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## The Progressive Miners of America: Roots of Dissent and Foundational Years, 1932-1940

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*The Progressive Miners of America: Roots of Dissent and Foundational Years, 1932-1940*

Ian Cook

Thesis submitted

to the College of Eberly Arts and Sciences

at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

History in

American Twentieth Century

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## ABSTRACT

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Ian Cook

This thesis will examine the events around the formation of the Progressive Miners of America and the early years of their existence. The period covered will begin in the early 1900s and cover the coal industry broadly and the specific events that occurred in Illinois leading to the Progressives formation in 1932. Events occurring within the United Mine Workers that influenced Progressive members will also be discussed at length. From there, this thesis will examine the union's reliance on a legal strategy to gain recognition from coal operators, its interactions with the various levels of government, and the violence that defined the union between 1932 and 1938. This thesis will finally examine the decision to affiliate with the American Federation of Labor and examine how the events of the 1930s ultimately shaped the Progressive Miners.

This thesis will differ from previous works in two major ways. The first will be the types of sources utilized. Oral histories, not available for the earliest historical works on the Progressives, will be utilized alongside newspaper sources and historical documents. This will present new topics for discussion, such as the radical minority within the Progressives and the long view of events that led to the union's formation. This presents a more complex image of the Progressives and allows for the inclusion of individualism within the union's history. The second are the conclusions that will be drawn in by the end of the thesis. These conclusions will cover the lasting legacy of the Progressives

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## Chapter I - Introduction

The Progressive Miners of America (PMA) organized in 1932 as a splinter organization from the larger, more established, United Mine Workers of America (UMW). Centered around the coal fields of Illinois, the miners felt that their autonomy at the district level had been trampled by International President John L. Lewis. After a tense contract negotiation that featured the theft of ballots, allegedly by a United Mine Workers organizer, and an ambush of coal miners and their families by local law enforcement and “special deputies,” the miners went out on their own to recapture the spirit of the early United Mine Workers. This spirit included ideas like rank and file democracy, the use of wildcat strikes, and decentralized leadership. The miners faced opposition from various levels of government, law enforcement, and the labor movement itself. Illinois erupted into violence for the rest of the 1930s as the two unions fought for membership in the streets, courts, mines, and media.

The Progressives were important in the histories of American labor and of coal mining unions. While early historiography regarded the Progressives as a minor dual union, they offered much more to labor history. The Progressives were one of the largest and most long-lived opposition groups to the UMW. They were the summation of decades of internalized dissent to a growing authoritative and centralized leadership in the UMW that felt that their only choice going forward was to form a new union. They represented a radical shift by granting more power to the local unions, but faced tough decisions as a conservative District leadership attempted to control their actions. The violence they faced in the 1930s impacted small communities and changed local society in Illinois. At the national level, they attempted to expand at a time in which the federal government regulated organized labor and offered a more bureaucratic process

of collective bargaining. The Progressives attempted to use these new channels to force operators into recognizing their rights and, through the defeats they faced in courts, created a unique criticism of these new systems.

Radicalism among the Progressive Miners of America will be a topic of discussion throughout much of this thesis. The radicals of Illinois had no fixed political ideology and can be hard to define at times. While some miners expressed interest in Karl Marx, Eugene V. Debs, and Vladimir Lenin, most only had a passing knowledge of Communism and Socialism. Most phrased their ideas through their Christian, mostly Catholic, upbringings. Others simply stated their opposition to capitalism or support for industrial democracy. Instead, this thesis defines radicalism by the actions that Illinois miners took. These actions include membership in the Industrial Workers of the World, direct action in the community through opposition to evictions and fundraising for the elderly, calls for violent opposition to law enforcement and the UMW, and use of the wildcat strike.

Harriet Hudson's *The Progressive Mine Workers of America: A Study in Rival Unionism* and Dallas Young's *History of the Progressive Miners of America 1932-1940* stand as the most complete histories written on the Progressive Miners of America. Both Hudson and Young's works were written shortly after the events of the Illinois mine wars, 1952 and 1940 respectively. However, new sources were made available in the decades since their writing and the historiography covering the Progressives has advanced since then. Recent scholarship, such as Carl Oblinger's *Divided Kingdom: Work, Community, and the Mining Wars in the Central Illinois Coal Fields During the Great Depression*, focuses on the stories of individuals in these trying times and connect them to larger themes like the evolution of coal mining in the twentieth

century. The Progressives have also been included in detail within larger works on the history of the United Mine Workers.

This thesis will differ from previous historical works on the Progressive Miners by incorporating oral histories into the previously utilized records of the Progressive organization and newspapers, ranging from the *New York Times* to the *Progressive Miner*, to present a better view of the union's history. Oral histories, primarily conducted in the 1970s and 80s with recently retired miners, provide an individual perspective of the events around the founding of the Progressive Miners. The oral histories illuminate the actions and ideas of rank-and-file members of the PMA. This perspective has been lacking in previous histories on the Progressive organization. Both Young and Hudson presented a top-down view of the labor union. Alternatively, histories that have utilized the oral histories tended to focus just on them as primary sources and did not contextualize them or provide sources to support the first-hand accounts' claims. By utilizing newspapers and the records left behind to corroborate to the claims made by Progressive members in oral histories, a more complete and complex view of the PMA emerges.

Chapter II will focus on the origins of the Progressive Miners of America and the events that led to its formation. Beginning in the early 1900s, the United Mine Workers rose nationally and built a powerful base of support in Illinois. This base of support was eroded in the 1920s as the UMW declined nationally in response to a decline in the coal industry and increased opposition from operators. Dissent towards the policies of International President John L. Lewis appeared around the country, but Illinois was an epicenter. Local leaders like Frank Farrington, President of the Illinois district, attempted to maintain control of their district's wealthy treasuries as Lewis replaced democratically elected leaders within the UMW with his appointed

stooges. The opposition culminated in the Reorganized United Mine Workers of America. This group existed primarily in West Virginia and Illinois and was led by a motley crew of former members of the United Mine Workers who had been expelled or forced out by Lewis. After the failure of this movement, and the rejection of these leaders at the rank-and-file level, miners again acted out their leaders and President Lewis during the 1932 Illinois contract negotiations. The ballots of a second referendum to accept a contract were stolen, because they allegedly represented rejection of the contract according to the Progressive Miners. Miners across the state of Illinois gathered in opposition to a forced acceptance of this contract and were fired upon by sheriffs and deputized community leaders at a small town called Mulkeytown. This final event led to conventions across the state calling for a separation from the United Mine Workers.

Chapter III will discuss the interactions between the governments at the county, state, and federal level and the Progressive Miners of America. At the county level, interactions differed from community to community. In some areas, the Progressive cause benefited from a friendly or at least neutral sheriff's department or city hall. In other communities, the Progressives faced stiff opposition from sheriffs who broke laws and used violent intimidation to maintain power. At the state level, the governor's office was mainly concerned with maintaining an image of peace in the Illinois coal fields. Peace talks between the two unions occurred often, but the resolutions achieved were nonbinding and did not stop the violence. Investigations by the state legislature only offered nonbinding recommendations for the governor. Pressure was also placed on the state government from the Progressives to increase aid to the mining communities at the height of the Great Depression. At the federal level, officials openly supported the United Mine Workers. The Progressives turned to the federal court system and the newly created National Labor Relations Board to prove that they represented the majority of the coal miners in Illinois.



But these cases often dragged on over long periods and Progressive support in an area often collapsed by the time a court decision appeared. The Federal government also aggressively investigated the Progressive organization the most aggressively, as the FBI became involved after a series of train bombings that had delayed the mail in Springfield. Federal legislation that attempted to regulate the bituminous coal industry eventually resulted in the recognition of the UMW as the sole collective bargaining agents of American coal miners.

Chapter IV deals with the period between the Progressives' founding in 1932 and 1938-39, the years of initial affiliation with the American Federation of Labor. After this initial period, the Progressive story changes and becomes a part of a larger narrative of the American Federation of Labor versus the Congress of Industrial Organizations and labor in World War II. This period is distinct and outside of the scope of this thesis. Chapter III covers topics like the formation of the Women's Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners of America, the continuing battles in Christian and Franklin County, the expulsion of leading radicals by the District leadership, the relief system developed within the union, and the success and failures of the union paper, the *Progressive Miner*. The final topic of discussion will be the decision to affiliate with the AFL and how it compares to the ideas union members held at the beginning of the Progressive revolt and what it meant as one chapter of the Progressive's history closed.

All three chapters will feature connections between trends at the district level of the Progressive Miners of America and the stories told by individuals who experienced the events. These stories will enrich the Progressive's history and provide greater context to the events around the PMA. Some such stories examine the influence of Italian immigrants and the communities they built and maintained on the Progressives, the federal bombing trial and its affect on a wide array of membership, and the choice to affiliate with the American Federation of

Labor. Many of these stories can be corroborated by other primary sources, but some raise important questions to which there are no clear answers. Both the UMW and PMA made wild claims against each other, and members of both organizations repeated the claims decades later for interviewers. To examine the claims side by side will reveal a deep divide between neighboring miners over unionism and the effects that “fake news” had in 1930s Illinois.

Chapter V offers a conclusion will examine the legacy of the Progressive Miners of America. While largely written off as a dual-union or a failed schism, the Progressives represented a challenge to the United Mine Workers. Progressive ideas on decentralized leadership and authority given to the locals to handle union issues directly challenged John L. Lewis’s authoritative leadership within the UMW and the labor movement at large. They also stood as criticism of the federal government’s regulation of unionism and collective bargaining. In cases where they represented a majority of workers they were still denied rights because of their perceived radicalism and the strong ties between the UMW and the Democratic Party. This thesis also argues that the Progressive Miners continued to influence the UMW long after they had fallen from power. Arnold Miller, a UMW President who emerged out of a later democratic movement within the union, attended a Progressive rally at a young age and was in contact with some retired Progressive leaders during his election campaign. The Progressive cause lived on long after their demise.

## Chapter II – Dissent and Formation of the Progressive Miners of America

The origins of the Progressive Miners of America go far beyond the chaotic events of 1932 in the Illinois coal fields. In truth, the seeds were planted with the birth of the United Mine Workers in the late nineteenth century and its traditional strength in Illinois. While the rest of the original backbone of the UMW (Indiana and Ohio) faded with time, Illinois remained a center of strength within the union and built a network of solidarity among its membership. The next generations of workers, drawing more and more from immigrant populations from Europe, maintained these bonds of solidarity and belief in trade unionism as the only way for them to get their best deal from the coal operators. Illinois operated uniquely, acting as a micro-level example for the national coal industry, by incorporating such a large variety of extraction methods and organizational structures.

The coal fields of Illinois were in a unique position in the year 1932. Illinois had long been a major producer of coal and capitalized on nearby markets in Chicago and beyond. While underground mining was the most common method of coal production, operators in Illinois began implementing new ideas and technologies more rapidly than in other established coal fields. Strip mining spread in the state much more quickly than in other fields. Small coal seams, near the surface, proved easily retrievable by strip mining and similar removal practices. While still a minority in the state, strip mining had more than doubled from the end of World War I to the 1930s.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harriet D. Hudson, *The Progressive Mine Workers of America: A Study in Rival Unionism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1952), 14.

Union miners had mixed feelings about the practice of strip mining. Some cited the negative effects strip mining had on the soil and the loss of future potential agricultural lands through the process of coal removal.<sup>2</sup> Many also regretted the loss of jobs at strip mines compared to the higher-employing underground mines of Illinois. UMW President John L. Lewis, however, endorsed strip mining as part of the broad subject of mechanization and its positive effect on the mining industry. Lewis felt that the mining industry had a large surplus of labor that negatively affected the unionized United Mine Workers by providing coal operators with a pool of labor to tap into at times of unrest. Implementing strip mining and other new technologies reduced the labor pool over time and the remaining miners were in higher demand and in a better bargaining position with operators.<sup>3</sup>

As mechanization spread rapidly among the mines of Illinois throughout the 1920s, miners recognized the threats it posed to their jobs. Some mining positions, such as those that handled the mules or horses pulling tons of coal to the surface, vanished in the face of these advancements. Others, such as the motormen that operated some of the new underground machines, found themselves in higher demand. Younger miners found themselves in better positions than those with decades of experience, as companies were more willing to train them on new technologies. The position most in upheaval was that of the loader, the miner who directly dug coal and loaded it for transport to the surface. These miners worked with their hands, picks, and shovels in order to break up coal in the older, nonmechanized mines.<sup>4</sup>

However, beginning in the 1910s and rapidly expanding in usage by the late 1920s, machines

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<sup>2</sup> Records of the First Constitutional Convention of the Progressive Miners of America, Folder 1, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>3</sup> John H. M. Laslett, ed., *The United Mine Workers of America: A Model of Industrial Solidarity?* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 113-115.

<sup>4</sup> John H. M. Laslett, ed., *The United Mine Workers of America: A Model of Industrial Solidarity?* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 167-200.

now broke up coal seams and relieved much of the physical stress of loading and transporting coal. Peabody Coal, by far the largest coal producer in the state, implemented the Marietta model of the continuous loader in its Illinois mines and rapidly increased its annual production numbers.<sup>5</sup> The labor requirements for mining coal were drastically reduced by these advancements, and the loaders fought for the positions left.

These technological advancements also altered the way many miners were paid for their work. Under the non-mechanized system, miners were often paid per ton of coal they produced daily. Miners worked under flexible shifts, where they mined as much as they wanted for the day and then were able to quit. These shifts became less flexible as the mines mechanized and wages were more tied to hourly work rate than output. While miners whose work did not directly relate to the output of coal per shift, such as those who maintained the underground rail system that helped transport coal to the surface, were already tied to hourly or daily wage scales, mechanization brought the vast majority of the mine under this new system.<sup>6</sup> Some miners claimed this hurt them and that their wages were higher when tied directly to the amount of coal produced. To these miners, the switch to a daily scale meant that their output could be wildly increased (with the use of labor-saving technology or through speedups instituted from management) with no increase in their wages. This issue was debated throughout the 1920s and well into the 1930s in the background of the conflicts that raged in the Illinois coal fields.

More so than in other fields, Illinois featured a large number of cooperatively owned mines. These worker-owned mines produced only a few tons of coal. Some were former company mines that, upon shutting down, were bought by the men who worked them. These

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<sup>5</sup> Joe Craggs, interview by Kevin Corley, 1986, Oral History Office of Sangamon State University, Springfield, IL.

<sup>6</sup> John H. M. Laslett, ed., *The United Mine Workers of America: A Model of Industrial Solidarity?* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 167-200.

mines generally had a low output and were of older design. The miners themselves were often older as well, having been the local men who worked them in their “glory days.” Others were run seasonally by men who could not find consistent work in larger mines. This was a common practice during the spring and summer months, during which many mines either shut down or ran on a skeleton crew. The unemployed miners could produce several tons of coal this way to sell or save for the winter months when coal prices rose and more money could be made.<sup>7</sup>

These cooperatively run mines often operated under union contracts, causing problems at the District level when it came to operating under the same scale that applied to larger coal companies. The small cooperatives could not afford the wages or machinery to keep up with the times, and many were forced out of business; this was actually the desired effect of John L. Lewis. Exceptions under the contracts for small-scale producers meant that the miners could not economically better themselves and often made the loudest calls for wage increases. Large numbers of the disgruntled miners who worked in cooperative pits later joined the rival union, Progressive Miners of America. They complicated union policies and negotiating strategies, such as being exempt from paying into pension funds.

While much can be said about the diversity of coal mining in Illinois in 1932, it was still dominated and shaped by the major national coal producers that were dwarfing all competitors in terms of tons produced. One company, for example, produced ten percent of the total tons of coal produced throughout the state in 1933. This contribution was roughly equal to the combined output of the bottom one thousand one hundred fifty mines in the state.<sup>8</sup> Peabody Coal was by far

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<sup>7</sup> Larry Mantowich, interview by Barbara Herndon, February 19 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>8</sup> Harriet D. Hudson, *The Progressive Mine Workers of America: A Study in Rival Unionism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1952), 22-23.

the largest operator in the state of Illinois, and along with the other large-scale operators ran the Illinois Coal Operators Association (ICOA). District 12 of the United Mine Workers negotiated directly with this organization for its contracts throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The smaller operators resented being ordered around by the ICOA, but ultimately lacked the strength to challenge the organization or the UMW.<sup>9</sup>

### **Changes in Illinois and the UMW**

While early coal mining in Illinois was defined by a Scottish and English labor force, by the early 1920s that had changed. The British immigrants who remained in coal mining had largely progressed out of labor positions and into management. While some remained in the labor pool of miners, their numbers decreased rapidly throughout the 1900s. Newer immigrant populations, such as Italians, Czechoslovakians, French, German, and others, became the large labor pool that occupied the bottom of the mining hierarchy. These new immigrant groups largely preserved their culture within the mining communities of Illinois and remained close and distinct.<sup>10</sup> By the late 1920s, many of these immigrants' children had reached adulthood and joined the mining force as well. The elder miners passed down their tradition of unionism and support of the United Mine Workers to their children. Many miners later recalled their fathers' experiences in mining and how much the union meant to them. Most of this new wave of immigrants identified as Catholic, and the church was influential in coal fields with distinct Italian and Eastern European communities.

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<sup>9</sup> Harriet D. Hudson, *The Progressive Mine Workers of America: A Study in Rival Unionism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1952), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Dallas Young, *A History of the Progressive Miners of America, 1932-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1940) 1-5.

The exact demographic shift is hard to approximate. Historian Dallas Young reasoned that an estimated eighty to eighty-five percent of Illinois coal miners were considered American born, while a little over ten percent were born in foreign countries. Young simultaneously stated that a great deal of this American born workforce were the sons of immigrants and that they remained in separate communities that were built by their mothers and fathers.<sup>11</sup> Most oral histories conducted with Progressive Miners that were the sons of immigrants showed that the miners felt a strong connection to these identities and cultures and remained apart of these communities for the majority of their lives.

Joe Craggs's story illustrates the rise of English immigrants in the hierarchy of the Illinois coal fields. His father immigrated in 1909, around eight years before Joe's birth, and rose in the ranks quickly, becoming a mine manager at Peabody No. 43 in Harrisburg. Craggs claimed the reason Englishmen were able to rise quickly in the ranks was because of technological advances in Great Britain's coal fields and higher skill levels among English miners. Craggs himself rose through management positions of Peabody Coal after close to a decade of work in various underground and above ground positions, and he helped implement mechanization and aided in designing some of the machines used in underground mines throughout the twentieth century, even claiming to own seventeen patents on coal mining technology.<sup>12</sup>

John Fancher and Gerry Allard, two important Progressive Miners in the Illinois coal field, claimed French ancestry. Fancher, of French and English descent, was born in Alabama and entered the mines there at the age of 10 (there was no union in Alabama to prevent his employment at that age). He then moved to Illinois after being black-listed in the aftermath of a

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<sup>11</sup> Dallas Young, *A History of the Progressive Miners of America, 1932-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1940) 2-4.

<sup>12</sup> Joe Craggs, interview by Kevin Corley, 1986, Oral History Office of Sangamon State University, Springfield, IL.



failed strike in 1917. There he remained a militant and took part in the dissident labor group, the Reorganized United Mine Workers in Springfield.<sup>13</sup> Gerry Allard was an educated coal miner, who became active in union politics and eventually the first editor of *The Progressive Miner*. Allard's wife, Irene, came from a family of Finnish miners who had settled in Illinois. She recalled how difficult it was, at first, for her family to accept Gerry, as he was not of Finnish descent. She was told her marriage to the "American" would only last one year. However, her family grew to love and support Gerry in times of need.<sup>14</sup>

Jack Battuello, another dissident, later recalled how close the Italian mining communities were in the early 1900s in Illinois and the neighboring fields around St. Louis, Missouri. His father immigrated from Italy in the 1890s after leaving the Catholic Church (he was an acolyte) and settled in Mt. Olive for most of his life. Holidays were spent at large community-wide gatherings. Battuello stated that the children looked forward to these large gatherings of family and friends because they knew the elders would give them a few cents each time they saw them (even at funerals). Weddings were the largest of the community events, and if they occurred during the slow season of production in the summer they would last for days. Battuello also recalled the discrimination expressed towards the Italian immigrants in the early 1900s. On one occasion, he got into a fight after a miner accused Jack of stealing his lunch and called him an offensive slur.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> John Fancher, interview by Barbara Herndon, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>14</sup> Irene Allard, interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherniavsky, 1974, Oral History Collection, Brookens Library, University of Illinois, Springfield, IL.

<sup>15</sup> Jack Battelo, interview by Barbara Herndon, March 13 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

Catherine Derorre Mans, whose mother was active in militant mining organizations and father was a miner in Illinois, also recalled the nature of the Italian community in the Illinois coal fields. Her grandfather had traveled to America between 1907 and 1908 to find work in the coal mines, having some experience in the mines of his homeland. Her mother also immigrated, marrying an Illinois coal miner and making a home in the Du Quoin area of Illinois. She recalled their home always having visitors, whether coal miners who worked with her father or members of the Italian community visiting for dinners, holidays, or housing for a temporary job in the coal mines.<sup>16</sup>

Frank Borgognoni's father had immigrated from Bologna to find his grandfather's grave somewhere in the American Midwest. Instead, his father found his uncles and other family members and settled with them in Kincaid, Illinois and began mining coal at the No. 8 mine. Frank's father worked his way out of the mines and opened a union-friendly tavern in Kincaid. He used his position as a business owner in the community to act as a translator for many Italian miners throughout his life, as well as a negotiator between the United Mine Workers and its opponents, and between the company and the various unions that arose. Because of this, the Italian community came together and helped build Borgognoni's two-bedroom family home. Frank mentions that Catholicism helped keep the Italian community close-knit and also helped build ties with other Catholic-leaning ethnicities (he mentions the Irish specifically). He also mentions the widespread practice of Italian miners transferring their pay back to family members still in Italy through the use of an Italian consular in Springfield.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Catherine Derorre Mans, interview by Nick Cherniavsky, February 17 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Borgognoni, interview by Kevin Corley, 1986, Oral History Collection at University of Illinois-Springfield, Springfield, IL.

Larry Mantowich, another opponent of John L. Lewis's UMW, grew up in a close-knit Lithuanian community in Springfield, Illinois. His father immigrated to the country with experience as a coal miner and became an active member of the United Mine Workers (even serving as a pit committeeman). Mantowich recalled that in the early 1900s, Springfield was largely a town of miners and farmers. The miners were paid in gold or cash before check systems were developed and the city became hectic when most miners were paid at the beginning of the month. Mantowich remembered the local Lithuanian Church as being a central point of the Lithuanian community in Springfield. He later admitted to leaving the church because of its siding with the companies over the union. Some preachers in town even advocated scabbing during strikes (his father left the church for a similar reason).<sup>18</sup>

Mantowich also supported the theme that the mines were diverse and multicultural, even calling them "The United Nations." He recalled working alongside miners of Bulgarian, Polish, Lithuanian, German, Italian, and Latvian ancestry, to name some. While he did not remember many African Americans working in the Springfield mines, he did indicate that facilities at the mine were integrated. There were no separate bathrooms or washrooms, and miners of varying backgrounds washed each other's backs at the end of their workdays.<sup>19</sup>

Migrants from the South, both African American and white, also defined the coal fields of Illinois. Most ended up in Southern Illinois and were able to influence local culture, such as through the spread of Southern Baptist churches in some coal communities. With white Southerners came their ideologies on race relations that defined their communities in the eyes of

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<sup>18</sup> Larry Mantowich, interview by Barbara Herndon, February 19 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>19</sup> Larry Mantowich, interview by Barbara Herndon, February 19 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

some Illinois residents. “Sundown Laws,” stating that no African Americans were allowed in city limits after dark, were applied in many small coal mining towns like West Frankfort. The Ku Klux Klan was wildly influential in Southern Illinois (particularly among Southern migrants) and responsible for violence in Franklin County against African Americans and immigrants.<sup>20</sup>

Agnes Burns Wieck, a labor organizer and journalist, wrote extensively for the United Mine Worker’s journal in District 12, the *Illinois Miner*, about the Klan in Williamson County, Illinois. The Klan acted as prohibition enforcers in most areas, receiving support from temperance groups and the local clergy. They often targeted Italian communities. While the majority of Italians that broke the dry-laws were a small-scale producers for personal consumption, violent bootlegging gangs did have a presence in parts of Illinois. Frank Fries, a Sheriff in Macoupin County, noted that he oversaw the last public execution in the state of Illinois.<sup>21</sup> Wieck noted that the Klan was responsible for several shootings in Herrin and Johnston City. She also reasoned that their spread among the mining communities was due to union inaction and the influence of religious zealots. Wieck also believed that a strong union presence could replace the influence of these religious leaders and show a new kind of tolerance and acceptance towards miners of different backgrounds.<sup>22</sup>

Some Illinois miners remembered the Southern migrants as strikebreakers. During the violence of the early 1930s union miners described most strikebreakers as imported Southerners

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<sup>20</sup> Irene Allard specifically mentioned Sundown laws, while Jack Battuello recalled Klan organizing near Gillespie and the issue of free speech surrounding their activities. Jack Battelo, interview by Barbara Herndon, March 13 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV. Irene Allard, interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherniavsky, 1974, Oral History Collection, Brookens Library, University of Illinois, Springfield, IL.

<sup>21</sup> The hanging in particular was of the leader of a gang of Italian-American liquor distributors.

<sup>22</sup> David Thoreau Wieck, *Woman from Spillertown: A Memoir of Agnes Burns Wieck* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 92-95.

(most often white). Miners claimed these Southerners were thugs, criminals, and gangsters and blamed much of the violence that occurred on them. Later, the Southerners were found on both sides of the union split. Those areas that were predominantly Southern that didn't take sides were at contested grounds and were the sights of major strikes.

The period between the end of World War I and the early 1930s in the Illinois coal fields was marked by internal factionalism, the rise of John L. Lewis within the United Mine Workers, and cries for rank and file democracy. Rapid gains made during the expansion of industry during World War I and corresponding increases in union membership as the government begrudgingly supported unionism in exchange for tight control over the rank and file and the quick end to any militant action, were under attack in the immediate post-war period. The United Mine Workers took on the coal industry and the United States government as inflation soared after 1918. Nationally four hundred thousand miners struck in 1919 winning modest wage gains. This represented an initial peak in membership that would not be reached again until the late 1930s.<sup>23</sup> In 1922 another massive national strike, this time coordinated between the bituminous and anthracite fields, affected over six hundred thousand miners. This resulted in an agreement in August of 1922 in Cleveland that set wages at seven dollars and fifty cents in the bituminous coal industry.<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that Illinois, through its strength in membership, maintained wages close to this rate throughout most of the 1920s as many miners lost ground elsewhere.

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<sup>23</sup> Out of this total of four hundred thousand members Illinois maintained between eighty and one hundred thousand members. This made the district one of the largest and most powerful.

<sup>24</sup> John H. M. Laslett, ed., *The United Mine Workers of America: A Model of Industrial Solidarity?* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 106-112.

Within Illinois, militancy and violence in the coal fields reared its head during these early post-war strikes. During the national 1922 strike, a mine in Herrin, Illinois attempted to open using scab labor and ignoring the union strike call altogether. Two union miners who allegedly confronted the company officials were killed, causing local union miners to storm the mines shortly afterwards. In the ensuing battle nineteen more men were killed, and both the county law enforcement and the state National Guard became involved before the dust settled.<sup>25</sup> Miners were conflicted in later years over the event; some felt that the violence was justified in the face of strikebreaking while others regretted their actions.

The next round of national coal industry negotiations, occurring at Jacksonville in 1924, more or less maintained a contract similar to what was signed in Cleveland two years earlier. While the contract was supposed to last until 1927, operators began to slowly withdraw from the agreement and operate as non-union. The United Mine Workers began to shrink nationally, losing influence in the west (where it had always been weak) and in the Appalachian coal fields. This mirrored a national weakening of unionism as economic decline brought on by the recession and overproduction would continue until the severe collapse of the Great Depression. The union was forced to rely more heavily on the Illinois membership. The leadership of the United Mine Workers even went as far as to loan themselves money from the rich treasury of District 12. The President of District 12, then, wielded much influence over how the international leaders conducted themselves and rivaled the influence of the International President, John L. Lewis.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Dallas Young, *A History of the Progressive Miners of America, 1932-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1940) 35-36.

<sup>26</sup> Dallas Young, *A History of the Progressive Miners of America, 1932-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1940) 36-37, 43-44.

John L. Lewis was not the type of man to back down from this challenge. Lewis was a lightning rod of the American labor movement of the twentieth century. Lewis led the miners from the end of World War I until 1960. He commanded a great deal of support when he led a direct challenge to the American Federation of Labor by helping create the Committee (later Congress) of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Lewis, a self-identified conservative who often voted Republican, nonetheless forged a standing alliance between the Democratic Party and the CIO that still mostly determines the party organized labor supports today. Lewis was well described by Alan Singer: “During the 1930s he was simultaneously United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) president, spokesman for industrial organization and America’s emergent working class as head of the CIO, a political activist in the drive to institutionalize the New Deal, a Washington lobbyist on intimate terms with the denizens of its halls of power, a prosperous entrepreneur and banker, a co-worker of communists and a colleague of corporate executives. He was a man with few friends, but numerous subordinates, admirers, and enemies who left behind divergent accounts and evaluations of their experiences with Lewis.”<sup>27</sup>

While Lewis emerged in control of the UMW after the struggles of the immediate post-war period, he felt threatened by the challenges offered from the militant districts. Lewis removed the challenges, mostly, by revoking the Districts’ autonomy and the democratically elected leaders within those districts. By revoking a District charter, the International Constitution allowed Lewis as president to appoint a provisional district to run matters until the “emergency” that provoked the crisis was resolved. These provisional districts ran throughout Lewis’ decades of leadership and allowed him to reward his close supporters with positions of

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<sup>27</sup> John H. M. Laslett, ed., *The United Mine Workers of America: A Model of Industrial Solidarity?* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 104-106.

power. Lewis used this tactic in Kansas to deal with Alexander Howat and in Pennsylvania to deal with John Brophy. Both were radicals who received support from Socialists and other left-wing groups and agitated for more radical leadership from Lewis.<sup>28</sup>

Illinois resisted these efforts throughout the 1920s through a combination of a strong membership and two consecutively strong District 12 Presidents, Frank Farrington and Harry Fishwick, who used the rank and file strength to ensure that the District remained independent and free from Lewis' direct control. Farrington, the more powerful of the two, had enough influence to mount a direct challenge to Lewis nationally. Radicals in other states began to voice support for Farrington for a run for the International Presidency. Fishwick, although less influential than Farrington, continued the tradition of opposition to the UMW leadership.<sup>29</sup>

Lewis took both men head on, preferring to rely on the tactic of discrediting his enemies in order to defeat both of them. He dispatched Fishwick with charges of corruption and misuse of union funds, his strategy against Farrington required more cunning. While Farrington was traveling in Europe (supposedly to dedicate a statue to the recently deceased American Federation of Labor lead Samuel Gompers) Lewis produced documents showing that Farrington was an employee of Peabody Coal and had been a double agent leading the union on behalf of the company. Farrington resigned from his office by telegram in Europe and did not return to America for some time. The entire situation was suspicious, as District 12 members questioned

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<sup>28</sup> Edward Dean Wickersham, *Opposition to the International Officers of the United Mine Workers of America: 1919-1933* (Ithica: Cornell University, 1951) 61-86.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Dean Wickersham, *Opposition to the International Officers of the United Mine Workers of America: 1919-1933* (Ithica: Cornell University, 1951) 61-86.



how Lewis had gained access to the contract between Peabody and Farrington and if their loyal leader had indeed worked against their wishes.<sup>30</sup>

Farrington later defended himself, stating that he had signed more or less a treaty with Lewis that had been brokered by Peabody Coal. Farrington claimed he recognized the danger that the political infighting between himself and Lewis posed to the union movement within the coal fields and agreed to walk away in favor of Lewis retaining his position as leader of the UMW. Peabody would then offer him a small wage to live on for the next few years as he transitioned from being a union leader to his new career field. However, this entire plot remained hidden from the rank and file membership; as Lewis' cronies had stolen the contract and published it independently while Farrington was in Europe and none the wiser. When Farrington contacted Peabody Coal, the company offered him more money to remain in Europe.<sup>31</sup>

Regardless, during the scandals of the 1920s the rank and file of District 12 became distrustful of both their District leadership and the International leadership. While Lewis was denied a provisional government in District 12, his policies nationwide led to condemnation from the rank and file as they recognized the threat that he posed towards their democratic input. Wage cuts further divided the rank and file from John L. Lewis, beginning in 1928. After several years of smaller-scale contracts, the Illinois operators concluded a new contract with the UMW calling for a wage cut to six dollars and ten cents. This was effectively a dollar wage cut from previous years, but was endorsed by a state wide referendum. The contract, which was set to run

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<sup>30</sup> Dallas Young, *A History of the Progressive Miners of America, 1932-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1940) 36-43.

<sup>31</sup> Dallas Young, *A History of the Progressive Miners of America, 1932-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1940) 36-43.

until 1932, set up a bitter conflict between the International leadership, the District leadership, and the rank and file.<sup>32</sup>

While the wage cut was ratified by popular vote in District 12, the measure was widely unpopular and hurt the image of both Lewis and the District 12 leadership. Miners bought into the idea that the wage cut was necessary to maintain work and that if a long strike occurred they would lose and be forced into accepting an even lower wage. Lewis shortly after, damaged his image in the state even more when, in June of 1929, he revoked the charter of Sub-District 9 of District 12 (covering the volatile fields of Franklin County). The leadership of District 12 backed the smaller Sub-District government and took Lewis to court over the issue. What followed was a lengthy legal battle which established the authority of Sub-District 9's original charter and protected the entirety of District 12 from future interference from Lewis. The court prevented Lewis from interfering with District 12 and gave it independence in some matters, such as the running of their own journal and in future contract negotiations.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Reorganized United Mine Workers**

Some within District 12 sought to capitalize on the legal gains and attempted to establish themselves as the legal representatives of the entire union. Claiming that the constitution of the UMW had lapsed and made Lewis's office invalid, they sought to establish themselves as the legitimate leadership of the UMW. The Reorganized United Mine Workers formed in 1930 at a convention in Springfield, ratifying a constitution hours before the United Mine Workers could ratify theirs by a similar convention. The conflict that followed over the next year largely existed

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<sup>32</sup> Harriet D. Hudson, *The Progressive Mine Workers of America: A Study in Rival Unionism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1952), 13-14.

<sup>33</sup> Lorin Lee Cary, "The Reorganized United Mine Workers of America, 1930-1931," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 66 No. 3 (Autumn 1973): 245-270.

in the state of Illinois and in courtrooms, as Reorganized officials attempted to prove that they were the valid and official representative of miners nationally and that they were not a dual union (as declared by Lewis and the American Federation of Labor). West Virginia proved to be an exception to this rule, as former-UMW President and Socialist Frank Keeney formed a powerful rival to the UMW in the state under the Reorganized banner.<sup>34</sup>

The Reorganized United Mine Workers called for democratic input from a militant rank and file membership. The Reorganized leadership struggled to deal with this militancy, though. The leadership was compromised of a wide-ranging group of national leaders who had stood up to Lewis and lost. Alexander Howat of Kansas, Frank Farrington, John Walker (an Illinois State American Federation of Labor leader and ex-Socialist), Adolph Germer (a radical of the 1910s who had been forced from the union) grabbed positions of power in the Reorganized leadership. While most were democratically elected, they were never in a comfortable position of authority. Rank and file militancy, in the form of a powerful left-wing group in the union, held leaders accountable for actions and publicly demonized their leaders when the miners felt that they had fallen short of their expectations. This militant left-wing also supported their own slate of candidates, occupying the Presidency and Secretary-Treasurer position.<sup>35</sup>

On the ground in Illinois, the Reorganized United Mine Workers differed in strength. The fields around Springfield were some of the most pro-Reorganized mines in the state. Elsewhere, their strength differed wildly. Some miners, however, from the period did not recall the group at all, showing a lack of strength or importance of the struggle. In other contentious areas, strikes

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<sup>34</sup> Lorin Lee Cary, "The Reorganized United Mine Workers of America, 1930-1931," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 66 No. 3 (Autumn 1973): 245-270.

<sup>35</sup> Lorin Lee Cary, "The Reorganized United Mine Workers of America, 1930-1931," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 66 No. 3 (Autumn 1973): 245-270.

were called by either side that claimed control of a mine site. The treasury of the Reorganized Miners remained low, though, and sustained strikes were impossible to fund. This loss of funds ultimately led to the leadership halting all organizing outside of the state of Illinois (effectively ending the alliance between West Virginia and Illinois in opposition of Lewis). The union differed from the UMW in not collecting dues from unemployed miners, effectively limiting a much needed income option.<sup>36</sup>

Ultimately, the Reorganized United Mine Workers collapsed in the face of court decisions that practically forced the union out of existence. By declaring John L. Lewis and the UMW the legitimate union and confirming Lewis' presidency, the Reorganized group became nothing more than a dual union. Rather than continue fighting the UMW, the leadership quietly shut down shop and rejoined the UMW. John Walker won election as President of District 12 shortly after the end of Reorganized movement, a controversial election to say the least. After quickly ending his opposition, the rank and file believed that Walker had become President in order to be Lewis' representative in the state. Walker's credibility fell through the floor after his election, complicated further by some who felt that the Reorganized United Mine Workers should have continued fighting against the UMW and continued on as a dual union in the coal fields. Other leaders, such as Farrington, eventually returned to the UMW and became organizers for Lewis, but never again held office in the union. Adolph Germer was the only one to go directly back to underground coal mining (winning some credibility back from the rank and file) before leaving the mines behind forever a few years later.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Lorin Lee Cary, "The Reorganized United Mine Workers of America, 1930-1931," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 66 No. 3 (Autumn 1973): 245-270.

<sup>37</sup> Lorin Lee Cary, "The Reorganized United Mine Workers of America, 1930-1931," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 66 No. 3 (Autumn 1973): 245-270.

The Reorganized movement also gave Lewis a legitimacy to assume more direct control of the rowdy Illinois locals, surpassing the District offices that reformed by the end of 1931. The UMW convention in Indianapolis in 1931, according to Illinois dissident Joe Ozanic, was packed with bogus locals that existed only in name. The delegates of these locals were loyal Lewis supporters who backed every one of his proposals. This practice was well documented throughout the 1920s as Lewis consolidated power through loyal appointees nationwide. This convention, though, produced a key change in the protocol for handling dues. Prior to 1931, UMW locals were in control of members' dues, sending the percentages owed to the District and International offices. The Indianapolis convention put the mines in charge of collecting dues and sending them directly to the International offices, shifting control of the UMW's treasury directly to Lewis. This had a devastating impact on District 12 and its massive financial reserves.<sup>38</sup>

As a final gift to the miners of Illinois, the Reorganized movement gave the miners a separatist spirit that lingered for decades. Miners in this UMW stronghold again considered life under a different union banner. Mines in Illinois held several small conventions in 1931 and early 1932 on the topic and featured leaders on both sides of the mine wars of the 1930s. One convention produced the "Rank and File Mine Workers of District 12," led by Ray Edmondson and William Keck. Edmondson became a key leader of the UMW in Illinois and served as District president, after close to a decade of acting in opposition to Lewis. Keck sided with the Progressives and served as both president and secretary-treasurer.<sup>39</sup> Another convention, held immediately after the collapse of the Reorganized group, was led by Alexander Howat and attempted to direct miners' frustration away from the failures of the leadership and towards the

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<sup>38</sup> Joe Ozanic, interview by Barbara Herndon, March 21 1970s, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>39</sup> Dallas Young, *A History of the Progressive Miners of America, 1932-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1940), 47.

UMW. However, the convention demonstrated Howatt's loss of credibility with the miners instead, due to his selling out the Reorganized organization.<sup>40</sup> While none of these conventions produced a tangible, lasting organization, all showed the continuing discontent among miners towards the UMW and their leaders.

Mines in Illinois shut down yet again in April of 1932 after negotiations failed to produce a new contract between District 12 and the Illinois Coal Operators Association. Operators demanded yet another wage cut from the United Mine Workers, while the District rallied around the cry of "no backwards step" that John L. Lewis had hammered into the heads of miners in the aftermath of the Cleveland Agreement. The rank and file were committed to the strike action and held out through the summer as negotiations continued to fail between the two groups.

According to historian Harriet Hudson the miners' commitment to a contract with no pay cuts had support from some local operators who continued to adhere to contract extensions based on the \$6.10 scale that had been negotiated in 1928. Illinois miners felt that this showed the ability of operators to continue at the old scale and remain profitable. Miners also wanted increased safety measures and shorter working hours to be included in the new contract.<sup>41</sup>

### **Ballot Theft and Mulkeytown**

By mid-July 1932, District 12 officers presented a new contract for a vote, but the miners responded overwhelmingly by rejecting it. By a two-to-one vote, miners voted against a pay cut, from \$6.10 to \$5.00 daily, as promised by Lewis' "no backwards steps" slogan of the 1920s.

District President Walker was backed into a corner by this defeat, as the United Mine Workers'

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<sup>40</sup> Lorin Lee Cary, "The Reorganized United Mine Workers of America, 1930-1931," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 66 No. 3 (Autumn 1973): 267-270.

<sup>41</sup> Harriet D. Hudson, *The Progressive Mine Workers of America: A Study in Rival Unionism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1952), 14-16.

bylaws demanded that a new contract could only be ratified by popular vote. Fearing harm to the UMW's stronghold in the Illinois coal fields Walker, and the rest of the district's leadership, decided to invite John L. Lewis to lead the next round of negotiations with coal operators.<sup>42</sup>

This decision proved controversial and divisive. The rank and file of Illinois still viewed the international leadership, particularly Lewis, with distrust. They remembered instances of conflict that District 12 had with Lewis throughout the 1920s. The miners remembered what Lewis had done to Farrington, Fishwick, the Reorganized Mine Workers movement, sub-district 9's autonomy, and the unpopular pay cut they took in 1928. When Lewis and the union leadership toured the state in support of a new contract they had negotiated with the coal operators, which was more or less the exact same as the first contract the rank and file had rejected, they encountered unruly crowds and were forced to cancel a few appearances. Walker came under attack at one meeting, having to exit the building quickly with security protecting him. During the second referendum vote on August 8, 1932, the rank-and-file gathered "watchers" to observe polling and secured the ballots to insure no interference from Lewis or the international leadership.<sup>43</sup>

Watchers reported overwhelmingly that voting had been conducted in a fair environment and miners were free to choose a "yes" or "no" vote without foreseeable consequences. But controversy arose over the removal from office of one local president under questionable circumstances. Also, some miners complained that the UMW's journal was a major source of pro-Lewis propaganda. After voting concluded, locals sent their ballots to Springfield, where

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<sup>42</sup> Harriet D. Hudson, *The Progressive Mine Workers of America: A Study in Rival Unionism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1952), 14-16.

<sup>43</sup> Harriet D. Hudson, *The Progressive Mine Workers of America: A Study in Rival Unionism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1952), 15-16.

they would be organized and sent to the international's offices in Indiana to be counted. Union officials in Springfield counted the total ballot numbers by local and cross referenced them with a tally sheet provided by the locals to confirm that ballot boxes had not been stuffed. Watchers descended on Springfield, determined to insure that the ballots would not be tampered with before reaching their final destination.<sup>44</sup>

The following day, the ballot boxes were stolen during transport from Springfield to UMW headquarters. Allegedly, the men in charge of transporting the ballots had used the back alley behind the bank (to avoid the crowds of watchers out front) and were robbed by several men who lay waiting for them. The men used a nearby getaway car to complete their crime, with a witness to the robbery claiming that the car's plates indicated that it was owned by a United Mine Workers official known to be in league with John L. Lewis. The rank-and-file immediately cried foul and declared that Lewis must have been involved in the robbery and that this was yet another attempt to interfere with their freedom of speech within the union. Their fears seemed to be confirmed when Lewis declared an emergency, seized control of the district, and ratified an "emergency contract" on August 10. This new emergency contract was, in almost every single way, identical to the one the miners had voted on days before.<sup>45</sup>

It is impossible to tell with one hundred percent accuracy what the ballots of August 8 would have reflected. They were never found and the leadership of District 12 or the International did not appear to take finding the stolen ballots seriously. The only available information, exit polls and tallies from the locals, tell a complicated story. Some locals had

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<sup>44</sup> Harriet D. Hudson, *The Progressive Mine Workers of America: A Study in Rival Unionism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1952), 15-16.

<sup>45</sup> Harriet D. Hudson, *The Progressive Mine Workers of America: A Study in Rival Unionism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1952), 16-17.



overwhelmingly rejected the August contract by large margins. In the southern counties, however, the miners had voted in more mixed measures. Some locals had passed the referendum with solid support, while some voted to reject by slim majorities of less than a dozen men. Without the ballots themselves, it is impossible to definitely tell what the miners of District 12 had decided.<sup>46</sup>

The disappearance of the ballots enraged District 12 members. When Peabody Coal, a major producer in the southern counties, called their miners back to work after August 10, pickets arose almost immediately. Other operators followed Peabody, assuming that the employer's actions held heavy weight in the coal fields and it was safe to begin mining again. Miners split on whether a continued strike would best serve their interests, as a minority seemed to shrug their shoulders and head back to work under reduced pay. The strongest centers of opposition were in the northern Illinois coal fields and the counties surrounding Springfield. In some areas of the central coal fields, such as Christian County, direct action was an imported phenomena. Miners from Macoupin County were the first to arrive in Christian County with the aim of building a strong center of resistance around Taylorville. Miners caravanning from Springfield arrived shortly behind them.<sup>47</sup>

Taylorville became one of the most important scenes of the "mine wars" of Illinois. Peabody Coal operated three major mines in Taylorville and an additional one in the nearby town of Tovey. The miners at Tovey had already decided to cease work at the urging of nonworking outsiders. As the columns of angry miners poured into Christian County, Peabody

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<sup>46</sup> Dallas Young, *A History of the Progressive Miners of America, 1932-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1940) 74-77.

<sup>47</sup> Dallas Young, *A History of the Progressive Miners of America, 1932-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1940) 79-80.

Coal reversed its position and stated that they would not oppose peaceful picketing or attempt to maintain operations in the face of thousands of protestors. By August 19, all four mines had been shut down and the miners were declaring a victory.<sup>48</sup> There were some instances of violence and unrest, even after Peabody and local law enforcement backed down from the striking miners. Miner Larry Mantowich recalled that a coal operator had pulled a gun on him and several other striking miners when they refused to let him cross a picket line. He also noted that several coal operators' homes burned down during the peak of miner activity in August. Mantowich believed that the burning homes were an attempt to lure striking miners to the area (they had congregated in a park in downtown Taylorville) and charge them with the crime. From Taylorville, the miners planned to move south and leave behind only enough miners to maintain local support for the continued picketing of Peabody mines.<sup>49</sup>

The miners' next target was Franklin County and the ruthless reign of Sheriff Browning Robinson. Robinson and the coal operators of Franklin County had collaborated to insure that the mines would open on August 10 and remain open beyond that. Only at a mine in Ziegler was a successful picket maintained. The conflict around Ziegler produced the first martyr of the opposition group, as Joe Colbert was shot and killed while picking mushrooms late at night on August 17. Colbert was a leader of the opposition miners in the area and his shooting was widely believed to have been premeditated and not an accident. In every other mine in Franklin County business continued on as usual at first. However, the spirit of rebellion spread into the county, and the International leadership took action. Locals 790 and 4069 had their charters revoked, and

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<sup>48</sup> Dallas Young, *A History of the Progressive Miners of America, 1932-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1940) 78-83.

<sup>49</sup> Larry Mantowich, interview by Barbara Herndon, February 19 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

Sheriff Robinson broke up pickets and protests in West Frankfort and Zeigler. His deputized officers of the law used guns and club to break up the crowds, leaving one protesting miner, Dominic Laurenti, dead.<sup>50</sup>

The same night Joe Colbert was killed, Gerry Allard, his wife Irene, several other protesting miners, and college students from Chicago were imprisoned for picketing in Southern Illinois. The men were all beaten by the sheriffs using baseball bats and Gerry himself received fifty lashes. Irene Allard felt that the only reason they were released was because of the neutral presence of the Chicago college students. Irene was told that Gerry had to leave the county that night if he valued his wellbeing. Gerry responded by asking for a gun permit, shocking his wife who had always felt Gerry was a pacifist. She recognized this event as foreshadowing the violence to come and the widespread acquisition of firearms by the miners.<sup>51</sup>

Allard recalled another event in the leadup to Mulkeytown, when Gerry's local in West Frankfort was raided by the police. They claimed to have come to arrest Gerry at a meeting of disgruntled miners but were confused as to his age (they thought he was an old man, while Gerry was in fact only in his twenties during this time). Irene's father and brother were able to distract the police in the confusion, and Gerry and Irene fled to a nearby cornfield.<sup>52</sup>

Joe Ozanic had much to say about Franklin County and Sheriff Robinson in later years. Ozanic claimed that John L. Lewis had sent two hundred thousand dollars to Franklin County in an attempt to purchase the local law enforcement and court system for the UMW. He claimed

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<sup>50</sup> Dallas Young, *A History of the Progressive Miners of America, 1932-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1940) 82-83.

<sup>51</sup> Irene Allard, interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherniavsky, 1974, Oral History Collection, Brookens Library, University of Illinois, Springfield, IL.

<sup>52</sup> Irene Allard, interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherniavsky, 1974, Oral History Collection, Brookens Library, University of Illinois, Springfield, IL.

that a deputy sheriff who served under Robinson had confirmed this to him years later. Leading up to the march on Mulkeytown, Ozanic met with Robinson and an unnamed District Attorney over the issue of the miners' right to peacefully picket and protest in Franklin County. Ozanic believed this right was protected under the First Amendment. The unnamed District Attorney told Ozanic he could organize Franklin County but would have to purchase the right for five thousand dollars.<sup>53</sup>

The threat of a large force of protesting miners still committed to the idea of nonviolent protest, descending on Franklin County brought about statements from Sheriff Robinson and other stating that they would be met with force. Calls to the state government, including Governor Louis Emmerson, went unanswered. The miners maintained that they held the right to peacefully protest the forced emergency contract. They also maintained that they received calls to action from the Franklin County miners and that many of the miners there did not support the new contract and wanted help in opposing it. By August 24, thousands of protestors had formed a caravan of automobiles for the explicit goal of heading to Franklin County to close the mines.

Sheriff Robinson prepared for the miners by creating a small army of deputized Franklin County miners and businessmen. Robinson planned a trap for the miners near the town of Mulkeytown and the Franklin County border. The caravan was diverted on the highway by law enforcement, after being searched by a group of sheriffs, and directed towards Mulkeytown. As the miners entered the narrow stretch of road near the town and the Little Muddy River, the Sheriff and his men fired upon the miners. The protesting miners, not carrying weapons, fled their cars and hid in nearby farmland and woods. The Sheriff's men destroyed the cars and

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<sup>53</sup> Joe Ozanic, interview by Barbara Herndon, March 21 1970s, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

supplies that were left behind. Miraculously no one was killed and only a handful of miners were hurt. The majority of the miners headed back north to their homes in the coal fields surrounding Springfield, or back to Taylorville to regroup for future action.

Joe Ozanic was one of the miners who had traveled first to Taylorville and then was apart of the convoy to Mulkeytown. Riding high from the successes of shutting down Peabody in Taylorville, Ozanic felt that the caravan would be successful in passing into Franklin County and organizing pickets and protests against the new contract there. Ozanic was near the back of the convoy and he had stopped for gas several miles away from the ambush site. A filling station attendant, upon learning that Ozanic and his passengers were miners in the convoy, warned them that Sheriff Robinson had set up an ambush several miles down the road. Ozanic attempted to race ahead of the convoy and warn what lay ahead but found only the abandoned and destroyed cars of the miners at the ambush site. Afterwards, he and his passengers headed back to Pinkneyville and met with a group of miners to discuss what had just occurred. Ozanic remembered that the miners stated plainly their raw anger against the UMW and the law enforcement of Illinois and felt that the time was ripe to leave the union and establish their own independent organization.<sup>54</sup>

Larry Mantowich also made the journey down to Mulkeytown after the successes of Taylorville. His car was around fifty or sixty back from the leading vehicle, he remembered, in a caravan that stretched ten miles in length. He could not recall noticing specific types of gunfire from Robinson's ambush, just that there was a lot of it and it was mostly aimed over their heads or at the ground around their vehicles. The sheriffs initially retreated when they thought the

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<sup>54</sup> Joe Ozanic, interview by Barbara Herndon, March 21, 1970s, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

miners were returning fire, but advanced and destroyed the miners' vehicles and supplies that were abandoned. Mantowich escaped Mulkeytown uninjured, but his passenger was shot during the chaos.<sup>55</sup>

Dissident Jack Battuello would also bring his radicalism on the caravan to Mulkeytown. Jack stated that his Local 1 in Gillespie had helped organize the caravan and sent calls out to all corners of the state. He claimed that he disliked the nonviolent nature of the miner's movement at this point and felt that if the miners were armed, they would find more rapid success. In Taylorville, he had convinced a national guardsman to hand over his rifle on the grounds that his presence there was illegal and, that miners needed the weapon more. However, he claimed that the miners were mostly unarmed and the caravan was peaceful. At Mulkeytown the truck he was in took fire and a man sitting near him was shot through the jaw. Jack claimed to have been the third truck in the caravan and was right at the front when the firing started.<sup>56</sup>

Not all miners fled Mulkeytown after the ambush. Some miners remained and debated a more radical approach to dealing with Robinson and those that stood in their way. The men who remained formed a small armed camp and prepared for warfare with local law enforcement. Joe Ozanic, Jack Battuello and other future leaders of the Progressives were allegedly involved in this small splinter movement, despite what Ozanic himself recalled. Sheriff Frank Fries of Macoupin County claimed to have aided this armed camp in escaping the area when the local law enforcement prepared to storm the camp and kill all the miners present by acting as protection while the miners evacuated their camp. Fries claims that law enforcement, represented

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<sup>55</sup> Larry Mantowich, interview by Barbara Herndon, February 19 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>56</sup> Jack Battelo, interview by Barbara Herndon, March 13 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

by Robinson and a Sheriff Knox, had discussed renting planes and dropping homemade bombs on the miners at Mulkeytown and the armed camp (much like law enforcement had done to miners at Blair Mountain in West Virginia a decade before). While the armed resistance dissipated quickly, this event showed miners' willingness to meet law enforcement's fire with fire of their own.<sup>57</sup>

The "battle" of Mulkeytown had lasting effects on the coal miners of Illinois. For the rebellious miners, it signaled the lengths to which the pro-Lewis leaders of the United Mine Workers would go to in order to protect their power. The Progressives saw this as a conflict of miner against miner, union brother versus union brother. While local law enforcement officials were the leaders of the initial resistance to this opposition group, most saw the opposition as coming within the mining community. The reformist spirit of the anti-emergency contract group died on the road outside of Mulkeytown and left behind a clear struggle that upended the coal fields of Illinois: The United Mine Workers did not care about their concerns and would use violence to oppose them. The only option left was to form a new coal miners union that would stand for union democracy and the freedom for the rank and file to choose their own destinies. Miners met at the end of August and confirm these ideas, calling for a new constitutional convention for October 3, 1932. They notified United Mine Workers locals throughout the state to send delegates with the express intent of forming a new union and leaving Lewis behind.

### **Forming the Progressive Miners of America**

The October Constitutional Convention of the newly named Progressive Miners of America brought to a head all the previous issues discussed in the Illinois coal fields. The miners

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<sup>57</sup> Frank Fries, interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherviasky, 1973, Archives at University of Illinois-Springfield, Springfield, IL.

of the diverse Illinois coal fields converged upon Gillespie to fight for what they considered the best deal for the miners they represented. The convention was attended almost entirely by United Mine Workers members who had decided to exit their union rather than unorganized miners (Illinois was a solid stronghold for the United Mine Workers until this event). Most of these miners worked in Sangamon, Christian, and Macoupin Counties. Other counties, like Franklin County, were represented by miners that had been discharged in the aftermath of the ballot theft. While miners certainly represented other counties, Sangamon, Christian, Macoupin, and Franklin Counties represented some of the most productive areas of coal mining and the sites of some of the largest mining operations.<sup>58</sup>

Some notable outside figures did attend, such as Frank Keeney from West Virginia. Both reminded the miners of the turmoil of the West Virginia fields and the collapse of their independent union movement there. The convention also saw the support of some Illinois officials. A Judge Dowell opened proceedings one session by declaring his support for the Progressives and reinforcing the belief that their rights had been trampled by the coal companies and the United Mine Workers.<sup>59</sup>

Much of the convention centered around the issue of wages and the different classifications of mines and miners. When the Wage Scale Committee returned a report indicating that no operators would raise wages above the Lewis-UMW contract of \$5.00 a day, the assembly erupted in anger. The wage cut was despised and accepting it as the new norm put the Progressives in a position of weakness. The unmechanized loading mines that still relied on

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<sup>58</sup> Records of the First Constitutional Convention of the Progressive Miners of America, Folder 1, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>59</sup> Records of the First Constitutional Convention of the Progressive Miners of America, Folder 1, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.



solid shooting to break up coal for transportation also claimed their wages would have to rise higher than the UMW level of .68 cents a ton. Strip mining delegates declared that they deserved more seats on the Wage Scale Committee and that they were underrepresented, igniting a strong debate over whether or not the strip miners were attempting to dominate the new union. The issue of cooperative mines also sprouted up, as some feared the “stockholder” aspect would allow coal companies to interfere in union politics. In theory, a coal company could buy stocks in small cooperative mines that had sided with the Progressives and would be allowed to attend union events and have a say in local decisions. Some made the call to ban cooperative mining and stockholders from participating in the union, but the issue was tabled for a later date. The Committee was charged, initially, with securing wages between \$5.00 and \$6.10 a day for the mechanized mines and .68 cents and .91 cents a ton for those who were paid under that system. Ultimately, though, the miners voted to accept a wage cut and backtracked from their calls only two months before of no wage cuts under Lewis.<sup>60</sup>

The miners also struggled to balance their new union’s militancy, and contain this militancy in a respectable fashion. This belief in respectable unionism went back to support for UMW President John Mitchell. Mitchell believed that harmony between the union and employers provided the best organizing and negotiating opportunities. This same ideology was used by Progressive leaders as they called for peace on the picket lines and to allow the elected officials to settle grievances. The miners voted to endorse measures for public elections for mine examiners, the creation of a political party run by working-class miners, an increase in relief for striking miners, calls for release of imprisoned Kentucky miners and striking carmen in Gillespie

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<sup>60</sup> Records of the First Constitutional Convention of the Progressive Miners of America, Folder 1, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

and Benld, and the ability of locals to sign contracts on an individual basis as long as it broke no constitutional laws and did not create conflict with any larger contracts signed. The miners also won strict term limits for the offices of President, Vice-President, Secretary-Treasurer, Executive Board, and Pit Committeemen. Most had a maximum of four year terms and could not serve consecutive terms. A motion to create a central hospital and elderly home that would treat miners at no cost was tabled, if only for the general understanding that the funds were not presently available.<sup>61</sup>

More radical proposals, however, were defeated by the delegates present. One was the original preamble to the Constitution of the Progressive Miners of America: “We affirm our ancient belief that the workers are entitled to the full value of their produce, and for this reason we adopt a new organization.” Debate broke out immediately concerning the perceived left-wing and radical language and how it would be used to red-bait the union before it even got itself off the ground. Ultimately the delegates tabled this revolutionary preamble and went with a more conservative one, closer to the United Mine Workers preamble, that had been submitted by delegates from Gillespie.<sup>62</sup>

A cadre of radical leaders within the Progressives took shape at this convention. Jack Battuello, Gerry Allard, Pat Ansbury, Dave Reed, and a handful of others who attended the convention and created the new union represented militant, left-wing ideologies. Battuello and Reed were both ex-members of the Industrial Workers of the World and Battuello had even

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<sup>61</sup> Records of the First Constitutional Convention of the Progressive Miners of America, Folder 1, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>62</sup> Records of the First Constitutional Convention of the Progressive Miners of America, Folder 1, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

hoboed around the Rockies organizing for them.<sup>63</sup> Allard was a Socialist, sometimes Communist, and well known and respected among the miners as a writer for union and left-wing journals. Ansbury had an undefined political ideology but often found himself siding with Socialists or Communists in demanding the most militant actions from the union. Frank Fries claimed that at the Benld meeting Ansbury had advocated dropping bombs from planes on Peabody mines that opened with United Mine Workers labor.<sup>64</sup> Battuello claimed that this group of radicals met at the first convention and decided as a group to remain out of office, outside of the local level, and influence the leadership through rank and file support. There seemed to be a recognition of the negative perception by some in the public of their ideas and beliefs.<sup>65</sup> All seemed to agree, except for Gerry Allard, who would become the editor of *The Progressive Miner* and receive praise at the convention for raising money to send miners to Brookwood Labor College.<sup>66</sup>

Why did this group of radicals agree to working alongside the more conservative elements within the Progressive Miners? While they advocated ideologies that ran counter to the beliefs of district officers, many of the radicals within the PMA were reformists at heart. They believed that change from within was the best path forwards and that their actions could alter policy within the new Progressive union. This belief goes back to the United Mine Workers of the 1920s and the reformist spirit that challenged John L. Lewis's consolidation of power. Movements like the Save the Union election slate of 1926 attempted to reform the UMW and push policies more towards the left, rather than advocating an exit from the coal mining union.

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<sup>63</sup> Jack Battelo, interview by Barbara Herndon, March 13 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>64</sup> Records of the First Constitutional Convention of the Progressive Miners of America, Folder 1, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>65</sup> Jack Battelo, interview by Barbara Herndon, March 13 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>66</sup> Records of the First Constitutional Convention of the Progressive Miners of America, Folder 1, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

While the PMA was formed by an exit from the UMW, they took with them the spirit of these movements and the idea that different ideologies working together provided the best plans to aid coal miners nationwide. The radicals were also united with the conservative elements in opposition to John L. Lewis and the perceived corruption within the UMW. It is telling that many of the issues both sides supported at this first convention were centered around term lengths and pay rates for district and local officers.

The final major takeaway from the first Constitutional Convention was the laying of groundwork for a national union. The invitation to two delegates from West Virginia and their speeches underlined the fact that many miners around the country felt that the United Mine Workers was not a valid option anymore. West Virginia miners felt robbed after the gains they made in the 1910s were wiped out in the 1920s by an onslaught of mechanization and union repression, a similar situation to that of the Illinois miners. In Pennsylvania, anthracite miners had rallied around the National Miners Union and the banner of Communist-led trade unions. In other fields, such as Kentucky, Alabama, Iowa, and Kansas, the spirit of rebellion against John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers was present. The UMW itself was weak nationally, and a civil war within their stronghold would only hurt their finances and membership. The Progressives, then, made a call for an international convention to build a rival to challenge the United Mine Workers as the primary miners' union. Specifically, the Progressives mentioned the West Virginia Miners' Union and the Amalgamated Miners Union of Nova Scotia, but the spirit of collaboration was extended to all miners in North America and included "all the split section from the corrupt U.M.W. of A."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Records of the First Constitutional Convention of the Progressive Miners of America, Folder 1, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

The stage was set, then, for a conflict that would dominate the coal fields of Illinois well into the 1940s as the Progressive Miners of America competed with the United Mine Workers of America for the right to collectively bargain on behalf of the miners. While both sides avowed nonviolent principles, dozens were killed and tens of thousands of dollars in property damage plagued Illinois during the first years of conflict between the two unions. All present chose sides, whether they were local grocery store owners, priests, the media, the coal companies, law enforcement, or local, state, and federal officials. Miners never looked back on the United Mine Workers after having felt wronged for so long by their beloved union and its tyrannical leader, John L. Lewis. The calls for rank and file democracy within the United Mine Workers did not go away with oppression from the union's leadership and only grew louder with time.

The final nail in the coffin, the stealing of the ballots in 1932 and the events at Mulkeytown a few months later, led a large number of miners to leave the UMW behind and build a new union from the ground up. This union was forced to deal with many of the issues the UMW had struggled with for decades: rank and file left-wing militancy, divisions within the coal fields in extraction methods and classifications of jobs, ethnic differences, and a decline in available jobs as mechanization spread. The Progressive Miners of America in some ways reflected the United Mine Workers in their decisions at the first Constitutional Convention. It embraced militancy, but realities of the weakened position of the new union had to be accepted. To deal with divisions in the coal industry, the union tried to balance between the various factions.

### Chapter III - Legal Battles and Government Interactions, 1932-1940

The history of the Progressive Miners of America is defined by its interactions on a number of fronts with the American legal system and government. As a “new” industrial union of the 1930s, it sought to build its membership through the new legal channels made available by the New Deal policies of the Roosevelt administration. Laws like the National Industrial Recovery Act and the National Labor Relations Act protected the rights of workers to join a union and operate with a collective bargaining agent, as well as empowered a previously established grievance system to hold both unions and employers accountable. Unlike the Congress of Industrial Organizations-affiliated unions that used these laws to great success, such as the United Auto Workers or Steel Workers Organizing Committee, the Progressives found their efforts blocked at all sides. FBI investigations, beginning in 1935, led to the convictions of several dozen members, forever tarnishing the reputation of the PMA both locally and nationally as they became affiliated, very unwillingly, with a perceived radical ideology that was currently sweeping the nation. Local and state governments often seemed uninterested in risking support for the Progressives outside of a lukewarm amount of fair treatment and some agents of authority were openly hostile toward the union. Injunctions against law enforcement officials in several counties that forced them to stop breaking the law in persecuting Progressives were unique for their time and even today.

While these topics have been covered in historical writings on the PMA, they have done little to provide context for what these events meant to rank and file members and how they were perceived. Investigations from the Illinois state government clearly paint a picture of abuses the Progressives faced from National Guardsmen, violent elements of law enforcement, private coal

company guards, and UMW members. NLRB records show a pattern of inaction or ruling against the Progressives in an overwhelming number of cases between its formation in 1935 and the early 1940s, at which time the Progressives practically gave up filing new cases. Media sources also provided coverage to many of these events, especially the federal trial against dozens of Progressive members in 1936 and provide excellent and reliable sources. However, they miss the impact these decisions and events had on miners at the ground level. These miners interpreted events uniquely based upon their experiences in the Illinois mine wars and in their reflections paint a more complex and complete story as to why the Progressives were ultimately beaten in Illinois and beyond.

It is also important to note, that from the very beginning of the organization in 1932 the Progressives sought a legal path to recognition. The Progressive district officers and their supporters, perhaps naively, always felt that just by representing a perceived majority of miners in Illinois that they were always in the legal right. While there were cases in which this was true, they never truly accounted for a majority of Illinois miners. Estimates differ for the membership of the PMA and UMW but almost all of them mention the UMW as having more dues paying members.<sup>1</sup> The Progressives did consistently win support from unemployed miners, which could have inflated their membership numbers even more. Had the legally binding referendum they sought from Governor Horner in 1933 actually occurred, it is reasonable to assume they would have been defeated and forced to shut down per their agreement.

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<sup>1</sup> A Report from the District Officers covering 1933 and 1934 stated average membership hovered around fourteen thousand, but fluctuated greatly never peaking above twenty thousand. The *Progressive Miner* stated that membership at the time of the First Constitutional Convention was at fifteen thousand. Individual reports from oral histories gave varying results. As for UMW membership, oral histories stated membership as being at forty thousand members around the time of the founding of the PMA.

The choice to pursue legal avenues as the main means of fighting the coal companies and the UMW, even as major strikes continued in Franklin and Christian County was financially exhausting. Judge George Dowell, an attorney retained for most of the conflict by the PMA proved to be a costly addition to the Progressive team.<sup>2</sup> Despite few results, Dowell had the unlimited trust of the district officers, and was retained until after the federal bombing trial concluded. Criminal cases brought against PMA members, ranging from obstruction and minor violations related to picketing to charges of murder, were often successful in producing convictions and the Progressive's efforts to provide relief to miners on trial or in prison and assist the families they left behind were draining on their treasury. District Court and NLRB petitions and appeals were equally draining on both manpower and financial resources. Regardless of rank and file criticism, the rotating leadership of the 1930s maintained the policy as they only way forward for the new miners' union.

Finally, the UMW built better relationships with local, county, state, and federal governments than the PMA. While PMA members cried foul over the perceived bribes and corruption that the UMW used in forging alliances against the PMA both locally and nationwide, it is unwise to assume that the PMA would not have formed similar alliances if they were able. But the UMW outspent the new union at every turn and had a large treasury at its disposal to respond to new events quickly. The PMA resorted to fundraising and the creation of short-term taxes and increases in membership fees to maintain relief systems, pay legal fees, run educational workshops, and publish the *Progressive Miner* as their main source of "truthful" news. The UMW also was able to take advantage of pre-existing relationships with institutions of power that did not exist for the PMA. The UMW was established and had a reputation, mainly after the

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<sup>2</sup> It is unclear if Dowell ever served as a judge, but uniformly all PMA members recalled him as "Judge Dowell"



1898 Virden Riots, as a responsible and beneficial organization to Illinois miners in the eyes of coal operators and community leaders. The number of Illinois miners, peaking at around one hundred thousand in the twenties and early thirties, represented a large voting block that could be swayed by the words of their UMW district officers, and later by John L. Lewis. The PMA, in contrast, never endorsed the candidacies of any Illinois politicians. Finally, the UMW forged national bonds with the Democratic Party and pro-labor politicians from all parties in the mid-to-late 1930s that provided a network of support that the PMA could not match. The alliance of organized labor, mainly through the Congress of Industrial Organizations and its affiliates, and the New Deal Democrats wielded considerable political clout. Key politicians all the way to President Roosevelt felt the pressure from organized labor and allegations of favoritism towards the CIO affiliates were rampant from 1936 onwards. As an outsider group with a radical reputation the PMA found few friends in Washington D.C. willing to hear their case or give them a fair shake.

### **Local and County Governments and Law Enforcement**

Local governments, through their mayors and city councilors, often sided with whatever union was strongest in their area. The Progressives benefited in some areas, such as Coulterville, when the local government sided with their cause. In the aftermath of the Mulkeytown ambush in 1932, the mayor of Coulterville allowed a small group of Progressives to camp in the town's park and discuss their next plan of action. The mayor sheltered this group, which had grown in size in response to threats from Randolph County sheriffs, until they made a protected retreat

with help from Sheriff Frank Fries.<sup>3</sup> Had the mayor of Coulterville caved in to pressure from Randolph County sheriffs, it could have resulted in the deaths of dozens on both sides.

Even when local politicians supported the PMA's organizing efforts there was no guarantee of success. In Zeigler in Frankfurt County the mayor initially allowed the Progressives to enter the town and hold meetings with the United Mine Workers members who had returned to work. In 1933, County Sheriff Brownie Robinson responded by disarming the entire police department in Zeigler and assumed jurisdiction over all legal matters. This was nothing more than an attempt to harass Progressive members and maintain the United Mine Workers control in the town. The mayor petitioned Governor Horner to send in troops to restore order but the request was denied, allowing Robinson to retain control of the small town indefinitely.<sup>45</sup>

In other Progressive strongholds, such as Springfield, the local government took a more neutral position. Springfield had long been a city dependent on the success of nearby coal mines for economic prosperity. While the town moved away from an economic reliance on employment in the coal industry over time, it was still very important in the 1930s. The local mayor hoped to maintain peace in the streets, but did not exert as much pressure on the Progressives compared to other regions. Law enforcement in the state capital was also fair in its dealings with the Progressives and members recalled being treated well when they were arrested. While beatings at the hands of county sheriffs seemed to be common in some areas, this did not appear to be the case in Springfield. It also served to benefit the Progressives that the nearby mines were mostly out of city limits and much of the chaos from the picket lines was out of the

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Ozanic Sr., interview by Rex Rhodes, Barbara Herndon, and Nick Cherniavsky, 1972 and 1974, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

<sup>4</sup> While Fancher himself did not recall the specifics of the events, the interviewer was able to provide details that supported their validity. Fancher only recalled the general chaos of the period.

<sup>5</sup> John Fancher, interview by Rex Rhodes, 1972, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

sight of the capitol building and government officials.<sup>6</sup> The newspapers based out of Springfield were also reportedly fair towards the Progressive cause in their coverage, according to some Progressive members.<sup>7</sup>

In areas that were hotly contested by the Progressives, the local governments were normally hostile to the newly created union. West Frankfort's mayor, in contested Franklin County, begged for Governor Horner to send in National Guardsmen in early 1933 to prevent Progressive pickets of UMW mines. Ray Tombazzi, who participated in some of the early pickets of Peabody Coal in Taylorville, recalled how much things changed when Peabody's chosen man, a Mr. Spresser, replaced Mayor Armstrong. Armstrong, according to Tombazzi, had expressed distaste over the destruction of the Christian County courthouse in order to house the hundreds of Progressives who were regularly arrested from late 1932 into the first half of 1933. As mayor, Spresser actively worked alongside Peabody Coal and Tombazzi believed that with that election Peabody Coal retained full control of the area for years.<sup>8</sup>

Most mining communities relied on county sheriffs to handle legal matters. As a virtual civil war ripped Illinois apart in the 1930s, sheriffs were on the front line in dealing with it. Both the PMA and the UMW openly broke the law and resorted to violence and intimidation to secure support at the local level. Law enforcement had to decide on which instances to bring down the hammer and prosecute those who disturbed the peace and which instances required just a night in the local jail for the angry miners to calm down. Some sheriffs became allies of the Progressive

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<sup>6</sup> There was mention of a bombing at a Peabody mine that stretched under the city of Springfield close to the grounds of the state capitol. Progressive Miners allegedly bombed the air ventilation system of the UMW affiliated mine and the blast was felt within city limits. No one was killed but it caused chaos as miners fled from underground in fear of a larger accident occurring.

<sup>7</sup> Art Gramlich, interview by Rex Rhodes, 1972, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

<sup>8</sup> Ray Tombazzi, interview by R. C. Rhodes, 1972, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

Miners of America, but in other cases Progressive members alleged charges of corruption against some sheriffs on the grounds that they accepted money from the UMW or from major coal operators like Peabody Coal.

Sheriff Brownie Robinson was perhaps the most consistent enemy of the Progressive Miners. Robinson represented Franklin County, a major center of violent conflict between the Progressives and the United Mine Workers in the mid-1930s. The Progressives felt that Robinson was overwhelmingly in the pocket of the United Mine Workers and that he broke the law in order to empower the UMW against their rivals. He broke up meetings, prevented legal pickets, and allowed the beating and shooting of Progressives and their families. The *Progressive Miner* was littered with accounts of Robinson's actions against the PMA in the year following their creation. It also frequently charged that Sheriff Robinson allowed UMW members, like the hated Ray Edmundson, to beat Progressives in public and step in only when the Progressives defended themselves. The beating of women in West Frankfort in December 1932 caused an uproar among the Progressives. An article in the *Progressive Miner* stated that Robinson and his deputies, armed with machine guns, prevented a peaceful meeting of a local women that supported the PMA and allowed members of the UMW to beat them in the streets.<sup>9</sup> In February 1933 the Progressives delivered a petition signed by three hundred miners calling for an injunction against Robinson and all special deputies in the county.<sup>10</sup> Eventually an injunction against banned sheriffs in five counties from engaging in unlawful restrictions of Illinois miners' freedoms of speech and to peacefully picket. Historian Dallas Young pointed out the unique

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<sup>9</sup> "Edmondson-Moulin Slug Women on Streets of West Frankfort, Illinois," *Progressive Miner*, 9 December 1932, 1.

<sup>10</sup> "300 Franklin County Miners File Injunction," *Progressive Miner*, 3 February 1933, 1.

nature of this injunction, which for the first time in Illinois history sanctioned law officials in such a manner.<sup>11</sup>

Sheriff Frank Fries of Macoupin County stands as the best example of the benefits of an understanding attitude towards the Progressives. Fries stated that he generally supported the Progressives and would have become a member if not for the fact he owned (and worked at) a small mining operation. While miners at cooperatively owned mines were allowed membership, the operation Fries ran prevented him from joining the union. His nephew was one of the miners injured at Mulkeytown. He was even present as an observer at one of the initial meetings in 1932 at Benld that led to the creation of the Progressives. He allowed the Progressives to operate in Macoupin County, but held a zero-tolerance policy towards the violence that seemed to follow them throughout the state of Illinois. Fries learned early not to relay information to the Progressives as well, noting an instance where a bombing occurred after casually mentioning to a group of Progressives slanderous statements made by a local priest towards their organization. But Fries was mostly successful in reducing violence; only one other violent event, with no injuries, occurred in Macoupin County while he was sheriff.<sup>12</sup>

Fries support ultimately did not last. He was elected to the Illinois House of Representatives, advocating for the Progressives and the passage of new mining safety laws. It was during this time that Jack Battuello, a Progressive Miner and militant from Gillespie, recalled his gaining respect for Fries and his “maverick” actions.<sup>13</sup> While he generally had support from the PMA, Fries’ support for the group waned and he lost respect for the

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<sup>11</sup> Dallas Young, *History of the Progressive Miners of America 1932-1940*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1940), 128.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Fries, interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherviasky, 1973, Archives at University of Illinois-Springfield, Springfield, IL.

<sup>13</sup> Jack Battelo, interview by Barbara Herndon, March 13 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

organization altogether. He believed they tore themselves apart by 1936, and expressed his distaste at their support of a congressional anti-union group in the 1940s based on their dislike of John L. Lewis.<sup>14</sup>

In at least one reported case, local officials attempted to profit off the conflict in the coal mining fields. Joe Ozanic claimed to have met with both sheriffs and an unnamed attorney (it was unclear whether he was a state's attorney or a county official) on the issue of democratic freedom of choice in the mining fields of Franklin County. Ozanic claimed that while the sheriffs were adamant in their denial of the right to picket or protest, the attorney stated that for a flat fee of five thousand dollars the correct permits would be issued to the Progressives and they would be allowed to more actively picket the Peabody mines around Taylorville. Ozanic stated that he turned down that offer immediately and expressed anger even decades later toward the attorney over the blatant corruption.<sup>15</sup>

### **State Government and the National Guard**

At the state level, newly elected Governor Henry Horner had to contend with the conflict between the Progressives and the UMW. Assuming office in January 1933, only a few months after the formation of the PMA, Horner immediately delved into the crisis in Christian County in particular. He hosted negotiations between the district officers of the PMA and the appointed leadership of District 12 of the UMW in late January 1933, after PMA President Claude Percy announced he would call a general strike across the state. The *Progressive Miner* stated that Percy put thirty thousand Progressive members (an inflated membership number) on twenty-

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<sup>14</sup> Frank Fries, interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherviasky, 1973, Archives at University of Illinois-Springfield, Springfield, IL.

<sup>15</sup> Joe Ozanic, interview by Barbara Herndon, March 21 1970s, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

four-hour notice, and that allied organizations, like the International Labor Defense, had done the same.<sup>16</sup> Realistically the Progressives were in no position to mount a general strike and did not have the funds to maintain a long strike. This should rather be seen as a threatening move towards the new administration in order to gauge their reaction.

Horner hosted negotiations for several weeks, but they ultimately collapsed over the main issue of ending the conflict between the two labor organizations. Horner recommended a statewide referendum in which miners would choose one union that would represent all Illinois miners. The Progressives enthusiastically agreed, believing that they represented thousands of miners too intimidated to leave the UMW. District 12 President John Walker exited negotiations on the referendum issue, believing that the UMW was in the more powerful position. The *Progressive Miner*, however, wrote that President Walker claimed “It would be suicide” to accept the referendum in a statement to the media.<sup>17</sup> Joe Ozanic, present at these meetings, claimed to have attended others like it after his taking office in the state organization of the PMA in 1935. He felt that the governor was disingenuous with the PMA officials; after stating support for their calls for a referendum, Horner sent the National Guard into Christian County instead.<sup>18</sup>

Governor Horner met with the leaders of the Women’s Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners of America early in his administration. After a march in Springfield, President Agnes Burns-Wieck, the Executive Board, and fifty-one local presidents crammed into Governor Horner’s office to raise their own set of demands. They made calls for an increase in state aid to the unemployed, the restoration of the right for miners to peacefully picket in the Illinois coal

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<sup>16</sup> “General Strike Looms!” *Progressive Miner*, 13 January 1933, 1.

<sup>17</sup> “Governor’s Confab Breaks Up After Walker Balks Vote,” *Progressive Miner*, 10 February 1933, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Ozanic Sr., interview by Rex Rhodes, Barbara Herndon, and Nick Cherniavsky, 1972 and 1974, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

fields, and for the creation of unemployment insurance to be funded by a tax on industry. Horner listened to the women, but strongly voiced opposition when they criticized the sales tax his administration sought to create. He expressed admiration for the women and their activities in distributing aid throughout mining communities but warned them to stay away from Communist influences. While the meeting had no binding effects and did not seem to affect the simultaneous meetings being held by the district officers of the PMA, it showed the new governor's willingness to meet with a variety of faces from the new miners' union in order to attempt to stop the conflicts occurring throughout the state.<sup>19</sup> It also spoke to the influence that the Women's Auxiliary had in 1933, both over their male counterparts and the community at large.

While Governor Horner made splashes by hosting meetings between the Progressives and the UMW, and would make several more attempts to ease the conflicts in his state before he left office in 1940, the more common state interaction with the Progressives was through the National Guard. The National Guard was frequently called out by Governor Horner, often at the request of local officials, to maintain peace in the face of large-scale protests by Progressive members in Franklin and Christian County, and in major cities like Springfield. Taylorville housed the National Guardsmen most frequently between 1932 and 1934 as they were frequently called for anywhere from two weeks to several months at a time. The majority of the interactions between the two groups were antagonist. It was the National Guards job to maintain peace and in many situations that meant ensuring that UMW mines stayed open. Guardsmen broke pickets or repelled the strikers from reaching company property, often alongside the private militias of companies like Peabody or Superior Coal.

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<sup>19</sup> "10,000 Auxiliary Women in March," *Progressive Miner*, 3 February 1933, 1.



One of the first martyrs of the Progressive cause was killed by National Guardsmen. Andrew Ganis, a miner from Tovey, an early supporter of the Progressive cause, and an active striker, was killed under suspicious circumstances in October 1932 after a National Guardsmen thought he was reaching to pull a weapon. The most commonly repeated story by the Progressive members was that Ganis was leaning on a fence post on his property at the time and had no weapons on his person. Twenty-five thousand miners and their families attended his funeral in the face of empty-threats from both Peabody Coal and the National Guard that a gathering that size would not be allowed.<sup>20</sup> A military tribunal found the shooter not guilty and stated that he had showed good judgement in firing upon Ganis.<sup>21</sup> Andrew Ganis's name became a rally cry for the Progressives against the involvement of the National Guard in the coal fields.

Not all interactions between the two groups was antagonistic. Ray Tombazzi claimed that one militia group, based in Chicago, took a liking to the Progressives when they were called in to deal with the conflict. Tombazzi claimed the guardsmen were all union men and that they attacked and raided the homes of scabs before being redeployed a week later.<sup>22</sup> Battuello recounted similar events during his organizing days in the mines of Arizona under the banner of the Industrial Workers of the World a decade before.<sup>23</sup>

Opinions varied among Progressive members over whether the National Guard was needed at all during the conflict. Frank Borgognoni reflected on the National Guard in relation to the killing of Andrew Gaines and expressed mixed feelings. While he felt that they showed too much favoritism toward the UMW and antagonistic coal companies, like Peabody Coal, he felt

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<sup>20</sup> "Thousands Honor Andrew Ganis, Martyr," *Progressive Miner*, 21 October 1932, 1.

<sup>21</sup> "Military Board Lauds Murder of Andy Ganis," *Progressive Miner*, 4 November 1932, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ray Tombazzi, interview by R. C. Rhodes, 1972, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

<sup>23</sup> Jack Battello, interview by Barbara Herndon, March 13 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

that they were necessary to maintain order in the coal fields.<sup>24</sup> Joe Ozanic seemed to feel that the National Guardsmen always thought twice about their actions when encountering a Progressive picket line, but that they were only following orders in breaking them up.<sup>25</sup> Ozanic's sentiments seemed to be rooted in his respect for the military coming from his service in World War I. Ray Tombazzi disagreed strongly with Borgognoni's points about the National Guard maintaining order, recalling that Guardsmen were often the cause of conflict between 1930 and 1934.<sup>26</sup> Tombazzi acknowledged that it was the job of the National Guardsmen to maintain curfew and to break up illegal pickets, but the job was morally unjust in the eyes of Progressive members.<sup>27</sup> This kept the PMA and National Guardsmen in a constant state of conflict and contributed to major incidents of violence perpetuated by both sides.

Community members that sided with the UMW seemed to take a more uniform position on endorsing the usage of the National Guard. Joe Craggs, whose father was a mine operator for Peabody was a teenager at the time of the PMA's formation in 1932. Craggs had just joined the mining workforce at the time, working weekends on the top of the mine, but moved with his father to Taylorville and began working underground during the heat of the mining wars to reinforce Peabody's, and the UMW's, position. While he did not address any injustices done toward the PMA, he applauded their role in maintaining peace. He mentioned that guardsmen protected his family's home around the clock and once discovered dynamite on the property.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Frank Borgognoni, interview by Kevin Corley, 1986, Oral History Collection at University of Illinois-Springfield, Springfield, IL.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Ozanic Sr., interview by Rex Rhodes, Barbara Herndon, and Nick Cherniavsky, 1972 and 1974, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

<sup>26</sup> It is possibly that Tombazzi had his dates wrong or that he was referencing the conflicts that predated the formation of the Progressives. These could have ranged from strikes and contract negotiations to the Reorganized United Mine Workers or the National Miners Union.

<sup>27</sup> Ray Tombazzi, interview by R. C. Rhodes, 1972, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

<sup>28</sup> Joe Craggs, interview by Kevin Corley, 1986, Oral History Office of Sangamon State University, Springfield, IL.

## The Federal Bombing Trial

The federal government became most directly involved with the Progressive Miners of America through the prosecution of several dozen members in connection with a series of railroad bombings that occurred during the first half of the 1930s. These bombings, by nature, were to limit the ability of mines worked by UMW members to ship coal to major markets. No innocents were ever harmed in these actions, but they became widely reported events. The unions blamed each other for the bombings. The UMW claimed that the bombings mostly affected the massive operations maintained by Peabody Coal in Christian County and the Progressives noted that explosions affected their mines as well. While the early bombings had mainly targeted the Midland rail-line (covering most of Christian County), bombings south of Springfield interfered with a broader variety of services, such as the shipping of mail and resulted directly in the involvement of the FBI.<sup>29</sup>

Art Gramlich, a member of the Progressive Miners in Springfield and also one of those charged by the FBI, hinted at his involvement in the bombings during an oral history conducted decades later. He discussed the methods used, waiting for several train cars to pass before detonating the bomb in order to avoid injury to train conductors at the front of the train, and claimed that there were between twenty-five and thirty bombings in the years leading up to 1936 and estimated that fifty to seventy carloads, each holding an average of seventy tons of coal, were destroyed. Gramlich also recalled finding out that the FBI wanted him for questioning and how he refused to travel with them out of fear for his own life. Instead, he surrendered himself at a police station in Springfield and had a deputy sit in on his interrogation. He claimed the FBI

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<sup>29</sup> Art Gramlich, interview by Rex Rhodes, 1972, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

informed him that they had an open-and-shut case to convict many Progressives but that they needed another informant to solidify their charges. They offered Gramlich a job in Seattle as a longshoreman and several thousand dollars to testify as an informant against his fellow union members. Gramlich responded, with several expletives and insults, that he would not turn on his fellow union members.<sup>30</sup>

Other Progressive members, even decades later, changed the subject when the bombings were brought up or declared their ignorance on the subject. Larry Mantowich claimed to know very little about the trial outside of what he read in the papers. When questioned by investigators for the prosecution prior to the trial on his ability to use dynamite, he denied any training or ability. It is unclear if Mantowich was lying or if his statements were reflective of working in a mechanized mine that did not use dynamite frequently. In the same oral history, though, he admitted to stealing dynamite from his mining job for a 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration, and stated that many miners took blasting powder home to cut down on their workload.<sup>31</sup> By preparing their dynamite before work, miners were able to focus more time on the loading of coal in unmechanized mines. This statement seems to reinforce the prosecution's belief that miners could easily access blasting powder or dynamite and leave the mines with it.

Jack Battuello discussed at length the government's inability to indict the radical minority of PMA members. Battuello, a leader among this minority group, believed that the lack of indictments should have proved that these actions were not carried out by the union's most militant members. Instead, many felt the radicals were guilty and only avoided indictments because of their cooperation with the United Mine Workers and the FBI. He claimed that such

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<sup>30</sup> Art Gramlich, interview by Rex Rhodes, 1972, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

<sup>31</sup> Larry Mantowich, interview by Barbara Herndon, February 19 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

allegations were used against him when he was voted out of the union in 1941 for working with members of the UMW. This, he had done, with the endorsement of the PMA district officers, to secure financial and political support for the freeing of the “Du Quoin Boys.”<sup>32</sup> Irene Allard confirmed Battuello’s statements, stating that the bombings were blamed on radicals and were used against men like her husband and Battuello.<sup>33</sup>

Although both sides utilized violence and members on both sides suffered personal and property damage, prosecutors targeted the Progressives. Eugene Hughes, a PMA member, claimed that no United Mine Workers members were indicted for their actions.<sup>34</sup> While not completely true, there was no large-scale investigation of the UMW to rival what occurred to the PMA. In 1936, forty-one men in total were charged, thirty-six of whom held membership in the PMA. President William Keck was among the indicted, as well as major strike leaders like Ray Tombazzi and Art Gramlich. The arrests made national news, and the Progressive name became affiliated with a long list of felony charges.<sup>35</sup> In total, the forty-one men were charged with actions stemming from twenty-three bombings, six attempted bombings, and the burning of one bridge. Federal investigators concluded that their investigation, which had originally stemmed from the delay of mail, fell under anti-racketeering laws and that the Progressives were in

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<sup>32</sup> The Du Quoin boys were United Mine Workers members who had allegedly killed a young girl in Du Quoin in the mid-1930s. The men maintained their innocence, and doubt was cast on the trial over the girl’s family affiliation with the UMW. Many treated it as a terrible accident and support for the imprisoned miners came from both the UMW and the PMA. District officers within the PMA issued several statements of support for the Du Quoin Boys but disliked and distrusted working alongside UMW Officers and Locals. Jack Battelo, interview by Barbara Herndon, March 13 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>33</sup> Irene Allard, interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherniavsky, 1974, Oral History Collection, Brookens Library, University of Illinois, Springfield, IL.

<sup>34</sup> Eugene Hughes, interview by H. Dean Campbell, 1972, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

<sup>35</sup> “21 Illinois Miners Held in Bombings,” *New York Times*, 11 December 1936, 6.

violation of federal anti-trust laws on the grounds that interstate trade was being hindered. Long prison sentences awaited all forty-one men if they were convicted.<sup>36</sup>

The trial was, to put it bluntly, a complete mess. Key witnesses for the prosecution admitted questionable bits of information under oath. For example, two miners admitted that they received hundreds of thousands of dollars from the UMW after leaving the PMA, and a star private investigator confirmed that he had accepted relief aid from the PMA while on Peabody Coal's payroll. Another star prosecuting witness, William L. Weber, admitted to serving time in prison on two separate occasions, for burglary and first-degree murder. Weber admitted that John L. Lewis had personally written a letter expressing support for his pardon for murder.<sup>37</sup> The prosecuting attorney, Wiley Hopkins, later accepted a job with the UMW in Washington D.C. at their international headquarters.<sup>38</sup> Wild claims were put forward by witnesses for the prosecution, such as one stating that the PMA had made elaborate plans to assassinate John L. Lewis in 1934.<sup>39</sup> Art Gramlich also recalled feeling that the trial was stacked against the Progressive members, specifically noting how each defendant had to identify themselves repeatedly in front of prosecution witnesses.<sup>40</sup>

The PMA spent large amounts of money defending the indicted miners and rallied support for them across the state. This added to the union's financial woes as they simultaneously fought several hundred compensation cases, several criminal trials, and cases of

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<sup>36</sup> Dallas Young, *History of the Progressive Miners of America 1932-1940*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1940), 166-168.

<sup>37</sup> Dallas Young, *History of the Progressive Miners of America 1932-1940*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1940), 168.

<sup>38</sup> Joe Ozanic, Interview by Barbara Herndon, March 21, 1970s, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>39</sup> "Alleges 1934 Plot to Kill John Lewis," *New York Times*, 23 November 1937, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Art Gramlich, interview by Rex Rhodes, 1972, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

representation through both the traditional court system and the NLRB.<sup>41</sup> Radical members were especially active in supporting the jailed members from outside of the court room.<sup>42</sup> Other miners took the stand in defense of the Progressives, testifying to specific individuals' innocence or broadly to the guilt of others. A report from the Progressive's district officers stated that the trial had clearly proved that Peabody Coal was behind the majority of the railroad bombings and that they maintained a bomb squad to carry out the acts.<sup>43</sup> Others raised the question of skill in designing the bombs seized as evidence. It was widely believed they were expertly made and that the average miner would not have been able to create the mechanisms to set off the explosions.<sup>44</sup>

Regardless, the brief thirty-day trial handed out convictions in mass. President William Keck had his charges dropped after he suffered a major heart attack and resigned from the union's top leadership position. Joe Ozanic from Mt. Olive replaced him as President by the end of 1938. Four other men had their charges dropped or were acquitted. Others were not as lucky and were sentenced to several year prison terms. Art Gramlich began his prison term in 1938 alongside miners like Ray Tombazzi, former Executive Board member Dan McGill, and Vice-President John Fancher. The original sentence was for a total of three years and a fine for each man of fifteen thousand dollars, but after a series of appeals the sentence was shortened to two

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<sup>41</sup> Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer to the Delegates Composing the Third Biennial and Fourth Constitutional Convention, Folder 3, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>42</sup> Jack Battelo, Interview by Barbara Herndon, March 13 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>43</sup> Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer to the Delegates Composing the Third Biennial and Fourth Constitutional Convention, Folder 3, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>44</sup> Larry Mantowich, interview by Barbara Herndon, February 19 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

years.<sup>45</sup> While having major leaders imprisoned for several years hurt the Progressives ability to expand, the financial cost of paying legal fees of their members, alongside the costs of going to trial at all, created problems for the union by the end of the 1930s and contributed to their affiliation with the American Federation of Labor.

The federal bombing trial also produced, oddly enough, one of the few examples of the federal government intervening in favor of the Progressive Miners. When questioned on why the sentences were cut short, John Fancher denied that President Roosevelt had been involved. He believed that sentences were cut short because of parole and did not reflect his intervention.<sup>46</sup> Fancher did state, however, that federal prison officials believed that the Progressives were not criminals but political prisoners. As political prisoners, Fancher stated that they were treated well and received less punishment from prison guards than other convicted felons they served alongside. He also acknowledged that, sometime under the Truman Administration, the fines against convicted Progressives, ranging from ten to twenty thousand dollars, were dropped and citizenship was returned to all but two of the convicted men.<sup>47</sup>

While this was the peak of the federal persecution of the PMA, it was not the only instance. Immigrant miners were targeted by federal officials as well, a tactic used to break strikes throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The *Progressive Miner* detailed one such instance on December 30, 1932, when federal agents arrested several immigrant Progressives, who were leaders of a picket at the Dorthel mine.<sup>48</sup> Illinois had a legacy of federal

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<sup>45</sup> Dallas Young, *History of the Progressive Miners of America 1932-1940*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1940), 169-170. It is interesting to note that Art Gramlich would serve as International President in the 1950s and didn't seem to suffer within the union because of his imprisonment.

<sup>46</sup> This is incorrect, as the sentences were shortened after an appeal by the Progressives removed the previous ruling that sentences were to be served consecutively and not simultaneously.

<sup>47</sup> John Fancher, interview by Rex Rhodes, 1972, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

<sup>48</sup> "Federal Agents Arrest Active Mine Leaders," *Progressive Miner*, 30 December 1932, 3.



law enforcement investigating immigrant miners during World War I and the turbulent period that followed. Miners of German heritage particularly faced oppression as they were viewed as spies or subversives under the context of war.<sup>49</sup> By the 1930s, though, Italians had become the most discriminated of the immigrant groups represented in the Illinois coal fields.

### **Federal Legislation of Labor and Bituminous Coal**

Even as the federal government intervened against the PMA, the Roosevelt administration introduced policy changes that affected the Progressive Miners and their ability to organize. Beginning with the attempt to pass the “Black Bill,” which introduced a 30-hour work week and other labor protections endorsed by the American Federation of Labor, legislators began to try and remedy the underlying class conflicts of the Great Depression. The 1930s were the peak of class conflict in America and a genuine fear was held by some in power that it would lead to Soviet-styled uprisings on American soil. While relief was the more acceptable avenue to address the concerns of the unemployed and underemployed masses, laws designed to legitimize organized labor began to take hold.

The first such law was the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), which created the National Recovery Administration in 1933. This broad-sweeping law attempted to regulate turbulent industries by setting standards of prices and wages endorsed by the leading corporations in each field, as well as establishing the Public Works Administration to employ those who desperately needed work. Criticism of the law, coming from a range of groups like small-business owners and the Communist Party, argued that NIRA gave the most benefits to

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<sup>49</sup> Carl R. Weinberg’s *Labor, Loyalty, Rebellion: Southwestern Illinois Coal Miners and World War I* offers excellent coverage of the persecution that German miners underwent during World War I and the periods immediately before and after.

large corporations and would lead to a higher concentration of power and wealth among the already wealthy elites. Organized labor mostly endorsed NIRA because of section 7a, which stated that organized labor had the right to act as collective bargaining agents on behalf of their members. The government had regulated organized labor during World War I briefly, but this represented a shift in ideology during peacetime. Labor leaders, correctly, predicted a massive upsurge in union membership as it became easier for unions to force recognition upon corporations that had been holding out.<sup>50</sup> However, this created more tension between the older craft-unions and the growing number of industrial unions that sought to expand into previously untapped industries.<sup>51</sup>

The Progressives, too, felt that NIRA offered an avenue to improve their membership numbers and their official status as the representative of coal miners in Illinois and beyond. However, they met roadblocks and became disillusioned with the law altogether. They criticized it as a tool of the conservative elements within the AFL and charged that John L. Lewis was able to manipulate the law to benefit the United Mine Workers through his connections in Washington D.C. While the AFL had officially remained neutral during the 1932 elections, John L. Lewis and the UMW began setting the groundwork for an alliance between the Democratic Party and organized labor. While the Progressives were never overly critical of President

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<sup>50</sup> Rhonda F. Levine, *Class Struggle and the New Deal: Industrial Labor, Industrial Capital, and the State*, (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 1988), 72-79.

<sup>51</sup> The United Mine Workers was by far the largest and most influential industrial union in the 1930s and they, along with their leader John L. Lewis, would become the face of the Congress of Industrial Organizations by the end of the decade. However, there were many independent industrial unions that existed outside of the AFL that sought to expand during this period as well. Some of the more successful were those affiliated with the Communist Party USA and their Trade Union Unity League (TUUL). The TUUL acted much like the AFL as an umbrella organization for newly created industrial unions, such as the National Miners Union, and had limited success until its collapse in the late 1930s.

Roosevelt they were wary of John L. Lewis's perceived power over the bureaucratic machines that held power over organized labor at large.<sup>52</sup>

The Joint Reports of the district officers covering 1932 to 1934 were largely positive. They stated that the laws had brought about shorter work hours for the coal industry but pointed out that coal was now lifted after the shift had ended. This issue was one that miners had fought over nationwide, especially in nonmechanized mines where miners were paid by the ton they produced.<sup>53</sup> However, the next Joint Report covering 1934 to 1936 was much more critical. It made the charge that the National Recovery Administration was nondemocratic and did not recognize the miners' right to elect their own collective bargaining agents. This charge was repeated in reports that detailed the failure of the PMA to expand beyond Illinois state borders.<sup>54</sup> Joe Ozanic went as far as to say that NIRA officials, acting as agents of the American government, were telling nonunion miners that they had to join the UMW to receive the benefits of the new federal law.<sup>55</sup>

In 1935 the NIRA was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Business leaders, along with elements of organized labor, had turned their backs on the law by mid-1934 and some welcomed its defeat in court. In some industries, employers led a counter-offensive to beat back the union gains made over the previous two years. Plans to replace it began soon after the

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<sup>52</sup> The Progressives hailed Roosevelt's election to president in one of their first issues of the *Progressive Miner*, claiming it as a victory for the working class over conservatism. They also mentioned John L. Lewis' prior support for Republican Party officials and Herbert Hoover specifically, as a way to reinforce the ideals held by their enemies as being detrimental.

<sup>53</sup> Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer District 1 Progressive Miners of America to the First Biennial and Second Constitutional Convention, Folder 3, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>54</sup> Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer to the Delegates Composing the Second Biennial and Third Constitutional Convention District 1, Progressive Miners of America, Folder 3, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, West Virginia.

<sup>55</sup> Joseph Ozanic Sr., interview by Rex Rhodes, Barbara Herndon, and Nick Cherniavsky, 1972 and 1974, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

Supreme Court decision and from this the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) was born.

The NLRA, passed into law in 1935 a mere five weeks after the demise of the NIRA, represented the most comprehensive federal regulation of organized labor to date and set the grounds for a process of union recognition that is largely still used today. The federal government created a bureaucratic process through which unions could gain recognition as collective bargaining agents that had to be recognized by corporations. In exchange for this guarantee, organized labor agreed to some limitations on their practices, such as usages of strikes or other examples of direct action. A system to penalize either side for breaking contracts or federal law was also created. This entire system was to be overseen by the National Labor Relations Board, a group of appointed arbitrators who would decide on issues between labor and the industries they sought to organize. It also outlawed the usage of company unions nationwide and explicitly prevented employers from interfering in the selection of collective bargaining agents by their employees.

While NIRA was sectioned by industry and offered differing sets of codes and regulations based on that, the NLRA affected most non-agricultural workers uniformly. This led to an even larger increase in union membership nationwide. While the AFL certainly benefited from the NLRA, it also greatly helped its new rival in the Committee (and later Congress) of Industrial Organizations. Industrial unions rapidly expanded after 1935 and unions like the United Mine Workers made massive gains as their influence peaked. Politicians felt pressure as the empowered labor movement was able to flex its political muscles and became a deciding factor in some elections throughout the second half of the 1930s.

The Progressives reacted in similar ways to the NLRA and NLRB as they had to NIRA. Optimism was rampant over the passage of the new law as the PMA felt that this law, favoring industrial unionism, would serve to benefit them. They also applauded the initial democratic elements of the NLRA/NLRB and felt that an avenue was now firmly in place that would allow them to flourish in areas they had long claimed majority support. Members were skeptical, though, of the perceived influence that John L. Lewis had in passing the NLRA and of his growing ties to the Democratic Party. While the NLRB was to remain independent, Progressives also feared that the Board would become plagued by conservative elements.

The optimism the Progressives felt was short lived. Legal cases between the Progressive Miners of America and the coal operators plagued the union. District leadership continued to count on the court system to support their cause, often on the grounds of claiming popular support from the rank-and-file members in that area. Demonstrating this support through the National Labor Relations Board proved difficult and often took long periods of time that the Progressives didn't have. Similarly, the Progressives relied on the courts to end lockouts from operators who refused to accept the union even after NLRB decisions went in favor of the PMA or from operators who sought to break contract and reopen under UMW contract.

The Progressive case against "Mine B" was one such case and caused a major strain on the union financially. Mine B, near Springfield, had operated under a Progressive contract since 1932 as part of the first group of operators who had recognized the new union. Due to a district-wide strike in 1937 that helped lead to a new contract for the Progressives, Mine B was ordered to pay retroactive wages to the four hundred sixty-seven members of Local 54. The company refused to pay and Mine B decided to shut down instead on May 12, 1937. The same day, twelve miners who recently had been expelled from the PMA, arrived at work and announced that they

had joined the United Mine Workers. Mine B's operator, President Elshoff, then went before the media saying that a new contract had been signed with the UMW and that they would reopen with a new work force.<sup>56</sup>

Art Gramlich worked on the picket lines at Mine B just months before his trial would begin over his connection to railroad bombings. He ran coffee and food from the local headquarters to Progressive Miners on the picket lines around Mine B. Pickets were active on and off from April 1937 to January 1938. He stated that it was lost because of turncoats and that the company had violently beaten some miners on company property.<sup>57</sup>

The PMA attempted to settle the dispute through the NLRB, a tactic they relied on two hundred ninety-eight times from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s according to Joe Ozanic.<sup>58</sup> After mediation with the UMW broke down, a full investigation was ordered by the NLRB for late October 1937, five months after the dispute began. Two more months passed before NLRB sanctioned elections occurred for the miners to democratically choose their collective bargaining agents. On a vote of four hundred four to twenty-five, with two abstaining votes, the Progressives confirmed their status as representatives of the miners of Mine B. As of the writing of the January 1938 report from the district officers, though, Mine B had remained closed and refused to operate under a Progressive contract. Instead, the operators chose to shut down Mine B completely, putting several hundred more Progressive members out of work.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer to the Delegates Composing the Third Biennial and Fourth Constitutional Convention, Folder 3, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>57</sup> Art Gramlich, interview by Rex Rhodes, 1972, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

<sup>58</sup> Joe Ozanic, Interview by Barbara Herndon, March 21 1970s, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>59</sup> Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer to the Delegates Composing the Third Biennial and Fourth Constitutional Convention, Folder 3, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

Joe Ozanic speculated that John L. Lewis, by abusing the UMW's treasury, had paid off President Elshoff in order to shut down his operation. Ozanic explained that Lewis had paid Elshoff a royalty fee based on the amount of profits Mine B was projected to make as well as a bonus fee for agreeing to remain closed. For this reason, Mine B remained closed for close to three years. By that time, the Progressives had lost support in that region and Mine B reopened under a contract with the UMW, even though the NLRB had certified the PMA as collective bargaining agents.<sup>60</sup> While Ozanic did not specifically state evidence that proved the conspiracy between Lewis and Elshoff, it is known that John L. Lewis did invest in mining companies as a private citizen and through the UMW's treasury.

This case stands out for several reasons. For one it showed that the NLRB had the authority to hand down labor-management-dispute decisions, but it lacked any ability to enforce them.<sup>61</sup> While Mine B's operators claimed that the labor dispute had damaged their profits too much to continue operations, they later reopened under a UMW contract. Even with a clear legal victory, the NLRB confirmed that the elections were fair in 1938 and had not been tampered with after the UMW ordered an investigation, the Progressives still lost. To many in the PMA, the District leadership had failed in pursuing the legal strategy. The costs were too high and hampered the union's ability to provide aid to its members or expand its message beyond Illinois's borders.

The Joint Report of the district officers covering 1936 to 1938 was strongly critical of the NLRB, reflecting PMA members' disappointment with the new labor law. Meanwhile, the PMA joined the American Federation of Labor: "Like the American Federation of Labor we feel that

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<sup>60</sup> Joseph Ozanic Sr., interview by Rex Rhodes, Barbara Herndon, and Nick Cherniavsky, 1972 and 1974, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

<sup>61</sup> Dallas Young, *History of the Progressive Miners of America 1932-1940*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1940), 142.

the National Labor Relations Act is a good law if properly administered, but in view of its present mid-administration and the partiality of the Board's personnel toward the C.I.O. and its affiliates, the law should be amended so as to be made absolutely fool-proof and so that the personnel of the Board will be governed by the provisions of said Act rather than by influence or power of any individual, group of individuals or labor organization... To this end, together with the A.F. of L., we propose to exert every ounce of power we possess in order that the necessary changes in the Act may be made..."<sup>62</sup> The PMA experience with Lewis made members suspicious of the NLRB and its neutrality.

Rank-and-file members expressed similar concerns over the NLRB's neutrality and its ruling against the Progressives, as well as its pushing of the PMA toward the AFL as allies. Irene Allard felt that affiliation with the AFL hurt the PMA greatly and that they would have been better off joining the CIO, which would have required rejoining the UMW.<sup>63</sup> Joe Ozanic likewise criticized the NLRB election process, "Had we been able to have gotten that kind of an honest election in 1936 from the NLRB, which we couldn't, which we were denied because of the marriage of the agencies with the Mine Workers and all their corruption, Lewis would have gone out in the 1930's, because we'd have beat him lock, stock, and barrel." He speculated that large donations Lewis made from the United Mine Worker's treasury towards members of the Democratic Party and the Roosevelt Administration gave him significant influence.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer to the Delegates Composing the Third Biennial and Fourth Constitutional Convention, Folder 3, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>63</sup> Irene Allard, Interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherniavsky, 1974, Oral History Collection, Brookens Library, University of Illinois, Springfield, IL.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph Ozanic Sr., interview by Rex Rhodes, Barbara Herndon, and Nick Cherniavsky, 1972 and 1974, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.



Together with the American Federation of Labor, the Progressives made their most successful, and controversial, protest over the NLRB. In 1940, two years into their affiliation with the AFL, International President Joe Ozanic and several Progressive members from West Virginia testified before the Smith Commission, a House investigation into NLRB favoritism towards the CIO and unfair practices. The committee was anti-labor and conservative in makeup, and the move was criticized by some within the Progressive organization and others in the labor movement. Ozanic testified on the corruption of the NLRB and allegations of UMW influence over the three Board-members that ruled over dozens of NLRB applications put forward by the Progressives. He met with a top federal official who claimed that he and others had been ordered by his superiors to ignore filings from the Progressives and rule against them as much as possible.<sup>65</sup> He also stated that the federal official claimed to have been given specific orders to only recognize the UMW in negotiations over a new contract to cover all Appalachian coal fields. The move froze out thousands of Progressive members who were forced into working under a UMW contract.<sup>66</sup>

Not all within the Progressives agreed with Ozanic's testifying before the Smith Commission. A small group of local leaders, led by a John Battuello of the Gillespie Local sent a telegram to the Commission to be read into the record stating that Ozanic did not represent the entirety of the Progressive organization. The NLRA was "labor's Magna Carta" in the words of the Progressive members and Battuello opposed any amending of the Act. Ozanic believed the delegates behind the letter represented a "rump" meeting that was composed of only the few

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<sup>65</sup> The superiors in question were either Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins or President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Progressives had moved to a position of public opposition towards President Roosevelt, especially after his declining of invitations to intervene in Illinois throughout the mid-1930s.

<sup>66</sup> Joseph Ozanic Sr., interview by Rex Rhodes, Barbara Herndon, and Nick Cherniavsky, 1972 and 1974, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

delegates that signed the letter and that they had no backing from the membership. Ozanic responded by summoning the Executive Board immediately and putting Battuello on trial for treason in late 1940. A referendum vote was held, and Progressive membership voted overwhelmingly to exile Battuello.<sup>6768</sup>

Several recommendations were made by Ozanic and the Progressives in attendance, and most were adopted by the Smith Commission. Some of the points accepted were the abolition of the three-member Board and the creation of five-member Boards, the imposing of time limits in which the NLRB had to respond to and make decisions on petitions from labor organizations, and that unfair practices or decisions could be appealed through district courts. These recommendations, as well as a slash in the NLRB budget and other measures to weaken the Board's authority, were included in an anti-labor bill, popularly called the Smith Bill, brought before the House and passed in 1940. The bill died in the Senate as President Roosevelt urged key Senate members to prevent hearings over the bill, but the damage was already done. In some regards, the bill influenced by Progressive testimonies formed the basis for Taft-Hartley several years later. Taft-Hartley was a particularly damaging set of labor laws designed to curb the influence and authority gained by labor organizations in the 1930s and during World War II.

During the early period of affiliation with the AFL, Progressives stood in opposition to the Guffey-Vinson Coal Act. The act was designed to bring balance to the coal industry that was plagued by constant swings in the market for its product. The Progressives protested over the

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<sup>67</sup> It is unclear if John Battuello and Jack Battuello are the same person and that Ozanic made incorrect statements in his interview. Jack was also tried for treason by the PMA but on grounds that he had worked alongside the UMW against the Progressives, specifically in freeing funds for the defense of the DuQuoin Boys. Jack did state in his own oral history that he had a brother named John, but did not go into details over his involvement with the PMA or if he faced trial from the union as well.

<sup>68</sup> Joseph Ozanic Sr., interview by Rex Rhodes, Barbara Herndon, and Nick Cherniavsky, 1972 and 1974, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

perceived negative effects the act would have on small-mining operations and the concentration of power among large-scale operators.<sup>69</sup> The Progressives received great support from cooperatively owned and smaller mines in Illinois, and they were right to fear what further regulation would do to small-scale operations. Their opposition to consolidating economic power in larger companies matches the opposition expressed by many towards the NIRA.

Regardless of their opposition, the Guffey-Vinson Coal Act passed into law and the Progressives again found themselves on the outside looking in at a new federal agency. The new law established regional boards to mediate between unions and operators and to maintain sets of codes that would be most beneficial to both the working class and the operators. Coal Board No. 10 covered the miners of Illinois. Progressive leaders, like Joe Ozanic, were shocked when a UMW official was appointed to represent the miners of Illinois to the Board. Ozanic attempted to protest this decision at a meeting of the Coal Board in Chicago but was quickly shut down by the Board's chairman. Instead, Ozanic, Secretary-Treasurer Claude Percy, and Judge Dowell prepared for a court appeal. The Progressive team was able to identify several discrepancies in the list of UMW locals in Illinois, such as a handful that had been Progressive since 1932 and others that represented mines shut down decades before. While the thoroughness of the Progressive officers and legal team revealed several lies made by a UMW official under oath, the Progressives were never seated at a Coal Board and again missed out on the benefits of federal recognition.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Joseph Ozanic Sr., interview by Rex Rhodes, Barbara Herndon, and Nick Cherniavsky, 1972 and 1974, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

<sup>70</sup> Joseph Ozanic Sr., interview by Rex Rhodes, Barbara Herndon, and Nick Cherniavsky, 1972 and 1974, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

Corruption and bribery allegations from the PMA towards their rivals in the United Mine Workers lay at the foundation of many of the controversies they encountered in their early years. After being given financial donations, Sheriff Robinson sided with the UMW and he ran a beefed-up police force of special deputies paid with UMW money. John L. Lewis also made donations to Democrats and members of key government agencies, like the NLRB and the Roosevelt Administration, to try and influence decision making. Local and state politicians could be easily swayed by the power of the UMW, which grew at the time of the Illinois mine wars into the largest and most powerful labor union in the country with massive financial resources. Progressive members alleged that because of recent changes in the UMW's constitution Lewis had even greater and unlimited access to the UMW treasury. While previously UMW locals had handled the money collected from membership dues and fundraising, it now was sent directly to the International headquarters. This prevented locals from truly rebelling, in the eyes of Progressives, and allowed greater control from the centralized leadership structure of the UMW.<sup>71</sup>

In 1937, The Progressives leaked the expense reports of the UMW that had not been released by John L. Lewis and were not released again until mandated under Taft-Hartley. The expense reports were an embarrassment to Lewis as they detailed lavish spending and the high earnings of appointed international organizers who answered only to Lewis. While Lewis's direct earnings as international president of the UMW were set by constitutional law at fifty thousand dollars a year, very high wages for a labor official in the 1930s, the Progressives thought the fine print revealed more. The expense reports were published in the official paper of

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<sup>71</sup> Joe Ozanic, Interview by Barbara Herndon, March 21, 1970s, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

the union, the *Progressive Miner*, alongside pictures comparing the lavish home of John L. Lewis to the poor dwellings of coal miners in the Appalachian fields.<sup>72</sup>

The picture painted of the PMA's interactions with government officials, new labor laws, and challenges from the legal system at all levels is bleak. By the late 1930s, after their affiliation with the American Federation of Labor had taken affect, the Progressives seemed on the verge of defeat. The UMW continued to expand, winning a major contract covering the Appalachian coal fields in 1940, and it seemed to have blown past the threat from the Illinois Progressives. Coupled with the imprisonment of those convicted during the federal bombing trial, the Progressives faced heavy financial burdens. With financial cuts to services and, a begrudging admission of defeat in strikes in Christian and Franklin County, despair became the new norm for the Progressive leadership. The NLRB continued to prove an enemy to the Progressives and more and more doors to new membership were rapidly closed on the union in the face of UMW expansion. Even with the split between President Roosevelt and John L. Lewis in the buildup to World War II, the alliance between organized labor and the Democrats stood strong, and the PMA gained no new grounds on the national front.

Perhaps the worst blows came from the rank-and-file's loss of trust and confidence in the district officers and the choices they had made. The legal route was considered a failure in its inability to produce results. The financial strains of pursuing this strategy, that by all accounts seemed to work for more widely accepted industrial unions, were punishing on the Progressives and their ability to fight the United Mine Workers. A failed movement from within the Progressives to reunite with the UMW, primarily endorsed by older miners who feared losing

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<sup>72</sup> Joseph Ozanic Sr., interview by Rex Rhodes, Barbara Herndon, and Nick Cherniavsky, 1972 and 1974, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

their pension benefits if the Progressives collapsed, showed a loss of support for the ideologies that had birthed and sustained the organization. John Fancher, while expressing support for men like Claude Percy, William Keck, and Joe Ozanic, stated that he felt betrayed by the court system's systematic blocking of progress for the PMA. He also criticized the incredibly high legal fees that the PMA maintained as early as 1933. Jack Battuello, a controversial figure within the union, also criticized the policies of trying over and over again to win through a legal system that did not change. He was one of the few to offer alternatives to what the district officers enacted, offering a range of ideas from organizing a union of cameraman and secretaries to mass produce stories on the troubles of coal miners during the Great Depression to a flat-out endorsement of self-defense from miners on the grounds that the working class had to be able to defend itself.

While the picture was indeed bleak for the Progressives by the end of the 1930s, it was not without hope. Especially at the local and state level, the Progressives had forged lasting bonds in the name of peace. While it is easy to focus on Sheriff Robinson and his oppressive policies towards Progressive members, one should also think of Frank Fries and how his actions prevented the deaths of potentially dozens of Progressive members in Coulterville. AFL-affiliation meant that Illinois state officials were somewhat more inclined to listen to Progressive complaints and rule more neutrally during future flareups of conflict. The Progressives did make some friends in Washington D.C. as well, ranging from anti-labor Republican Howard Smith to a brand of populist Republicans that supported labor and agricultural reform. It is telling that at the dedication to a newly constructed monument to Mary "Mother" Jones and the martyrs of the Virden Riots that the Progressives were joined in attendance by West Virginia Senator Rush Holt, North Dakota Senator William Lemke, and future Illinois Senator Charles Wayland

Brooks. The type of political support that was drawn to the Progressives, then, was tied to an opposition to the alliance of New Deal Democrats and the CIO but it did not always represent anti-labor interests. True, it is harder to find signs of hopes in the legacy of legal battles that the Progressives had. The hope some Progressives may have felt would have come from the spreading of knowledge of their defeats, to ensure that the working-class would not suffer similar situations in the future and to push for greater labor law reform. While the Progressives were criticized for their appearance before the Smith Commission, one should doubt that they had anti-labor interests at heart. President Ozanic and the other miners who testified believed that the system had been broken to rule against them, and instead of removing the system of arbitration on labor disputes entirely, their suggestions were for a massive overhaul that would have benefited all of the working-class.

#### Chapter IV - Founding of the Progressive Miners of America to AFL Affiliation

With the conclusion of the 1932 Constitutional Convention, the newly established Progressive Miners of America attempted to consolidate their strength within the Illinois coal fields they called home. This strategy was pursued on several fronts from within the union. Elected leadership, like William Keck and Claude Percy, felt that the courts would ultimately give the union authority over miners in Illinois and that in the meantime contracts should be signed with friendly coal companies. A militant rank and file membership called for an expansion of strikes and direct action, and the radical faction, composed of men like Jack Battuello and Gerry Allard, called for organizing nationally among other measures. The Progressives were aided in seeking these various demands by a newly created Women's Auxiliary, a first of its kind in the coal fields, and a militant journal, *Progressive Miner*.

The creation of the Women's Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners of America was both revolutionary and a long time coming in the Illinois coal fields. The organization was one of the first of its kind and involved women even more directly in the organizing of a male-dominated industry. While the wives, daughters, and sisters of coal miners had helped with relief action and walked pickets during strikes, the Women's Auxiliary went beyond this by actively putting pressure on union leadership and developing its own goals and philosophies outside of the majority opinion of the Progressive organization. They also took a more direct position during strikes and stood at the front lines when confronting strikebreakers or police. The Women's Auxiliary was the backbone of the strike actions that occurred in Christian, Franklin, and Sangamon Counties as the women organized soup kitchens, clothing drives for children, and raised funds for relief statewide. The organization also organized large parades and marches in



support of the Progressives, the largest involving over ten thousand in Springfield and culminating with the Women's Auxiliary's President, Agnes Burn Wiecks, meeting with the Governor.<sup>1</sup>

The Women's Auxiliary originated from the actions of local groups of miners' wives, beginning before the creation of the Progressive Miners of America. Irene Allard alleged that she and the women of West Frankfort were the first to organize an auxiliary in Illinois, after seeing a similar styled, localized, Ladies Auxiliary at a United Mine Workers meeting in Clinton, Indiana. In 1932 they organized, initially, under the United Mine Workers banner. Officially, the United Mine Workers did not recognize the Ladies Auxiliary as a national organization, and it remained only local and isolated. Efforts to recognize the contributions of women at the national level through annual constitutional conventions were soundly defeated. West Frankfort remained alone, for a year, as the only local in Illinois that had a Ladies Auxiliary.<sup>2</sup>

In 1932, with the creation of the Progressive Miners of America, Ladies Auxiliaries were organized across Illinois. On November 2, one hundred sixty delegates from thirty-seven Ladies Auxiliary locals met to create a district-wide, centralized organization to coordinate the efforts of women around the state. Out of this, the Women's Auxiliary emerged as the women decided, in the words of Irene Allard, "A woman was a coal miner's wife." Allard explained that the women present at the convention felt the term lady did not apply to them. They did not act or conform to the standards for women of wealth, and they also felt that the term lady was derogatory and used to make them seem immature. Allard was present for this convention, but could not vote as the

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<sup>1</sup> Irene Allard, Interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherniavsky, 1974, Oral History Collection, Brookens Library, University of Illinois, Springfield, IL.

<sup>2</sup> Irene Allard, Interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherniavsky, 1974, Oral History Collection, Brookens Library, University of Illinois, Springfield, IL.

women of West Frankfort had remained affiliated with the United Mine Workers, believing they could convince their husbands and brothers to leave and join the Progressives.<sup>3</sup>

Agnes Burns Wieck was elected the first leader of the Women's Auxiliary, and the Progressive gained a militant ally in her. Wieck had years of experience in organizing in New England and Philadelphia and was a gifted journalist and writer. She was never afraid to lead from the front, and often did during tense marches or parades in hostile territory. Wieck and Hazel Ansbury led the massive funeral procession of Andrew Ganis, a martyr for the Progressive cause in Tovey, who had been killed by a National Guardsman under questionable circumstances.<sup>4</sup> She was also a gifted public speaker, featured at several large Progressive rallies in cities like Springfield, Gillespie, and Taylorville. Wieck associated herself with Progressive leaders like Jack Battuello and Gerry Allard, the editor who featured articles from Wieck regularly in the *Progressive Miner*.

The *Progressive Miner*, although operating at a loss almost constantly throughout the 1930s, was an effective organizing tool for the Progressive Miners. The journal was initially a weekly paper that offered news on the Progressive organization, national labor struggles, the sins of the United Mine Workers, the state of the coal industry, and even featured a half a page on the activities of the Women's Auxiliary and the issues of women in Illinois and nationally. Editor Gerry Allard published the entirety of the first constitution in 1932, resolutions being submitted by locals, and which mines had signed with the Progressive organization and which were holding out (Taylorville and Peabody Coal were regular front-page appearances).<sup>5</sup> Illinois miners had, a

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<sup>3</sup> Irene Allard, Interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherniavsky, 1974, Oral History Collection, Brookens Library, University of Illinois, Springfield, IL.

<sup>4</sup> "Thousands Honor Andrew Ganis, Martyr," *Progressive Miner*, 21 October 1932, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Information on the general layout and content of the *Progressive Miner* was taken from issues beginning on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1932, and ending on January 20, 1933.

decade before, built the *Illinois Miner*, into a strong paper on the United Mine Workers' activities in the state and became a strong voice criticizing John L. Lewis. The ability to rebuild this type of publication within the Progressive organization, at a smaller scale, was applauded and circulated heavily among Progressive members.

The *Progressive Miner* catered to the militants in the union, as it sometimes expanded from its normal coverage to cover Socialist issues abroad. An eight-part series on "Wall Street Imperialism" in Nicaragua, for example, began in October of 1932.<sup>6</sup> Editorials also discussed international radicals and left-wing issues, such as an article from October 1932 that compared the struggles against the American government and the United Mine Workers to Gandhi and the struggle for Indian independence from the British. The article compared the British and Americans/UMW in their disrespect towards laws and constitutions in dealing with dissent, and challenged the belief that solutions could be reached through "electionism."<sup>7</sup>

While the hope that courts would ultimately establish the Progressive Miners as the sole organization in the coal fields ultimately fell short, some operators did indeed side with the Progressives. This faction of smaller-scale coal operators had resented the dominance of major companies, like Peabody Coal, which had controlled the Illinois Coal Operators Association (ICOA). As discussed in Chapter II, this organization favored the larger companies in their contract negotiations with the United Mine Workers, and many smaller companies were unable to compete with the standard's established in the ICOA's contracts. This faction decided to meet

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<sup>6</sup> "Looting of Nicaragua," *Progressive Miner*, 30 September 1932, 2.

<sup>7</sup> "Ghandi's Fight in India and its Relation to the Struggle of the Coal Miners," *Progressive Miner*, 7 October 1932, 3.

with the Progressive Miners of America, beginning in late September of 1932, and form the new Coal Producers Association of Illinois (CPAI).<sup>8</sup>

The CPAI ultimately agreed to recognize the Progressive Miners of America, made official by their checking off dues at their mines to the organization. The new union was allowed a localized structure of negotiating grievances and small-scale issues that was to be respected by mine officials in exchange for the Progressives accepting the five dollar wage (a major issue that had led to the original members leaving the United Mine Workers). After fierce debate at the First Constitutional Convention, the delegates had agreed to give the various committees authority to accept the five dollar wage, but to maintain the fight for a wage closer to the six dollar raise they felt fair. Ironically, the leadership of the Progressive Miners never put the initial contract to be signed with the CPAI up to a rank and file referendum, as demanded by the PMA's constitution, because many miners had severe strike exhaustion, as many had not worked since the spring of 1932, and were more than ready to work at any wage given.<sup>9</sup>

### **Expansion, Strikes, and the Relief Fund**

Over time, larger operators were swayed into signing contracts with the Progressives and leaving the coalition of operators that signed with the United Mine Workers. Cosgrove-Meehan, an operator who employed four hundred miners in Panama, Illinois, signed with the Progressives in late November 1932.<sup>10</sup> In early January 1933, the *Progressive Miner* reported on over nine hundred miners leaving the United Mine Workers and signing a Progressive contract at Majestic

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<sup>8</sup> Harriet Hudson, *The Progressive Mine Workers of America: A Study in Rival Unionism*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1952), 21-23.

<sup>9</sup> Harriet Hudson, *The Progressive Mine Workers of America: A Study in Rival Unionism*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1952), 21-23.

<sup>10</sup> "Cosgrove-Meehan Coal Company Sign with Progressives," *Progressive Miner*, 25 November 1932, 1.

Mines in DuQuoin.<sup>11</sup> While the Peabody holdouts, mostly around Taylorville, were much larger than Majestic or Cosgrove-Meehan the Progressives believed they were making gains in signing with medium to large sized operators and not just the small-scale producers that they initially appealed to.

While the leadership attempted to wind down the strike actions underway, new conflicts arose throughout the Illinois fields. The Progressives made progress in flipping United Mine Workers' locals to their side in the central fields and organized new locals in the northern fields that had been previously ignored by the United Mine Workers, but they faced lockouts indefinitely in hostile regions, like Franklin and Christian Counties. The Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer issued for 1933 and the first half of 1934 detailed the extent of expanded strike action and lockouts. At the time of the union's founding, five thousand members were listed as on strike. By the time of the report (September 1934) a total of eight thousand members were on strike. The same report listed membership as averaging a little over fourteen thousand members, meaning that at any given time sixty percent of the membership was on strike.<sup>12</sup>

Franklin County was the initial site of strongest resistance to the Progressive Miners. Sheriff Browning Robinson, the leader of the deputies at the Mulkeytown ambush, sided wholeheartedly with the United Mine Workers and did everything in his power to obstruct the Progressives from picketing or holding meetings. Ray Edmondson, a United Mine Workers leader appointed as President of District 12 (Lewis would revoke the charter of District 12

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<sup>11</sup> "Miners Employed at Majestic Mine Vote Overwhelmingly to Join Progressive Miners Union" *Progressive Miner*, 6 January 1933, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer District 1 Progressive Miners of America to the First Biennial and Second Constitutional Convention, Folder 3, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

because of the chaos within Illinois), was also quite active in Franklin and rarely faced interference from local law enforcement. Benton, West Frankfort, Ziegler, and Orient were battlefields as miners debated whether to maintain their allegiance to the United Mine Workers or to affiliate with the Progressive Miners of America. Violence was rampant to the point that Irene and Gerry Allard fled their home in West Frankfort to avoid death threats.<sup>13</sup> None were safe from the violence, even the women who composed the local Women's Auxiliary chapters as they were beaten in the streets of West Frankfort in December 1932. A *Progressive Miner* article that covered this event alleged Ray Edmondson knocked a woman to the ground and moved to pull a gun on her.<sup>14</sup>

While Franklin County remained a tense battleground, Christian County rose in importance by early 1933. Peabody had shut down its mines around Taylorville during the initial opposition to the Lewis contract, but they quickly reopened them after the convoys of miners had headed further south. Peabody relied upon a buffer of local law enforcement (made up mostly of special deputies that were on the coal operator's payroll) to ensure that a scab workforce could keep its mines running. An early January 1933 shootout left a Women's Auxiliary member and mother of three dead, as well as two Peabody guards and a dozen injured at the No. 7 Peabody Mine in Kincaid. The *Progressive Miner* defended the actions of the PMA miners on the grounds that they were only responding to the violent behavior that had been forced upon them for weeks.<sup>15</sup> Fifty-four were eventually indicted over the shootout, with around two dozen of them being active PMA members.<sup>16</sup> The situation escalated a week later when President Claude

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<sup>13</sup> Irene Allard, Interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherniavsky, 1974, Oral History Collection, Brookens Library, University of Illinois, Springfield, IL.

<sup>14</sup> "Edmundson-Moulin Slug Women on Streets of West Frankfort, Illinois," *Progressive Miner*, 9 December 1932, 1.

<sup>15</sup> "Peabody Thugs Kill Mother of 3 Children," *Progressive Miner*, 6 January 1933, 1.

<sup>16</sup> "54 Kincaid Miners Indicted," *Progressive Miner*, 20 January 1933, 1.

Pearcy sent a telegram to Governor Horner threatening to call a general strike with national repercussions over the conditions of Christian County.<sup>17</sup>

Minor strikes broke out in the northern part of the state too, primarily in the unorganized mines that had been ignored by the United Mine Workers. The *Progressive Miner* reported on conflict in the northern coal fields, particularly around Farmington. Four hundred miners walked out on strike in Mark, in order to gain recognition of their union.<sup>18</sup> Organizing events were more scattered across the northern counties, as the coal fields employed many more in the central and southern parts of the state. Communities also did not have the same level of commitment to the coal industry, as employment in the mines was less important and other industries had a larger influence on the local economy.

The expansions of strikes in Illinois put a dual strain on the young Progressive union. For one, having sixty percent of the membership on strike meant that dues were not always on time from striking locals (if they came at all). The union offered reduced rates on membership dues for those striking, but still expected the rank and file to continue contributing in hard times. To soften the blow on those striking, especially in the hard hit areas of Franklin County, the union offered financial assistance in the forms of a strike fund. Because of the fluctuations on a month to month basis of members striking and those who were able to contribute, the funds went through periods of great strain. The strike fund did receive some aid from the government of Illinois and some private individuals. The Secretary of the Relief Fund, William McAulay, mentioned that around forty thousand dollars had been dispersed in the fields around Springfield

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<sup>17</sup> "General Strike Looms!" *Progressive Miner*, 13 January 1933, 1.

<sup>18</sup> "Four Hundred Miners Strike for P.M. of A." *Progressive Miner*, 18 November 1932, 1.

by February 1933 and that Secretary-Treasurer William Keck had helped gain some “State Aid” but that was likely all they would get.<sup>19</sup>

Mandatory donations to the strike fund, set by the central leadership of the Progressive Miners, drew criticism from some militant rank-and-file miners. A fierce argument broke out at the 1933 Scale Committee (in which Secretary-Treasurer William Keck and Secretary of the Relief Fund William McAulay’s remarks were taken from) over the issue of increasing the amount owed to the strike fund. An initial measure came forward proposing a flat one dollar due from every member on payday was quickly defeated. A two percent “fee” was then passed by a vote of seventy-one to fifty-seven, but a recount revealed that the measure was in fact defeated. A final compromise was the continuance of the flat one dollar fee until a rank-and-file referendum could be held on a three percent fee. This debate was preceded by a move by Progressive leadership to raise the general membership fees from one-point-five percent to five percent, which was also quickly defeated by a majority vote. Opposition to both measures stemmed from the belief that the Progressive membership would openly rebel against such measures, and the appearance of control over a publicly condemned militant rank-and-file had to be maintained.<sup>20</sup>

The radical faction of the union played an important part in these debates at the 1933 Scale Convention. It began to make more calls for radical action from their leaders and the union itself. Jack Battuello attended the convention as a delegate of Local 1 and joined allies, like a Delegate Steed of Local 1 and a Delegate Voysey of Local 15, to form the major opposition to

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<sup>19</sup> Minutes from the First Scale Convention of the Progressive Miners of America, Folder 2, Box 2, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>20</sup> Minutes from the First Scale Convention of the Progressive Miners of America, Folder 2, Box 2, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.



many measures supported by President Percy and Secretary-Treasurer William Keck. Battuello attempted to add May Day to a list of officially recognized holidays by the union along with Armistice Day and September 1, the founding of the Progressive Miners of America. Resolution 14, proposed by Local 73, called for a condemnation of the "...Capitalist system of government in general, and in favor of a Working Man's Republic" and the prevention of the union from ever publicly supporting a candidate from any "capitalist" political party. Fierce debate broke out over the resolution, and it was tabled by a vote of seventy-six to fifty-six. Delegates Steed and Voysey, who fought fiercely in favor of the resolution, condemned Secretary-Treasurer William Keck. Keck refused to grant them the floor and attempted to expunge the debate over capitalism from the record entirely.<sup>21</sup>

Outside of the issue of the relief fund, the largest debate between the radical factions and President Percy was over the creation of Defense Committees and the release of imprisoned Taylorville miners. Taylorville had been the site of some of the earliest, and largest, militant action that preceded the creation of the Progressive Miners of America. While conditions were initially favorable, Peabody Coal had reopened mines with imported strikebreakers and United Mine Worker loyalists, all under the protection of local law enforcement. A conference was held in Gillespie on February 12, 1933 to address concerns over the conditions in Taylorville and to create a District-wide response. The Policy Committee Report from the conference called for the creation of local Defense Committees, whose purpose would be to fight unlawful imprisonment, raise funds for those miners who had been charged with crimes in relation to protests, and to put pressure on the governor and other elected officials to intervene in favor of the Progressive

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<sup>21</sup> Minutes from the First Scale Convention of the Progressive Miners of America, Folder 2, Box 2, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

Miners. The report contained much radical language, including referring to the Taylorville miners as “class war prisoners” and calling for mass action, specifically a general strike, against the state government if Progressive demands were not met. The report was signed by both Delegate Steed and Jack Battuello, who served as Secretary of the convention.<sup>22</sup>

To say the report created controversy is a massive understatement. A Delegate Novak of Local 5 initially spoke as the loudest resistor, raising issue over the language explaining why the men were imprisoned, the forcing of the defense committee system on the entire state by Locals 1 and 9, and the perceived insult towards President Percy that had occurred at the conference itself. Percy faced criticism for not doing enough for the Taylorville miners and appearing weak. Vice-President Humphries pointed out that if the resolution passed, the Progressives were in no position to sustain a general strike. Percy defended himself as well before the Scale Convention, saying that he was in favor of the Defense Committee system, on the grounds that they reported to a District Defense Committee that worked alongside the Executive Board. Percy’s comments inflamed supporters of the report, though, as they took offense to his statements that some rank-and-file members were being detrimental to the union and that the Defense Committees would ultimately reported to the centralized Executive Board.<sup>23</sup>

Jack Battuello rose after President Percy, in attempt to explain the actions of the conference committee that had produced the report. Battuello believed that his local had acted within the constitutional powers given to the locals, and that the letterhead clearly stated that the call for a meeting was from Local 1 of the Progressive Miners of America. Battuello believed

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<sup>22</sup> Policy Committee Report of Statewide Conference for Release of Taylorville Miners. Held in Gillespie, Illinois Feb. 12<sup>th</sup>, 1933, Folder 2, Box 2, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>23</sup> Minutes from the First Scale Convention of the Progressive Miners of America, Folder 2, Box 2, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

that the local union had every right to participate in union policy, as long as it did not interfere with decisions made by the central leadership. He turned his guns on the district officers, taking some shots at their beliefs: "... The only difference between the Local Union here and that of the District as I see, the district believes that the question should rest in the hands of lawyers and on this question I disagree with the district." The final words on the issue, before the resolution was sent back to the Resolution Committee, was President Percy saying that it was an honor for Delegate Steed to attack him. While the issue itself was very minor, the debate around it highlighted the growing divide between the militants and the leadership.<sup>24</sup>

### **Defeat of the Radicals and Outside of Illinois**

The struggles between the radicals and the elected leadership resulted in a resounding defeat for the radicals, removing many from the union entirely. Gerry Allard was the first domino to fall. Allard had established himself as the first editor of the *Progressive Miner*, the official publication of the union and a direct challenge to the United Mine Workers' *Illinois Miner*. Allard drew condemnation from the leadership for his management of the paper, as it constantly operated at a loss of thousands of dollars as it attempted to compete with the UMW's established paper. It was also alleged that Allard was a Communist, and many of the conservative leaders believed that his affiliation with the union hurt its public image. The final straw, officially, was Allard's editorials that often criticized the Progressive leadership by name for their support of reactionary union policies or for interfering with union democracy.<sup>25</sup> Allard was removed from the *Progressive Miner* and, after initially being allowed to continue work as a

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<sup>24</sup> Minutes from the First Scale Convention of the Progressive Miners of America, Folder 2, Box 2, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>25</sup> David Thoreau Wieck, *Woman from Spillertown: A Memoir of Agnes Burns Wieck* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 152-154.

miner, was exiled from the union entirely.<sup>26</sup> The move did not go over well with many rank and file members, even those outside of the radical faction.

Agnes Burns Wieck was the second domino to fall, possibly because of her association with Allard. Wieck, as the elected head of the Women's Auxiliary, had overseen the construction of a statewide network of relief stations and soup kitchens to soften the blows left by indefinite strikes and lockouts. Wieck had fallen out of favor with the Progressive leadership, though, and her independence from control by the union had allowed her to be more critical of the leadership than they liked. The Women's Auxiliary was independent of the union at its beginning, only sharing a title. Wieck resisted calls from both the union and the women who were members of the Auxiliary to merge as she feared oversight by the male leaders and the loss of the ability for women to independently state their feelings about the union's actions. Wieck could not serve for consecutive terms as leader of the Women's Auxiliary, but had initially felt that her Vice-President would succeed her in office. As her popularity plummeted in the aftermath of Gerry Allard's firing and the loss of access to the *Progressive Miner*, she decided to go out in an honest and truthful way. At the second convention of the Women's Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners of America, she released a report, signed by herself, the Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer. The report listed the accomplishments of the previous year, while attacking President Percy and other Progressive leaders for censoring the journal and attacking those with left-wing views for simply being dissenters.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Irene Allard, Interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherniavsky, 1974, Oral History Collection, Brookens Library, University of Illinois, Springfield, IL.

<sup>27</sup> David Thoreau Wieck, *Woman from Spillertown: A Memoir of Agnes Burns Wieck* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 164-171.

This report was widely condemned by both the Women's Auxiliary and the Progressive leaders. Wieck's endorsed candidate lost, and the Women's Auxiliary moved in a more conservative direction. Shortly after her leaving office, the Women's Auxiliary came under the official control of the Progressive district officers, just as Agnes had feared. The ultimate sign of her fall from grace was three years later, when she wished the convention well from a hospital bed in New York City (she had left the state after she and her husband were forced out of the Progressive Miners good graces) and a resounding vote of "no" was cast in wishing her well in response. She returned to Illinois to make several speeches over the next few years, but never in conjunction with the Women's Auxiliary or the Progressive Miners. Instead, she appeared alongside Socialist and Communist groups outside of the labor movement in the mining industry.<sup>28</sup>

Other radicals were forced into positions of retreat throughout 1933 and 1934. Pat Ansburry, a friend of Gerry Allard, increasingly found himself on the outside looking in with respect to the Progressive Miners. He continued making scheduled speeches, often alongside Agnes Burns Wieck for leftist groups but rarely at Progressive events. Other lesser known miners, such as an E.C. Davis, were also affected by the crackdown on radicals. John Fancher recalled that Davis was a leader in the Bonus Army of Springfield and was considered "dangerous" by some miners. He was eventually banned from speaking at Progressive events because of his calls for radical action against the coal companies and the United Mine Workers.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> David Thoreau Wieck, *Woman from Spillertown: A Memoir of Agnes Burns Wieck* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 164-174.

<sup>29</sup> John Fancher, Interview by Barbara Herndon, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

Larry Mantowich also recalled that his Progressive local voted to expel Joe Angelo on charges of being a Communist sometime between 1932 and 1934.<sup>30</sup>

By 1935, Jack Battuello was one of the last radicals left standing. He had so far avoided serving in any executive offices, aside from Local 1's delegate at various conventions. However, he expanded his influence locally by rising to the position of local president and used that platform to continue agitating for a decentralized leadership with authority on most matters being given to the locals (a possible influence from his days in the Industrial Workers of the World). Battuello built a strong, militant organization in Local 1 that later organized embalmers in St. Louis, send aid to Anarchists fighting in the Spanish Civil War, and resisted an eviction of an elderly woman. With the loss of a friendly voice after Gerry Allard's dismissal as editor as the *Progressive Miner* Battuello was limited in voicing his opinions. He was not alone, though, as a handful of radicals survived the first few years of the organization. Dave Reed, a veteran of union organizing whose career ranged from (alleged) affiliation with the Molly MacGuires to the Industrial Workers of the World, quietly won a seat on the union's Executive Board, and continued to support and work with Battuello.<sup>31</sup>

Outside of Illinois, the Progressive Miners of America faced, opposition from the federal government, the United Mine Workers, and distrustful independent miner organizations. In late 1932 in West Virginia, shortly after the First Constitutional Convention of the Progressive Miners Frank Keeney's West Virginia Mine Workers Union collapsed. Keeney's speech at that convention, calling for immediate aid and affiliation between the two organizations, was ignored

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<sup>30</sup> Larry Mantowich, Interview by Barbara Herndon, February 19 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>31</sup> Jack Battelo, Interview by Barbara Herndon, March 13 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

by the Progressive officers and they ultimately paid an organizing price for it.<sup>32</sup> While organizers were able to sign up a handful of West Virginia locals in 1933, they quickly collapsed from a lack of financial support and opposition from the larger, established coal companies that dominated West Virginia at the time. Dealing with a resurgent United Mine Workers in that region was seen by the operators as the safer bet with John L. Lewis promoting harmony and efficiency in the coal fields. This also prevented a spread of Progressive support.<sup>33</sup>

In Pennsylvania, the Progressives had initially counted on the National Miners Union (NMU) for support. The NMU was aligned with the Communist Party and acted as the radical alternative to the United Mine Workers in the anthracite coal fields of Pennsylvania, Eastern Kentucky, and other isolated fields. The union faced fierce opposition from all sides, as they were constantly red baited, and operators often refused to acknowledge them as the collective bargaining agents for miners who held membership cards. Progressive reports covering the first years of the union mentioned that organizers ventured into the fields in attempts to raise awareness of their shared opposition to John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers, but ultimately came up short. The NMU refused to join forces, and for good reason. The NMU would have been forced into abandoning their Communist Party ties to affiliate with the Progressives, something union leaders were against. The Pennsylvania coal fields were also primarily worked by Americans or Irish-Americans, where as the Progressives received strong

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<sup>32</sup> Minutes from the First Constitutional Convention of the Progressive Miners of America, Folder 1, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>33</sup> Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer to the Delegates Composing the Second Biennial and Third Constitutional Convention, District 1, Progressive Miners of America, Folder 3, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

support from Italian-American communities. Regardless, the NMU disbanded in 1935 and was largely absorbed by the United Mine Workers.<sup>34</sup>

In other fields that the Progressives attempted to enter, such as Arkansas and Tennessee, they were met with similar responses. Miners seemed enthusiastic about the message that Progressive organizers espoused, and discontent towards John L. Lewis was very high. However, miners were either locked into contracts under United Mine Workers banners or they feared the risks associated with breaking with the much larger and established UMW. Those who did affiliate were unable to sign contracts and quickly folded or rejoined the United Mine Workers.<sup>35</sup>

Some, mostly from within the Progressive Miners, attribute the challenge from the Progressive Miners and other independent groups into forcing the United Mine Workers into organizing previously unorganized, or recently lost, coal fields in fear that a rival organization would instead claim those miners. In areas like the Appalachian Coal Fields, the United Mine Workers had vanished in the 1920s after making major gains a decade before. However, changes in federal law allowed industrial unions to quickly expand and receive federal protection for their rights to organize and collectively bargain. Many coal operators saw the writing on the wall. Assuming that a unionized workforce may be unavoidable, they accepted the United Mine Workers over their more radical alternatives (The Progressives, NMU). This practice came under great scrutiny in the late 1930s, as the Progressives mounted challenges to these contracts with support from the American Federation of Labor.

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<sup>34</sup> Pat Toohey, Interview by Linda and Paul Nyden, August 6 1972, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>35</sup> Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer to the Delegates Composing the Second Biennial and the Third Constitutional Convention, District 1, Progressive Miners of America, Folder 3, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.



## Violence Towards Progressive Miners

Also harming the Progressives was their image as a group of violent radicals. State and federal officials were hostile to the Progressives. The expansion of strike actions in Illinois brought about tensions in the coal communities and on the picket lines as the struggle between the United Mine Workers and Progressive Miners increasingly looked like a civil war. Towns split in support over the two unions, friends and family stopped speaking to each other, and random acts of violence became commonplace in areas of high tension. While much of the early violence seemed to have been aimed at Progressives by law enforcement or United Mine Workers members, the Progressives increasingly fought back and actively instigated the violence themselves. In January 1933, ten coal miners were shot just outside of Springfield in a melee of violence that left a special deputy critically injured.<sup>36</sup>

One of the most famous episodes of violence occurred in Springfield in 1935. A car opened fire on a crowd of Progressive Miners and their families who were leaving a meeting at their local headquarters. In the ensuing shooting, one man was killed and several were injured. Three men were initially charged with the shootings, one of whom was United Mine Workers District President Ray Edmondson. Edmondson had been an early advocate of the rank and file movements in Illinois but had ultimately sided with the United Mine Workers. Edmondson agreed to surrender himself to local law enforcement from a hospital bed as he was recovering from a gunshot wound in the neck allegedly received at the scene.<sup>37</sup> John Fancher claimed to have been at the meeting and had seen Ray Edmondson driving a vehicle that circled the block several times before opening fire on the Progressive crowd. Fancher noted that by 1935 most miners

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<sup>36</sup> "Ten Shot in Mine Riot," *New York Times*, 8 January, 1933, 16.

<sup>37</sup> "Union Head Held in Mine Riot Death," *New York Times*, 23 April, 1935, 3.

were carrying weapons and were more than ready to use them against members of the United Mine Workers.<sup>38</sup>

While violence like the April 22 shooting in Springfield made national news, personal stories help show the widespread nature of the violent wars in Illinois during the 1930s. Frank Borgognoni, whose father operated a “Progressive” bar that hosted meetings between Progressives and coal operators, remembered his father mounting a machine gun on the roof of the building for protection (similar to the models used by American soldiers in World War I). He said that it was only used once, when a car speed up driving straight at the front doors of the bar. The machine gunner opened fire, killing the driver and stopping the vehicle in its tracks. Borgognoni claimed that the driver was an employee of Peabody Coal and a known thug.<sup>39</sup>

Jack Battuello remembered a different kind of violence. He claimed that one night after coming home from playing cards at a bar affiliated with the Progressive Miners, he noticed a vehicle driving by his home every few minutes, slowing down for a few seconds as it neared his house and then speeding off. Battuello grabbed a shotgun and waited in the darkness of his house, as the car eventually stopped and the driver approached his home. After identifying himself as Curly Jones, a fellow Progressive Miner, Battuello told him he was going nowhere with Jones and that they would speak more the next day. The following morning, Battuello found Jones at the local union hall and shoved a pistol in his face, demanding names and reasons for the surveillance the previous night. Battuello refused to name who had ordered the surveillance

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<sup>38</sup> John Fancher, Interview by Barbara Herndon, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>39</sup> Frank Borgognoni, Interview by Kevin Corley, 1986, Oral History Collection at University of Illinois-Springfield, Springfield, IL.

forty years later when the oral history was conducted, but he said he told Jones he would murder him if he ever tried to walk on the same side of the street.<sup>40</sup>

Battuello also mentioned a personal rivalry with United Mine Workers District President Ray Edmondson. Battuello claimed to have organized armed ambushes for Edmondson when he traveled through Gillespie or was on an isolated stretch of highway. Edmondson, to be fair, also allegedly organized ambushes for Battuello, who claimed to have never feared Edmondson. Once, he claimed, he knocked on the door of Edmondson's local union hall to ask for a release of funds from locals that had switched to the Progressive Miners and to ask if Edmondson wished to join as well. Battuello claimed that, partially out of respect for the gutsy move, Edmondson gave the Progressives access to their frozen funds and allowed Battuello to speak before his local.<sup>41</sup>

Frank Fries, who served as Macoupin County Sherriff during the initial outbreak of violence, recounts only two instances of violence during his tenure as head of the county law enforcement. Both were bombings, and Fries claimed to have unfortunately caused one of them. A local priest had ridiculed Fries for supporting the Progressives and denounced them as Communists. Fries had told some friends within the Macoupin County Progressive organization about the altercation, and the priest's house was bombed that very night. Sherriff Fries claimed to have never passed on information to the Progressives after that event, though he remained a supporter of their cause from a distance.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Jack Battelo, Interview by Barbara Herndon, March 13 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>41</sup> Jack Battelo, Interview by Barbara Herndon, March 13 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>42</sup> Frank Fries, Interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherviasky, 1973, Archives at University of Illinois-Springfield, Springfield, IL.

These stories should not be taken as anomalies, but typical events that often did not make it past local news or a small article in the *Progressive Miner*. Eugene Hughes, a Progressive Miner from Harrisburg, Illinois, recalled a bombing on the steps of the local Catholic Church that had targeted Progressive Miners and their families. He also noted the regular violence on the picket lines as the United Mine Workers acted as strike breakers against the Progressives who were fighting for recognition between 1932 and 1934.<sup>43</sup> Irene Allard recalled bombings that commonly derailed, or at least halted, trains carrying coal from mines operating on the wrong side of the conflict. She felt that these examples of violent action were used to justify the persecution of her husband, Gerry, and others like him within the Progressive organization.<sup>44</sup> Catherine Derorre Mass, only a young child at the time of the conflict, remembered a girl her age being killed as a bystander in a large crowd at a violent picket line in late 1932. The girl who was killed was the daughter of a United Mine Worker member, and Catherine's father forbid her from attending her friend's funeral over fear of violence.<sup>45</sup> John Fancher noted that when he replaced Dan McGill as a member of the Executive Board it was because McGill was sick and recovering from a gunshot wound.<sup>46</sup> McGill would face constant legal troubles over "rioting" in Franklin County and was shot at several times over the 1930s. Ray Tombazzi, a miner loosely affiliated with the militant faction and representing the Franklin County miners, was shot several

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<sup>43</sup> Eugene Hughes, Interview by Dean H. Campbell, 1972, Oral History Collection at University of Illinois-Springfield, Springfield, IL.

<sup>44</sup> Irene Allard, Interview by Barbara Herndon and Nick Cherniavsky, 1974, Oral History Collection, Brookens Library, University of Illinois, Springfield, IL.

<sup>45</sup> Catherine Derorre Mans, Interview by Nick Cherniavsky, February 17 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>46</sup> John Fancher, Interview by Barbara Herndon, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

times, had his home bombed twice, and was arrested multiple times during this turbulent period in the union's history.<sup>47</sup>

Art Gramlich's story speaks to this part of the history of the Progressive Miners of America better than any other. Gramlich was a Springfield area miner, beginning work in the coal mines in 1919 as a member of the United Mine Workers. He had joined the Progressives in 1932 and was a featured member of the pickets around Springfield against Peabody Coal, who, operated five mines around Springfield. Gramlich was fired upon several times in the early pickets in the area. He described himself as somewhat of a rabble rouser, fighting members of the United Mine Workers in the streets or taverns of Springfield when he saw fit. In his own words, "We tackled them on the streets or around the taverns at night. At out-of-the-way taverns, you know, you would walk in where they was at and right away you could smell them and you let them know them know that they had a certain odor about them, and goddamn, the hell would start." He paid the price, though, when his father was assassinated in 1936. The assumption of the police was that Art Gramlich had been the intended target and his father had been killed by a rifle shot through a window on account of mistaken identity.<sup>48</sup>

### **Decline and the Decision to Affiliate with the AFL**

By the mid 1930s, then, the Progressives were in a precarious position. The fight within Illinois was largely dying down, as most mines were back to work with the union that the operators wanted to have. Major operators, like Peabody Coal and Saline Coal, were able to play the two unions off against each other to sign contracts at the local level that benefited them most.

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<sup>47</sup> Ray Tombazzi, Interview by R. C. Rhodes, 1972, Oral History Collection, University of Illinois-Springfield, Springfield, IL.

<sup>48</sup> Art Gramlich, Interview by Rex Rhodes, 1972, Oral History Collection at University of Illinois-Springfield, Springfield, IL.

In times of strikes, both unions crossed picket lines to the detriment of their fellow miner. The long-strikes led by the Progressives, with some going back to early 1933, were all but lost and members shifted to new areas or left the state or industry entirely. Most of the radicals who had helped define the early organizations rank and file ideology were also gone. No more United Mine Workers locals were flipping to join the Progressives as they had in 1932 and 1933. Instead, the Progressives found that their locals were now slowly moving back to the United Mine Workers and abandoning the cause they had begun in 1932.

After several years of walking the picket lines with the Progressive Miners, Larry Mantowich went back to the United Mine Workers and crossed picket lines to work in the mines again. Mantowich had been on strike since 1932, before the formation of the Progressives or the stealing of the ballots. He also recalled that, with time, the rest of the Springfield coal fields followed him back into the United Mine Workers. Larry mentioned that to rejoin the United Mine Workers meant to ostracize oneself from friends and family who stayed loyal to the Progressives.<sup>49</sup> John Fancher claimed that after 1932 (the year he joined the Progressive Miners) he never worked in a coal mine again. While he acknowledges that the spread of mechanization contributed to the lack of jobs, local coal producers, especially Peabody, had also blacklisted the Progressives. Fancher served, instead, in the leadership of the Progressives as an Executive Board member, a vice-president, and later as a special investigator for the American Federation of Labor.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Larry Mantowich, Interview by Barbara Herndon, February 19 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>50</sup> John Fancher, Interview by Barbara Herndon, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

Hope for expansion beyond Illinois seemed all but gone by this point. The 1936 Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer called the organizing drives outside of Illinois a failure. West Virginia had been identified as an ideal site for expansion, but the Progressives only faced defeats there initially. The West Virginia Miners Union had collapsed by early 1933 after the failure of large strikes in the Kanawha coal fields, and many local miners there feared putting their hopes in a new, militant upstart union when the United Mine Workers offered a safer alternative. Other states had rejected the Progressives altogether, claiming that if they wanted to be independent they would do so on their own terms with their own local leadership. Membership also declined, as the report noted that it fell from the previous of fifteen thousand dues-paying members to around thirteen thousand five hundred. The locals had openly rebelled over continuing to pay into the *Progressive Miner's* publishing fund, and the paper was moved to a twice a month publication to attempt to reduce costs. Relief and legal fees had close to bankrupted the union as well, as the District leadership's strategy of battling with the courts had almost entirely backfired and left the union paying tens of thousands in court fees and fines towards coal companies.<sup>51</sup>

The union's ability to negotiate contracts also weakened greatly by 1937. Rather than negotiate a new contract in April of 1935, they signed an extension of their previous 1933 contract. Wages rose a little, from five dollars a day to five dollars and fifty cents a day, and the work day was slightly decreased from eight hours to seven hours.<sup>52</sup> While the Progressives made gains, these mirrored gains made by the United Mine Workers. This contract was set to expire in

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<sup>51</sup> Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer to the Delegates Composing the Third Biennial and Fourth Constitutional Convention, Folder 3, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>52</sup> Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer to the Delegates Composing the Second Biennial and Third Constitutional Convention, District 1, Progressive Miners of America, Folder 3, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

1937, and again the Progressives were unable to sign a new contract before its expiration in April. A strike began in July, after operators of mechanized mines demanded an additional thirty minutes of work to be added onto the seven-hour day. The strike ended in August when the demands were dropped, but Progressives were unable to win any new gains in the 1937 contract.<sup>53</sup> Many in the rank and file were disappointed in these negotiations, and the scale committee that set standards for negotiation experienced much turnover in this period, perhaps contributing to their weakness in negotiation. The Progressives had again failed to negotiate a contract before the United Mine Workers, as they feared not being able to at least mirror the gains their rivals had made.

Divisions in the national labor movement, though, offered new opportunity for the Progressive Miners. The American Federation of Labor faced, at first, internal opposition on the issue of craft and industrial organizing. The AFL was a craft-based federation that promoted the unionizing of highly-skilled workers. This ideology meant that hundreds of thousands of semi-skilled and unskilled workers were left out of the labor movement and were ignored by the established craft unions. However, with the rise of industrialization and mechanization nationally, growing calls were made for workers to organize based on industry instead of skillset. John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers led this internal opposition, first forming the Committee of Industrial Organizations in late 1935. They sought to reform the AFL from within and establish protected rights for newer, industrial unions to make gains in the manufacturing industries that began to control the American economy. This movement was fiercely opposed by

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<sup>53</sup> Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer to the Delegates Composing the Third Biennial and Fourth Constitutional Convention, Folder 3, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.



the entrenched craft union leaders, who began to call for the removal of these organizations entirely from the AFL.<sup>54</sup>

As the writing became clear on the wall that a split between craft and industrial unions would occur within the AFL, the Progressive Miners of America saw an opening. If the United Mine Workers left the AFL, the Progressives could affiliate and become the legitimate authority for unionized coal miners. The AFL, particularly President William Green (with his background with the United Mine Workers) had previously spoken out against the Progressives and denounced them as nothing more than a dual union movement. Some rank-and-file members, such as the remainder of the radical faction that was still active in the Progressive union, opposed affiliation with American Federation of Labor. President Percy had condemned the AFL in speeches dating back to 1933, mostly because of their perceived alliance with the United Mine Workers against the democratic rights of the rank-and-file.<sup>55</sup> If the Progressives were to affiliate with the AFL, it would have to be ratified by a popular vote among members and the AFL would have to officially expel the United Mine Workers from their ranks.

Joe Ozanic, made President of the Progressive Miners of America in 1936, and John Fancher, then serving as the Vice President, were the spearhead of the team that negotiated affiliation with the American Federation of Labor after a resolution passed before the constitutional convention stating that if asked, the Progressives would consider affiliation with the AFL. This coincided with the AFL penalizing the unions in the Committee of Industrial Organizations just short of expelling them officially. These unions responded by forming a new

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<sup>54</sup> Melvin Dubofsky and Warren Van Thine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 148-161.

<sup>55</sup> President Percy's Speech to the Delegates Assembled First District Convention on Scale Matters, Folder 2, Box 2, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

organization, outside of the AFL, known as the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Ozanic appeared before the 1937 American Federation of Labor Convention, in Denver, speaking before the floor on the mine wars that had been occurring in Illinois for close to five years by this point. Ozanic claimed to have spoken the name of every miner who had been martyred and accused many members of the United Mine Workers (including Lewis) for being involved in their murders. President Ozanic claimed that he was warned not to leave his hotel room for the remainder of the convention for the remarks he made.<sup>56</sup>

Several months passed before the American Federation of Labor acted on the issue. Fancher and Ozanic met officials in Cleveland in 1937 to push the issue further, setting ground rules for what an affiliation would look like and how the organization would have to change.<sup>57</sup> One such issue was a proposed name change, from the Progressive Miners of America to the Progressive Mine Workers of America. AFL officials thought the PMA name was soiled by its links to violence and radicalism, and that a new name would give the organization a fresh start. Ozanic would also become the appointed head of the new Progressive Mine Workers of America. This was a setback to the Progressive rank-and-file. Much of the opposition to Lewis had focused on his autocratic reelection process and control of positions around him. While it was initially believed that elections would be held for a long-term International President, Ozanic maintained his position into the 1940s.

There was also some rank-and-file opposition to affiliation with the American Federation of Labor. Some felt that it was as an endorsement of craft unionism. Many miners regretted their

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<sup>56</sup> Joe Ozanic, Interview by Barbara Herndon, March 21 1970s, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>57</sup> John Fancher, Interview by Barbara Herndon, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV. Fancher would also claim that the AFL officials were rude and dismissive towards the Progressive officers attending meetings.

affiliation with the AFL, believing that the CIO would have represented them better and given them more support and space to organize. Entry into the AFL positioned the Progressive Miners between the growing conflict between craft and industrial unions, as well as between John L. Lewis and William Green.<sup>58</sup>

Affiliation was a hot issue and not all fell in line with the leadership's beliefs that this was the best plan moving forward. A sit-down strike in an underground mine in Wilsonville, led by local President Jack Battuello, captured national news in the midst of the negotiations for the Progressives' affiliation with the AFL. While the wildcat strike was over a local issue involving the dismissal of a popular Progressive pit committeeman, the strike dragged on and became an embarrassment for the Progressive leadership. The newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), sent aid to the striking miners and offered them words of encouragement.<sup>59</sup> The Progressive leadership opposed the wildcat strike and ordered the miners back to work, to no avail. Battuello was a master in managing the sit-down strike and maintaining media attention. He brought attention to the coal operators refusing the miners' access to their religious leaders on their various days of worship, creating a national news story in the process. The strike ended after several days with no major victories, leaving spectators confused as to what the nature of the strike had been.<sup>60</sup>

The decision to accept affiliation was put to vote, similar to the 1932 referendums that led to the establishment of the Progressive Miners. District leaders, like Claude Percy, President Joe Ozanic, and William Keck (who had just been acquitted of charges related to the train bombings)

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<sup>58</sup> Melvin Dubofsky and Warren Van Thine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986) 163-168.

<sup>59</sup> "Sit-In Miners Get Offer of C.I.O. Aid," *New York Times*, 24 May, 1937, 13.

<sup>60</sup> Jack Battello, Interview by Barbara Herndon, March 13 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

rallied support for AFL affiliation and begun to preach the importance of national organizing and how affiliation would aid in that endeavor. Others, like the remainder of the radical minority that had helped establish the union, rallied against the decision to affiliate. The votes returned a massive amount of support for affiliation from the Illinois membership. The Progressive Miners of America would be no more, as the Progressive Mineworkers of America had taken their place. The AFL came through on its promises and donated fifty thousand dollars towards a national organizing campaign.<sup>61</sup> William Green publicly stated that the Progressives would not engage in the raiding of United Mine Workers' locals, demanding that this organizing drive would have to occur mostly in the unorganized fields.<sup>62</sup> Organizers targeted the coal fields of Appalachia and the West. Locals in West Virginia and Kentucky emerged before the end of 1938 and the Progressives saw immediate positive benefits to their affiliation with the AFL.<sup>63</sup>

The Progressives, then, ended 1938 after six straight years of fighting in a precarious position. AFL affiliation reaped immediate rewards as membership rose and the union's treasury benefited from financial donations. Costly legal fees were now shared with the AFL itself and access was given to a team of experienced labor lawyers that the Progressives previously lacked. Progressive leadership believed that the United Mine Workers was more vulnerable than ever and that the resources were finally in their possession to win their civil war against their rival mining union. The future, it seemed, was bright for the young Illinois mining union. However, long-term issues were taking their toll on the Progressives. Six years of violence had stained their

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<sup>61</sup> Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer to the Delegates Composing the Third Biennial and Fourth Constitutional Convention, Folder 3, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>62</sup> "Green Bars Invasion of C.I.O. Mining Field," *New York Times*, 28 May, 1937, 14.

<sup>63</sup> Joint Report of the President, Vice-President, and Secretary-Treasurer to the Delegates Composing the Third Biennial and Fourth Constitutional Convention, Folder 3, Box 1, Progressive Mineworkers of America Archives, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.

reputation more than a name change would fix, and violence again flared up when the Progressives appeared in West Virginia and Western Kentucky. Their contracts were mirrored on the United Mine Workers and they were never able to boast of major improvements when in comparison. The expulsion of the radical minority weakened the Progressives in their rank-and-file militancy and led to acceptance of many of the ideas they had despised in 1932. The Progressives were in a much better position by the end of 1938, but appeared more hollow in the ideas and freedoms that made them a unique option when compared to their United Mine Workers rivals.

## Chapter V - Conclusion

What should one make of the Progressive Miners of America? At face value, they seemed to have been a long time coming. The Progressives came not from the theft of ballots, the forcing of a wage cut after years of national decline, or even the violence of Mulkeytown. These events truly had an impact, but the roots of the Progressives went beyond that. Years of internal struggles had paved their way as coal miners, in Illinois and beyond, fought to retain their democratic and autonomous roots. In many ways this mirrored the struggle occurring underground as miners fought against mechanization and a changing work environment that threatened their freedom. The internal disputes that marked the history of the United Mine Workers throughout the 1920s were formed around idealistic and charismatic leaders who, much like John L. Lewis, assured the miners that they had miners' best interests were at heart. The Progressives represented a rejection of this style of unionism altogether and structured their new organization to be true to what they felt the United Mine Workers had been founded on: democracy in the work place and in the union, a shift of power from the District and International to the Local, and a rejection of the trend of centralization of power within the labor movement. The miners of Illinois were diverse and represented changes in the American mining industry. They worked in operations ranging from half a dozen men to multiple thousand-man operations owned by large corporations. Strip-mines that would overtake the industry in just a few decades were well represented in this group as well. This diverse group of men, disgruntled with both their work and their union for over a decade now decided that enough was enough and decided to embrace their ideals of what the labor movement could possibly be.

The unfolding events were idealistic and violent as the miners of Illinois struggled over the decision to reject their roots going back to the nineteenth century or to embrace the current United Mine Workers and John L. Lewis's shady, strong-armed tactics. When all was said and done, twenty-two Progressive Miners and their family members lay dead. Twenty-one of these are recognized martyrs by the Progressive Miners, with the final casualty coming in 1937 after the mine wars had died down. Dozens more were injured in their homes, union halls, churches, and on picket lines across the state. Homes, businesses, and union halls affiliated with members from both the United Mine Workers and the Progressive Miners of America were destroyed. Railroad bombings involved the FBI and federal law enforcement and resulted in the imprisonment of dozens of Progressives. Thousands of dollars of man hours were lost as Progressives picketed throughout Franklin and Christian Counties in the hopes of putting pressure on coal operators that ignored their support among the miners. For all of this death and destruction, the Progressives ultimately lost the battle for the hearts and minds of coal miners in the United States. UMW membership and influence continued to soar while the Progressives were forced to scrounge for new membership in unorganized, small-scale operations.

The legacy of the Progressives, if it was not ultimately tied to the violence they participated in, was in their attempts to win battles in court rooms and in meetings with government officials. Rather than rely on the examples of direct action undertaken by rank-and-file members across Illinois, a conservative leadership poured all efforts into fighting battles in the District Courts and with petitions to the newly formed National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). PMA members alleged corruption as the NLRB repeatedly ignored their requests, delayed hearings and investigations, and did everything possible to hinder progress for the young labor union. The financial strain on the Progressives of pursuing a legal avenue to resolve their

problems and from constant defense from criminal charges only served to weaken the Progressives ability to put resources into expansion in both Illinois and nationally. Similarly, the Progressives lacked the clout to truly influence politics beyond a local community scale. While they did gain some admirers early on in Frank Fries, and later in men like Rush Holt, they lacked the network of allies that the United Mine Workers had at the state and national level. The building of the alliance between Democrats and organized labor only served to hurt the Progressives more. The PMA, then, was left as radical outsiders looking in on the mainstream labor movement and the benefits they gained.

Should the Progressives be classified as a failure? It is true that they never overtook and replaced the United Mine Workers as the sole representative of coal miners. Many Illinois miners later rejoined the United Mine Workers or accepted that they would never mine coal again. Jack Battuello, the rebel of Local 1 who had been exiled for working alongside United Mine Workers leaders in freeing the Du Quoin Boys, rejoined the United Mine Workers and worked for District 50 in the 1940s. In this capacity, he worked under Ray Edmundson, the alleged perpetrator of several shootings of Progressive meetings who Battuello had attempted to ambush years before. Battuello also had familiar help in organizing for District 50 from Claude Percy, the former president and district officer of the PMA.<sup>1</sup> More Progressive Miners and their families, such as Irene Allard, a begrudging Battuello, and former sheriff and Congressman Frank Fries all admitted to one extent or another that Lewis made gains for American coal miners. If their goal of overtaking the UMW was a loss and their anger towards John L. Lewis tempered with time, what is the lasting influence of the Progressives?

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Battelo, interview by Barbara Herndon, March 13 1975, Oral History Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Center, Morgantown, WV.



In truth, the lasting impact of the Progressives was a last chance effort to endorse democracy in the coal fields and rank-and-file control before decades of silence on the issue. A debate that threatened to rip the United Mine Workers apart for almost two decades was resolved with an endorsement by hundreds of thousands of coal miners of John L. Lewis's ruthless and dictatorial tactics in ruling the UMW. The Progressives were one final attempt, by a true rank-and-file revolt, to force a choice between democracy and obedience. While the UMW had faced external threats since their inception from groups like the Industrial Workers of the World, the Western Federation of Miners, and the National Miners Union, the Progressives were a unique challenge. They inherited a long tradition, both in Illinois and across the nation, of commitment to reform from within the UMW, but recognized that members finally decided enough was enough. They were disgusted enough with the union that they were raised to respect almost religiously within families representing generations of Illinois miners that they struck out on their own to build something entirely new.

This new creation was given the same heritage that the UMW had but no longer rightfully deserved. The PMA members, with long histories within the UMW, brought the heritage of Virden, Ludlow, and Blair Mountain with them. They acknowledged the rebel leaders that came before them, like Adolph Germer, Alexander Howat, John Brophy, and Frank Farrington, but simultaneously rejected building a cult of personality around any labor leader. The Progressives truly believed that any president or district officer was nothing more than a miner, a comrade, and an equal. They debated new ideas as well; within the context of the Great Depression debates over Communism, Socialism, and capitalism played out in convention halls and picket lines. The Progressives prided themselves on building a union open to any idea and that any individual could impact his local just by becoming involved. A militant rank-and-file,

with local leaders who were willing to put their lives on the line for the Progressive cause, ensured that the district office never reached Lewis's levels of authoritative control. By 1940, though, even these lofty ideas were called deeply into question. The radical heritage and toleration of Communist and Socialist elements tempered with time though, and militant individuals were forced out of the Progressive ranks in attempts to maintain order and distance themselves from red-baiting allegations. The district and international officers reacted to internal threats in similar ways that John L. Lewis had throughout the 1920s. This showed a departure from some of the idealism that marked the inspiration behind the Progressives.

The idealism that the Progressives embodied, though defeated by 1940 within the union, did not go away. Many Progressive members attributed their actions as being a major influence to the Miners for Democracy movement that was sweeping through the UMW at the time many oral histories with surviving Progressive founders were conducted. The miners followed these developments closely and pointed out similarities between their struggles and the struggles of miners in the 1970s. Tony Boyle was nothing more than John L. Lewis with a different name to this older generation of union miners. Arnold Miller, the UMW President elected on the Miners for Democracy ticket, attended a Progressive rally in the Kanawha coal fields during the late 1930s, something that Progressive members took pride in. Joe Ozanic, with help from some of the Progressive members still active in union politics, contacted Miller and presented him with a complete history of the Progressives and their struggles as a way to highlight the battles that supporters of union democracy had gone through before.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Ozanic Sr., interview by Rex Rhodes, Barbara Herndon, and Nick Cherniavsky, 1972 and 1974, Archives at University of Illinois at Springfield, Springfield, Illinois.

The Progressives, also, failed in their attempts to utilize federal legislation aimed at making it easier for trade unions to organize. NLRB cases were overwhelmingly losses to both financial accounts and membership. The few cases that ruled in favor of the PMA were drawn out and had little affect on the ground situation. The federal government actively sided with the UMW in enforcing regulation of the bituminous coal industry keeping the Progressives locked out of crucial conversations that could have helped gain new members outside of Illinois. Their failures in this regard stand as strong criticism of the federal labor legislation of the New Deal. The attention in historiography is often focused on the successes that industrial unionism made under the NLRA, such as the rapid expansion of the United Auto Workers or the Steel Workers Organizing Committee. An industrial union like the PMA being locked out of new regulations showed the negative effects independent and radical unions had in relation to the Democratic Party and its alliance with the CIO. It highlights the fact that the NLRA would help industrial unions expand only when they were presentable and acceptable to a majority of Americans. The NLRA spelled the end for a radical era of schisms and independence that, in many ways, ended with the PMA and their generation of militants.

The Progressives, then, succeeded ultimately in one of their goals: to demand democracy for coal miners nationwide. While their external challenge to the UMW failed, their demands were ultimately accepted by the rank-and-file of the United Mine Workers. Their hatred towards John L. Lewis on a personal level went away as time passed, but his legacy has continued to be debated long-after the Progressives faded from view. In many ways, the same issues that the Progressives opposed Lewis over are the frontline of the debate for Lewis's legacy. This fact vindicates the extent that Progressive rank-and-file members went to in 1932 to demand their rights to democracy in the work place. While the idealism of the Progressives fell short in the

1930s and they were never able to overcome their rivals, the themes they supported continued to be represented within the rank-and-file coal miners of America.

It is shortsighted to broadly consider the Progressive Miners of America as either a failure or a success. Their goals were too broad, and their successes and failures were a mixed bag. However, with a wider context and the inclusion of individual accounts of the events that tore Illinois apart the Progressives can be described as what they truly were. They were young and old, Conservative and Communist, American and immigrant, Christian and Agnostic. They worked in a diversity of mining operations unrivaled for the time period. They represented a diverse background and upbringing that centered around the religious reverence of trade unionism, and when that religion was threatened they made it their own. They rejected charismatic leaders and their ideas in favor of creating something new and unique that would be entirely theirs. This was a major risk for the miners and their families, but they took those risks regardless. Trade unionism was important enough to these workers that they risked their jobs, pensions, and safety for a chance at a better future. Those successes and failures have been outlined in detail, but it is safe to say that many of these miners would make the same decisions they made in 1932 again.

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