

The Coal Strike of 1902 – Turning Point in U.S. Policy

The Federal Government, with the Commissioner of Labor in a fact finding role, acted as a 'neutral' for the first time in contributing to settlement of the bitter coal strike

By Jonathan Grossman

On Friday, October 3, 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt called a precedent-shattering meeting at the temporary White House at 22 Lafayette Place, Washington, D.C. A great strike in the anthracite coal fields of Pennsylvania threatened a coal famine. The President feared "untold misery . . . with the certainty of riots which might develop into social war."¹ Although he had no legal right to intervene, he sent telegrams to both sides summoning them to Washington to discuss the problem.

Roosevelt, who had been injured a month earlier when his carriage was hit by a trolley car, sat in his wheelchair pleading with representatives of management and labor. "With all the earnestness there is in me . . .," the President urged, "I ask that there be an immediate resumption of operations in the coal mines in some such way as will . . . meet the crying needs of the people." He appealed to the patriotism of the contestants to make "individual sacrifices for the general good."²

This meeting marked the turn of the U.S. Government from strikebreaker to peacemaker in industrial disputes. In the 19th century, presidents, if they acted at all, tended to side with employers. Andrew Jackson became a strikebreaker in 1834 when he sent troops to the construction sites of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal.³ War Department employees operated the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad during the Civil War.⁴ In the violent rail strikes of 1877, Rutherford B. Hayes sent troops to prevent obstruction of the mails.⁵ Grover Cleveland used soldiers to break the Pullman strike of 1894.⁶

Here and there a ray of neutrality broke through the anti labor atmosphere. Congress established a Bureau of Labor in 1884, which was the forerunner of the present Department of Labor, Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, and Bureau of Labor Statistics. In 1886, Cleveland asked Congress to "engraft" on the Bureau of Labor a commission to prevent major strikes. In 1888, Congress passed a law aimed at promoting industrial peace in the railroad industry. After the Pullman strike, U.S. Commissioner of Labor Carroll D. Wright headed a group which made a colorless but honest report of the dispute. One recommendation provided the basis for the Erdman Act of 1898, under which the Commissioner of Labor and the Chairman of the Interstate Commerce Commission tried to mediate railroad strikes. The law had not yet been applied when a new Federal policy erupted from the industrial warfare in the coalfields in 1900 and 1902.⁷

The groundwork for the 1900 anthracite coal strike was laid by the unexpected results of strikes in the bituminous or soft coalfields in 1897. A depression in 1893 forced down wages and, according to a Pennsylvania legislative committee, many miners lived "like sheep in shambles." A spontaneous uprising had forced many mine owners to sign a contract with the United Mine Workers. Both sides struck a bonanza as operators raised both wages and prices. Coal companies prospered, and union membership soared from 10,000 to 115,000.⁸

John Mitchell, who at the age of 28 became president of the United Mine Workers in 1898, hoped to achieve the same kind of success in the anthracite or hard coalfields of Pennsylvania. Anthracite coal at the turn of the century was an unusual business. Unlike soft coal, anthracite was a natural monopoly heavily concentrated in a few hundred square miles in five counties in Pennsylvania. Anthracite coal, because it burned cleaner than soft coal, had become the main heating fuel in many Eastern cities. Rivalry for control of the industry led to over expansion, violent business fluctuations, and eventually control by a few large independent mine owners, coal railroads, and bankers.

For miners the work was hard, intermittent, and hazardous. To keep wages low, operators flooded the coalfields with immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. The men were of 14 different nationalities, spoke different languages, and had different customs. Of 150,000 workers, only 8,000 belonged to the United Mine Workers. But Mitchell hoped that the anthracite industry would negotiate with the union in order to reduce competition.

Mitchell underestimated the opposition of the mine operators, and the operators underestimated the militancy of their workers. In August 1900, the union drew up demands and asked for a conference. The operators refused to deal with the union. Mitchell offered to have the dispute arbitrated. The operators rejected the offer. Mitchell reluctantly called a strike on September 17, 1900. He was apprehensive about the miners' response. But "poetic justice has been meted out," he exultantly recalled. The non-English speaking miners, introduced to break labor organizations, had become staunch supporters of the United Mine Workers.⁹

The White House was caught off guard by this major strike on the eve of a Presidential campaign. President William McKinley was running for reelection against William Jennings Bryan under the slogan of "Four Years More of the Full Dinner Pail." Some newspapers charged that the strike was fostered by "conspirators working in the interests of Bryan." Mitchell repeatedly denied that politics motivated the strike, but he admitted that the forthcoming election "proved of incalculable assistance to the mineworkers."¹⁰

Senator Marcus A. Hanna, political "kingmaker," led the campaign for conciliation. "Uncle Mark" had become a champion of industrial peace and argued that responsible trade unions would wean workers away from Democrats and radicals. Hanna worked with banker J. P. Morgan to persuade coal railroad presidents of "the dangers that would accrue from the election of Mr. Bryan to the Presidency."¹¹ George Baer, president of a coal railroad, claimed that both McKinley and Hanna had warned him that the coal strike could seriously hurt their party at the polls.¹²

Under political pressure, coal operators posted a pay increase and agreed to a grievance procedure but refused to recognize the union. John Mitchell, though boasting that the workers were victorious, accepted half a loaf as better than none and dropped the fight for union recognition. He called off the 6-week strike on October 29, a week before the Presidential election of 1900. McKinley won by a wide margin. Although its motives may have been partisan, the Administration was setting the stage for a new role for the Federal Government as a peacemaker rather than a strikebreaker in industrial conflicts.¹³

The coal strike of 1902

The strike of 1900 was the prelude to a larger drama--the great anthracite coal strike of 1902. Restless miners demanded more pay and shorter hours, while the mine operators complained that profits were low, and that the union destroyed discipline. When the owners refused to negotiate with the union, miners appealed to President Roosevelt to call a special session of Congress. The operators, on the other hand, resented the Federal mediation which had brought about the shotgun agreement of 1900, and they bristled at the idea of renewed Federal interference.¹⁴

John Mitchell was frustrated by the refusal of employers to deal with the union. He proposed mediation through the National Civic Federation and if that were not acceptable then a committee of eminent clergymen should report on conditions in the coalfields. George Baer expressed the sentiment of many coal operators when he replied, "Anthracite mining is a business, and not a religious, sentimental, or academic proposition.... I could not if I would delegate this business management to even so highly a respectable body as the Civic Federation, nor can I call to my aid . . . the eminent prelates you have named."¹⁵

The miners struck on May 12, 1902. There was hope for a settlement as long as firemen, engineers, and pumpmen remained at work. But when these maintenance crews walked out on June 2, both sides settled down for a long and bitter fight. Commissioner of Labor Carroll D. Wright wrote that of 147,000 strikers, 30,000 soon left the region, and of these 8,000 to 10,000 returned to Europe.¹⁶ Although Mitchell exhorted

the miners to strike peaceably, strikers attacked scabs, terrorized their families, and lashed out at private police forces and armed guards hired by mine owners.¹⁷

The political climate had changed between the coal strikes of 1900 and 1902. McKinley had been assassinated, and Hanna had lost much of his influence. Theodore Roosevelt, who stepped into the breach, believed that both capital and labor had responsibilities to the public.

Roosevelt's quandary

As the strike dragged on, Roosevelt became more and more restless. His attorney general, Philander Knox, told him that the strike was not his concern. Roosevelt repeatedly raised the issue, but Knox continued to advise the President that he had no right to intervene.²³

The coal operators were determined to break the strike and rejected all union offers to conciliate on the grounds that there was nothing to talk about. When George Baer, spokesman for the operators, received a letter appealing to him as a good Christian to make concessions, he replied that the "rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for--not by the labor agitators, but by the Christian men to whom God in His infinite wisdom has given the control of the property interests of the country." Union supporters brilliantly exploited this "divine right" letter of "George the Last" and public opinion turned against the operators.²⁴ Perhaps for the first time in American history, a distinguished scholar wrote, a union tied up a basic industry "without being condemned as a revolutionary menace."²⁵

President Roosevelt was in a quandary. "There is literally nothing . . . the national government has any power to do," he complained to Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts. "I am at wit's end how to proceed."²⁶ Lodge too was worried. He did not understand the folly of the operators which would cause great suffering and probably defeat the Republican party.²⁷ As winter neared and coal prices soared, Roosevelt feared "the untold misery . . . with the certainty of riots which might develop into social war." Although the President agreed with his advisers that he had no legal right, he determined to bring both sides together and see whether he could bring about an agreement.²⁸

A historic confrontation

At a historic meeting, Roosevelt called in representatives of government, labor, and management. "The ten men met in my room on October 3," Roosevelt wrote, "I being still unable to leave my wheelchair." Attorney General Knox, Labor Commissioner Carroll D. Wright, and Secretary Cortelyou were present.²⁹ Roosevelt "disclaimed any right to intervene" but the "terrible nature of the catastrophe impending" impelled him to use his influence "to bring to an end a situation which has become literally intolerable."³⁰

For Mitchell, the calling of the conference implied union recognition. Breathing the sweet smell of success, he was at his conciliatory best. Mitchell, Roosevelt wrote, "behaved with great dignity and moderation. The operators, on the contrary, showed extraordinary stupidity and bad temper."³¹ The operators were "insolent" to the President, and they savagely berated Mitchell as a leader of agitators and extremists who killed 21 people and deterred thousands from working by intimidation and violence.³²

The operators told the President that instead of wasting time negotiating with the "fomentors of this anarchy," he should use the power of government "to protect the man who wants to work, and his wife and children when at work." With proper protection they would produce enough coal to end the fuel shortage. The operators angrily rejected the President's efforts to mediate and refused to deal with Mitchell.³³

"Well, I have tried and failed," Roosevelt wrote that evening to Marcus Hanna. "I feel downhearted over the result."³⁴ The President did not hold the strikers blameless, but he disagreed with the operators' position that there was nothing to discuss. "Commissioner Carroll D. Wright, in whom I have the utmost confidence," Roosevelt wrote, "has reported to me that . . . there is certainly right and wrong on both sides." The operators, Roosevelt declared, had no reason to reject conciliation.³⁵

At first, the operators seemed to have won a victory by their recalcitrance. The Governor of Pennsylvania ordered the entire State National Guard to the coalfields. But soldiers don't dig coal. The miners remained on strike, and the operators failed to make good their promise to mine enough coal to meet public needs.³⁶

Although Roosevelt blamed the operators for spurning mediation, he again appealed to the strikers. On October 6, he asked Wright to propose to John Mitchell that if the miners returned to work, he, the President, would appoint a new commission to investigate all matters and would do all within his power to enforce the commission's findings.³⁷ Roosevelt recognized that the operators' position was "exquisitely calculated" to prevent compromise.³⁸ But both he and Wright tried to persuade Mitchell. For a time Mitchell wavered. Then he wrote the President that, in view of his experience with the coal operators in the past, he did not trust them. The miners had gone more than half way and objected to further sacrifice, he believed. Mitchell felt that compliance with the President's request "would mean surrender of the cause for which the miners had so heroically fought." By a near unanimous vote, miners determined not to go back to the pits until the operators made real concessions.³⁹

Since no end of the strike was in sight, the President prepared to send Carroll Wright on another investigation. Former President Grover Cleveland wrote Roosevelt that the miners should first go back to work and then negotiate a settlement. Roosevelt welcomed Cleveland's support and proposed to expand Wright's investigation in an extraordinary way. He wanted Cleveland and other eminent men to "join" Wright. "I earnestly beg you to say that you will accept," the President wrote Cleveland. The latter reluctantly agreed and sold at a loss his stock in coal railroads to avoid a conflict of interest. Roosevelt then searched for other prominent men to add to Wright's commission.⁴⁰

President Roosevelt also was ready as a last resort to order the U.S. Army to take over the coalfields. He would do whatever was necessary to prevent interference with the resumption of work and would run the mines. In the meantime, his commission of eminent men would decide the rights and wrongs of the case.⁴¹

The rising crescendo of public rage was setting the stage for drastic measures. Roosevelt feared that the "attitude of the operators" would "double the burden" of those who stood against "Socialistic action." Carroll Wright noted that public men and industrialists were "rapidly becoming State socialists insofar as the coal industry was concerned," and that even Congressmen advocated revolutionary change.⁴²

The Anthracite Coal Strike Commission

On October 23, 1902, the 163-day anthracite coal strike ended. The following morning President Roosevelt met briefly with the commissioners and asked them to try to establish good relations between the employers and the workers in the anthracite fields. The commissioners refused to comment to reporters, and then met for almost 2 hours at Wright's office, one block from the White House. There photographers took pictures, and the room became so saturated with smoke from their flash powder it had to be aired out. After organizing and scheduling future sessions, the commissioners lunched with the President, and then began their arduous task of settling the strike.⁴³

Before listening to testimony, the commissioners spent a week touring the coal regions. They rejected the offer of the coal operators for a special train and visited mines selected jointly by the opposing parties. They saw first hand the conditions under which miners lived and labored.

Carroll Wright was overwhelmed with work and deferred as far as possible other duties he had as Commissioner of Labor. He used a large part of the meager resources of the Department of Labor, which then had a total annual budget of \$183,000, to support the work of the Commission. Wright ordered special agents, experts, and clerks to drop current assignments and go to the coalfields to obtain prices of items commonly used by employees of anthracite mines. He repeatedly reminded these agents of the "extreme and urgent need" for data, and when they ran into language barriers, he authorized them to hire interpreters.⁴⁴

The commissioners, after their inspection tour, met for nearly 3 months. Five-hundred fifty-eight witnesses appeared, including 240 for the striking miners, 153 for nonunion mineworkers, and 154 for the operators. The Commission itself requested the appearance of 11 witnesses. The testimony ran to 10,047 legal-sized pages in addition to other exhibits. John Mitchell played a prominent role in presenting the case for the miners. George Baer made the closing arguments for the coal operators, while Clarence Darrow closed for the workers.

Although the commissioners heard some evidence of terrible conditions, they concluded that the "moving spectacle of horrors" represented only a small number of cases. By and large, social conditions in mine communities were found to be good, and miners were judged as only partly justified in their claim that annual earnings were not sufficient "to maintain an American standard of living."⁵¹

The Commission's findings seemed to split the differences between mineworkers and mine owners. The miners asked for 20-percent wage increases, and most were given a 10-percent increase. The miners had asked for an 8-hour day and were awarded a 9-hour day instead of the standard 10 hours then prevailing.⁵² The operators refused to recognize the United Mine Workers union. But Mitchell believed that he had won de facto recognition and wrote that the "most important feature of the award" was the creation of a six-man arbitration board to settle disputes that could not be worked out with mine officials. The employees selected three members and the employers three members.

The Commission dealt with many other subjects, such as private police forces, child labor, and blacklisting. But the panel observed that what was really needed was a spirit of good will. "A more conciliatory disposition in the operators and their employees in their relations toward one another," the Commission commented, "would do a better and a more lasting work than any which mere rulings, however wise or just, may accomplish."⁵³