had hypocritically promised in 1900. The representatives for the miners on the board were to be chosen from the three UMWA fields that divided the anthracite region, which meant that they could be UMWA office holders. Insignificant as this may seem, it was hailed as de facto recognition of the union, even though the commission also recommended the creation of a separate union for anthracite

Attending the meeting of the Anthracite Coal Strike Commission in Scranton on November 17, 1902, were (1) Judge George Grey, commission chairman; (2) Dr. Peter Roberts, author and witness for the miners; (3) Clarence S. Darrow, chief attorney for the miners; (4) A.H. McClintock, a coal company attorney; (5) S.P. Wolverton, a coal company attorney; (6) John Mitchell, UMWA president; and (7) H.C. Reynolds, attorney for individual operators.



“The weapons you used to bring them to your terms were the most cruel, deadly weapons that any oppressor has ever used: hunger and want.”

mines, clearly an insult to the UMWA. In all, the settlement was less than what Mitchell had demanded but certainly more than the minimum he had been willing to accept.

Insomnia plagued John Mitchell throughout his career as union president. Extended absences took their toll on his marriage and family. His exhausting schedule and endless pressures led him to growing dependence on alcohol, and he never again enjoyed the same level of success he experienced in 1902. The coal operators increasingly broke their collective bargaining agreements after 1904, returning to their war with the United Mine Workers of America. As the years passed, Mitchell became more of a bureaucrat who viewed the labor

movement as a professional field in which to advance his own financial interests, rather than the virtuous cause he had once believed it to be. Having distanced himself from the union’s rank and file members—whom he privately called “cattle”—he was voted out of the presidency in 1908. Nine years later he died of pneumonia, a largely forgotten man.

History has been generous to John Mitchell. Today he is widely credited with permanently establishing the United Mine Workers of America in the anthracite fields and giving miners the organizational unity they needed to secure economic justice in their relations with the operators. His political savvy forced the federal government to assume a judgmental role in a labor dispute for the first time. Because of John Mitchell, the Anthracite Strike of 1902 was a triumph for all American workers. ❖

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The author wishes to thank Robert Janosov of Luzerne County Community College, Nanticoke, for his thoughtful critique of this article.

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