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“Beneath the Starry Flag”: the Flags and Songs of the 1913-14 Michigan Copper Strike as Image-making in the American Labor Movement

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"Beneath the Starry Flag": the Flags and Songs of the 1913-14 Michigan Copper Strike as Image-making in the American Labor Movement

The 1913-14 Michigan copper strike is unlike many American labor actions of the period in that it did not include red flags or socialist anthems. Many of the most familiar photographs of the strike involve American flags, not red ones. Similarly, the songs mentioned in journalistic accounts of the strikers are American Civil War songs, not popular labor songs of the period. The few newly-written songs about the strike, published in the local newspapers, seem cautiously polite and espouse values such as patriotism, liberty and human rights. During a time when sections of the "friendly" press were concerned with labor presenting the correct image and avoiding unfavorable associations, the Copper Country strikers, and the W.F.M., seem to have been attempting to create a fresh narrative regarding what this strike was (and what it was not).

This paper will consider elements of the Copper Country strike in the light of media coverage, prior to July 1913, of several American labor topics that might have influenced the way the strike was presented. Particular attention will be given to photographs, songs, and accounts from the 1912 Lawrence textile strike, as well as contemporaneous critiques of labor song lyrics. Most of this commentary will be drawn from the labor and socialist press, demonstrating that the 1913-14 Michigan copper strike occurred during a period in which the labor movement was struggling to craft and image that would display it as it wished to be seen.