

THE TRAGEDY  
OF THE GREAT  
Pennsylvania Coal Strike

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HIGH in a coal breaker sit a number of little boys, and among them, here and there, an old man. The coal, elevated fresh from the mine to the top of the great wooden structure, is emptied into shoots and comes sliding down inclines, past the little boys and old men, whose eyes must be quick to detect the pieces of slate which the hands must be ready to snatch out. It is a long, tedious, monotonous business, this one of slate picking, for the stream of coal seems never ending, and there is a continuous straining of the sight, bending of the back, and wearing away of the finger tips—the latter until the skin becomes thin and supersensitive, or hard and callous as warts. Besides, there is the constant black cloud of dust—dust that powders the clothes, hands, face, head, everything, and that enters the nostrils and turns the lungs into a kind of black sponge, accompanied with fearful frequency by consumption and miner's asthma.

There, together in the coal breaker, sit youth and age. Side by side they are earning their daily bread. The boys are beginning at the lowest rung of the ladder of anthracite coal mining; the men have been through all the grades, in the prime of their manhood having earned the wages of skilled workmen, and now, in the decline of years and powers, with nothing saved from the, at best, poor

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wages with which to protect old age, they are back at the lowest rung of the ladder, ending life where they began.

Begun in the breaker; ended in the breaker!

That tells the tale of the average Pennsylvania anthracite miner who reaches old age in the mines. Who reaches old age! but, of course, many are maimed and cannot continue at the vocation until old age. Others escape when they can from coal mining, as from a region of terrors; and death by accident or mine disease makes dreadful claims. Hence there is not nearly so large a proportion of old men among these hard coal miners as among men of other vocations.

But as if to compensate, there are many old young men, while boys are serious and grave far beyond their years, and womanhood is nipped of its beauty and fragrance before the blossom.

This is the state of things in the hard-coal fields of Pennsylvania, where for several slow-dragging months John Mitchell has been leading a strike of the united mining population for a little better pay, a little shortening of working hours, and a little added humanity.

#### Average Wage Under \$1 a Day.

For it should be known that the wages of the average Pennsylvania hard-coal miner, taking one year with another, is be-

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tween \$250 and \$270 per annum. This rate of pay, would, under good conditions, all must concede, be very small. But considering that the mine-worker is called upon to spend his long working hours under ground, where danger from blasting, from caving-in, from the rushing of tunnel coal cars, from gases, from dampness is ever present, this rate of pay seems to be more in keeping with the brutalizing conditions of European labor than that of free and equal American citizenship.

Yet to establish and to continue this extremely low rate of wages has long been the policy of the real rulers of the hard-coal fields of Pennsylvania.

Years ago, President McGowan, of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad—a man who now would be called a "Captain of Industry"—knowing how valuable the hard-coal fields of Pennsylvania were, and anticipating their greatly added value in the near future, began to acquire by purchase and lease all the anthracite coal-bearing land possible. His railroad ran through the heart of the hard-coal belt. Several other railroads also ran to or through this section of the State, and they followed the example of the Reading Railroad to greater or less extent.

A lot of small coal operators were scattered over these regions at that time, and the railroads began to put up freight rates so as to squeeze them out of the coal min-

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ing business. The coal operators took defensive measures. They had a bill put through the Legislature forbidding a transportation company to engage in the mining business. The railroads went around this by organizing mining companies, ostensibly separate and distinct from the transportation companies, but in fact with the same officers and a policy that made them mere coal-mining departments of the coal-carrying railroads.

#### How Railroads Squeezed Miners.

It was soon found that this separate organization served two purposes: It squeezed the independent operators, on the one side, and the mine-workers on the other; for the railroads made a charge of from \$1.50 to \$2 a ton for carrying coal to tidewater, a higher rate than is charged by other railroads of the country for a similar haul and much higher than these same hard-coal railroads regularly and by schedule charge for high-class perishable freight.

The purpose of this high charge for coal carriage was clear. It was to make the total cost of mining and delivering a ton of coal at tidewater appear so great as to leave no margin for a raise in the wages scale or a reduction of working hours with the same wages to the salaried men. On the other hand, these heavy transpor-

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tation charges and various stringent requirements, together with increased inconveniences, tended to make the return in the mere matter of mining less and less for the small operator, and put him more and more at the mercy of the railroads, whose ultimate aim was to swallow him.

This policy of absorption, which is the polite name for robbery on a grand scale, has been proceeding steadily and remorselessly, until by the recent report of the United States Industrial Commission it appears that nine-tenths of the hard-coal lands of Pennsylvania are owned by eight railroad companies. It is notorious that such coal lands as these roads do not own are dependent on them for coal carriage, so that their operators are compelled to make contracts to run for several years, for the hauling of their coal at certain high rates, and to make the railroads their selling agents.

Therefore it may be truthfully said that eight railroads, to all intents and purposes, own all the hard-coal lands in the United States, for Pennsylvania contains the only anthracite deposits in this country, and commercially, in the world. The Reading Railroad, the Erie Railroad and the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad own considerably more than half of the hard-coal lands, and their policy dominates.

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#### Close Union Among Railroads.

Of course unions among workmen are deplorable, if not wicked. This we often hear from the circles of the magnates and find expressed in their organs. But for years there has been the worst kind of a union among these railroads and their subject operators. A few men having the control of the whole industry, have been accustomed to gather around a directors' table in a New York office once, twice or three times annually and decide how much coal should be taken out of the ground and what its price should be. The public has not been consulted; it has simply been expected to pay what these half-dozen or more gentlemen, in their gracious and benevolent wisdom chose to ask, which, as is always what happens in such cases, was "all that the traffic could bear."

As for the mine workers, of course they were not at any time consulted. They were never consulted about anything. The systematic policy toward them has always been one of crushing. President McGowen at the beginning conceived the idea of establishing in the Pennsylvania hard-coal fields a worse than European condition of cut-throat competition among mine workers. Welsh, English, Irish and native Americans—all English-speaking and composing a homogeneous people—had been doing the work of mining coal in the anthra-

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cite fields. President McGowen imported a great number of Poles and men of other nationalities with their families, endeavoring apparently to get men who, while accustomed to very low wages, should be antagonistic to each other by national, racial, religious and other prejudices and be detached in small groups, as it were, by the barriers of language.

#### How Wages Are Kept Down.

Moreover, it was the deliberate scheme to have more laborers on the ground than were really necessary to get out the limited amount of coal which the half dozen managers in New York decided would "hold up" the market price to a certain scarcity figure.

Of course, this is a broad country, and there have been many opportunities for men even in the rudimentary occupations to make good wages, so that it was not to be supposed that these immigrants would long stay in the Pennsylvania hard-coal regions, when there were invitations for better employment outside.

This would quickly have ruined the policy of a surplus of labor, if permitted freely to operate. The coal magnates held the men by a number of simple devices. One was to compel them to do all their buying at stores kept by the mining companies. The prices charged were such as to win for

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these places the opprobrious name of "pluck-me" stores.

Then a regular deduction was made from the pay of the men to provide for doctors' services and a sick fund. This worked to the benefit of the coal magnates in two ways. It lessened the remuneration of the workers, and it saved the magnates the expense of making their mines safe and of caring for the diseased or injured. These doctors, looking to the coal magnates for their pay, cast their smiles in that direction, and gave but scant attention, mixed with cynical glances and contemptuous frowns, to the people whom they were supposed to treat and whose money was their hire.

#### Wages Docked for "Religion."

Like this medical dockage, there was a dockage for religion. One of the baldest facts among all peoples in all ages is that few are so poor or improvident that they cannot and will not voluntarily find some way to make contributions toward religious worship. Yet on the score of the improvidence of the mine workers and the necessity for securing the proper worship of God Almighty in the Pennsylvania coal regions, coal magnates made a practice of taking from the mine workers' wages a certain sum to support religion, this sum to be expended, not by or at the direction of the mine

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workers, but by and according to the wishes of the mining magnates. This made the preachers of the Gospel, of whatever denomination, if not creatures of their will, at least passive to their rule; so that religious sanction, active or passive, was for many years given to the horrible conditions in the Pennsylvania hard coal fields, and the mine worker was admonished to accept established things as the will of God. There were bright and honorable exceptions among these directed clergymen, but the exceptions were few and proved the preponderating rule.

This religious advice, not blasphemously to oppose the will of heaven, extended in a general way to the worst of all the troubles, that of pay time. For after promising as low wages as possible at the outset, and then deducting and drawing back a considerable part in the ways named and in other ways, the magnates fell into the habit of paying when they felt like it the balances due the workmen. In some places these payments were made once in two or three months.

Thus in a variety of ways the mine-workers were held down to a low rate of remuneration. They were robbed of part of their originally small wages and held back in the payment of the remainder. These were conditions that breed desper-

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tion, the fruits of which the magnates soon experienced. They went to the submissive Pennsylvania Legislature—a law-making body that for several generations has been the creature of the great coal, iron, railroad and tariff-protected corporations—and obtained the passage of an act authorizing the establishment of “coal and iron police,” who were to carry firearms and who constituted a private standing army.

#### **Coal and Iron Police.**

This Coal and Iron Police force was additional to the usual sheriffs' posses and the military regiments that were to be had by the coal companies for the mere calling; but it had a function that made it the more deadly against any kind of trade unionism or organized movement among the mine workers for betterment of working conditions. It was to a large extent a secret service—a service of detectives or spies. Its members had secret commissions from the coal companies, wore no distinctive badges or uniforms and reported to the coal magnates from whom they received their pay.

All these circumstances combined to make the coal magnates all-powerful masters in the coal-fields, and they used a subtle influence to array colliery against colliery and region against region, so that there was never any harmonious purpose among all the mine-workers and no con-

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certed movement for betterment. For twenty-five years the strike movements were separate and unrelated, and they all failed. During the quarter-century following the middle seventies not one of the multitude of workmen's strikes in the Pennsylvania hard-coal fields succeeded.

For this reason the presidents of the hard-coal mining railroads complacently and superciliously smiled when in 1900, just two years ago, John Mitchell, president of the United Mine Workers of America, the national organization of the coal miners, demanded better pay, shorter hours, abolition of the company store in fact as well as in name, monthly payment of wages and some other things, on pain of a general, concerted strike of the hard-coal mine-workers in case of refusal. The railroad managers comfortably reviewed the past years dotted with the tombstones of strike failures. They estimated the secret membership of the miners' union to be not more than 20 per cent. of all the mine-workers. To suppose that a 20 per cent. organization could control 80 per cent. of non-union men, backed as they were by the formidable powers of the mining and railroad corporations, appeared too ridiculous gravely to consider.

#### **How Mitchell Organized the Miners.**

The truth was that the union did not contain as many as 20 per cent. of the mine

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workers in the hard-coal fields. It did not contain more than 8 per cent., as the officers afterwards admitted. But the hour for a great concerted movement, which should overleap the barriers of language, allay religious intolerance and bury past animosities had come, and with the hour had come the man to lead—a young man of 28, bred to the mines, but having with the hardships of the miner imbibed the aspirations of the American citizen. With the clear sight, sound judgment, daring and prudence of a good leader, he offered a character to inspire with confidence all who might follow. This man was John Mitchell.

When Mitchell called upon all mine workers, whether union men or not, to strike, more than 120,000 out of 143,000 mine workers in the hard-coal fields on the first day laid down their tools and refrained from work, and within a week practically every hard-coal mine worker had stopped.

The strike was complete, and after many weeks was victorious. The coal magnates, who never before had conceded anything to their workmen on demand, had then to concede a 10 per cent. increase in wages to induce them to return to work.

The men concluded that this was a good beginning. They returned to the mines, and the whole working population went into the union.

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But as time passed it was found that in some of the regions the workmen had to give up all, or nearly all, of this advance in wages in exchange for the abolition of an old evil by which the miners were compelled to buy their blasting powder from the coal companies and pay several times the market price for it.

Then, too, those of the men who were paid for their labor by the ton of coal mined, found that the "dockages" or deductions made in the weight on the score of admixture of slate grew heavier, while the coal cars that constituted the rough means of measuring the results of work, and hence the amount of pay, were steadily being made larger, holding not the miners' long ton of 2,240 pounds, but well up toward 3,000 pounds, and with the "topping" or heaping of coal on top, would frequently hold considerably more than 3,000 pounds.

#### **Miners' Expenses Are Heavier.**

Besides all this, it became as apparent to the Pennsylvania anthracite mine-worker as it has become to American workmen in other vocations, that general prices have greatly advanced in these piping times of prosperity. That most conservative and authoritative establishment, Dun's Commercial Agency, of New York, which has been keeping record of the prices of more than a hundred commodi-

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ties that are the chief and common necessities of life among our people, announced several months ago that these prices had advanced so much that the cost of living had risen 40 per cent. over that of a year before.

These circumstances urged the hard-coal mine-workers to demand relief. Delegates were sent to a convention and a long list of grievances were drawn up, and several demands were made of the coal magnates. Among the latter were: Twenty per cent. increase of wages to some of the classes of workmen, 20 per cent. reduction in working time with the present pay for other classes of workmen, and the establishment of "check-weighmen," who should be named by the mine-workers and be present at the weighing of the coal on issuance from the mine.

At the first sound of discord, that great friend of trusts and workmen, United States Senator Hanna, rushed to the fore with his Civic Conciliation and Arbitration Federation and made mighty efforts to prevent a strike war. But he failed, as many others failed. Mr. President Baer and his fellow presidents of the anthracite mining railroads told the Senator and all the other busybodies in substance that they could go to the bow-wows; that the anthracite coal mines are private property; that the rights of private property are sacred and must

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not be molested; that the railroad corporations would manage their property and their business in their own way, and without any outside interference; that the working conditions of the miners are good; that the body of mine workers are normally quiet, contented and law-abiding; that wicked labor agitators, who must foment trouble to show that they are active and so earn the union strike pay, are responsible for the present strike; and that under no circumstances would the companies grant the new demands or recognize the union.

President Baer, writing to a public-spirited citizen of Wilkesbarre, Pa., said: "The right 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."

#### **Baer Like Other Despots.**

Sentiments similar to these have been uttered by the world's worst despots when they were working great injury to their fellow creatures. It was the essence of the evil doctrine of the divine right of kings. It gave religious sanction to the monstrous principle of aristocracy. It was what ground the French peasant into the mire for centuries, and had its horrible climax in a revolution in which women

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carried human heads and hearts about the streets on pikes and men drank warm human blood as it came trickling from the scaffold.

In face of the plain, black, not-to-be-forgotten facts of the Pennsylvania hard coal fields, President Baer's words become bald blasphemy. "God in His infinite wisdom" may and does do wondrous and countless things. His ways are infinite. But He never "gave control of the property interests of the country" into the hands of the "Christian men" who manage the Pennsylvania anthracite mining railroads, if by that term is meant that He gave the coal mines to these eight railroads, to be disposed of by them as their private property.

God Almighty, the Universal Father, made the coal mines, as He made all nature, for the use of His creatures. He did not hand down a coal mine title to Mr. President Baer and his associate railroad presidents, and before the Great Father the smallest child in the arms of the poorest mine laborer's wife has just as much natural right and title to those anthracite mines as has Mr. President Baer.

This is the indisputable and everlasting truth. What has dimmed or hidden it is that men have fallen into the habit of confusing the works of man with the works of God, and supposing that because a man

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has an indisputable title to the things his labor produces he therefore has as sound a title to things God creates, and which some men appropriate. Mr. Baer and his associates and their companies are justly entitled to all that they can by their separate or combined efforts produce, but they never did, and never can, make one cubic inch of coal land. In the nature of things it was not intended that human beings should create things; it was intended that men should apply their labor to natural elements, should change or modify things that Omnipotence has created. But what Mr. Baer in effect says is that "God in His infinite wisdom has given" not only the fruits of their toil to the railroad companies in question, but the control of nature's storehouse of coal as well.

Assuming for the moment that this were true, how are the railroads acting with this great trust?

We have seen the hardships that coal-mining workmen suffer. But observe what the general public, the users of hard coal, are made to endure.

#### **Plenty of Coal to Be Mined.**

There is enough coal buried in the 470 square miles of anthracite territory in Pennsylvania to keep the miners busy for a hundred years at the present rate of output. Long before the expiration of that

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time other anthracite fields may be discovered or nature, which is so bountiful to man, may reveal many substitutes. But President Baer and his associates give small thought to posterity's needs. Their thought centers on the present. They own or control the whole known anthracite supply and their constant aim is to take out of the ground the least number of tons compatible with the highest price and the largest aggregate revenue.

They aim to make an artificial scarcity of coal.

The scarcity they effect in two ways. First, they do not work the equipped mines as long and as fully as they might be worked. They are deliberately closed down for periods that are not needed to make repairs. Next, they do not attempt to open all the available coal land, but on the contrary keep as much as possible out of use, and deliberately and continually buy and lease workable coal land to prevent it from being worked.

By its published annual report current during the coal strike of 1900, the Lehigh Valley Railroad was paying a quarter of a million dollars a year in minimum royalties on coal land from which it was not taking a pound of the mineral, but was purposely holding out of use.

The policy of the "Christian men to whom," according to Mr. Reading Railroad President Baer, "God in His infin-

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ite wisdom has given the control of the property interests of the country," has been to make scarce and high-priced to the masses of men what the Almighty intended to be plentiful and low priced.

Perhaps but for the great strike of the mine workers during this summer of 1902 the general public would now be no more conscious of these no-better-than-highway exactions than they were during the years in the past. But the short and arrogant refusal even to treat with mine workers over the latter's alleged grievances, and demands, and the long strike, extraordinary rise of hard coal prices and consequent inconveniences and even hardships to which the public has been subjected, has caused the public mind to open and the public eyes to see that God intended the anthracite coal fields of Pennsylvania for a great benefit and not for the private spoil of such "Christian men" as compose the eight anthracite railroad companies.

#### **Government Should Own Railroads.**

But how to remedy the evil is the problem. Two things are necessary. One is that the railroads, which are nothing more than steam highways, should be taken out of private hands, and conducted by the public's government for the benefit of the public, as they are conducted with great success and with small

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prejudice to public or private interests, among many civilized peoples of the world, the most notable results being shown, perhaps, among those people most like our own—the new-born, vigorous and progressive Australasians.

Publicly owned and conducted railroads would guarantee low and equal rates. What low freight rates would mean may be inferred from the fact that that electric railroad genius, Albert L. Johnson, was at the time of his death, a year ago, in the midst of plans for a railroad that should carry coal from the anthracite mines to tidewater for 25 cents a ton, against the six to eight times that sum now charged.

Next the coal lands ought to be taxed according to their actual selling value.

I found during a visit to the West Virginia coal strike fields recently that the allied coal companies there were paying taxes that amounted to not far from one-fifteenth of 1 per cent. of the selling value of land and improvements. The taxation of coal lands in Pennsylvania is much like this.

#### **Common Rights in Land.**

The principle of common rights in land would be observed by making the tax falling on the coal land very heavy and according to the real selling value. All taxation of improvements or the fruits of hu-

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man labor should be exempted. Taking this value through taxation for common purposes would in effect be making the coal lands common property. But it would not disturb the practice of private operation of the coal lands. Men would be just as free to call these lands their private property, and would be at full liberty to work them or not, as they pleased. But it would quickly be noticed that not even such "Christian men" as compose the companies of the eight anthracite mining railroads would care to hold valuable coal land idle. They would be able to get under such circumstances no higher price for their coal product than they can now get under normal conditions, while they would have to pay heavily to the government in taxation on all land, used or unused. They, therefore, would retain only such land as they could use, and they would work that retained quantity to its highest capacity.

In other words, the present anthracite railroad monopolists would be forced by a heavy ad valorem coal land tax to put their hundreds upon thousands of idle acres of valuable coal land to use, producing coal or they would give them up to those who would gladly operate them.

Bringing this vast idle area into use would cause a tremendous demand for mine workers and consequently cause an

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immediate rise in their wages and a material improvement in their working conditions. On the other hand, an enormous increase in the production of anthracite coal with a consequent reduction in price, would be of vast and far-reaching importance to the general coal-using public.

Through these two plain radical steps lie the solution of this great coal monopoly problem and the discontinuance of the tragedy of the Pennsylvania hard-coal mine worker.

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