

Class Conscious Coal Miners, 1880-1930

My doctoral dissertation is on the development of class-consciousness among bituminous coal miners in Central Pennsylvania near Johnstown. Much of it focuses on a town called Nanty-glo, Pennsylvania. In 1943, Nanty-glo, which means “streams of coal” in Welsh, received national media attention when *Life* magazine featured interviews with Nanty-glo mine workers and pictures of the borough in an article on the United States government's wartime takeover of the bituminous coal industry to stop a coal miners strike.

The class-consciousness of the Nanty-glo miners was forged out of conflict and a spirited contentiousness; class conflict with the region's coal corporations and steel and railroad barons; political conflict with agents of the coal companies and local merchants for control over the municipal government and police force; ideological conflict with the national leadership of the United Mine Workers of America over the direction of the union; and internal conflicts over the significance of ethnic and religious differences. One of my conclusions is that the coal miners are successful in developing a sense of working-class consciousness because of their ability to develop an integrated working-class community in Nanty-glo with many of their own independent institutions. A study of the struggle for class-conscious community in Nanty-glo gives insights into the possibilities for a broader class-conscious American working class labor movement during this period. The approximately 1,300 Nanty-glo mine workers and their families play a role in United States labor history much more significant than the population of their small town would suggest. Organizers from Nanty-glo working in Johnstown, Pennsylvania played important roles in the 1919 steel strike. During the 1920s, Nanty-glo mine workers pressed the UMWA to initiate a campaign to organize the unorganized and they provide crucial and continuing support for John Brophy and the UMWA opposition's "Miner's Program" from 1922 until 1928. In 1932 and the beginning of 1933, they help convince John L. Lewis and the UMWA to launch a massive organizing drive that rebuilds the coal miners' union and contributes to the creation of the CIO.

The bituminous coal miner's traditional conception of himself as a free artisan, which has been called the "miner's freedom," provided the ideological and social underpinning of the United Mine Workers of America and of class formation in mining communities. The roots of the ideology of the rank and file American coal miner lie in the coal fields of England and Wales. The expansion of the American bituminous coal industry after the Civil War created a demand for skilled coal miners that lured thousands of miners across the Atlantic. These British Isle miners brought with them, as part of their values and ideology, a tradition of trade union activism with a record of achievement dating back to the Chartist

movement. Their experience included involvement in an active union movement with both local and national organization, involvement in the beginnings of the British Socialist movement, and a strong sense of a miners' community.

In the United States these miners found a rapidly expanding coal industry which doubled output and employment each decade from 1870-1910, and a fledgling coal unionism operating without many of the traditional legal restrictions imposed on unions in England. In this setting the work values and trade union ideology of British miners helped develop a class-conscious working-class ideology. Crucial in the development of this ideology was conflict between the miner and the operator over the organization of coal production, and the miner's fight to retain his industrial independence.

The early hand-pick coal miner considered himself a skilled craftsman. His assistant or loader was often a son or other relative whom he was teaching the craft. Apprenticeship included learning the customs of the trade as well as the skills involved. The British miner's ability to pass along his traditions to new generations of coal miners was aided by the uneven development of factory-style coal production in the United States. Mechanization was spread out over half of a century, from 1880 through 1930. In a number of important coal fields bituminous coal mining remained essentially a "cottage industry" into the 1920s. This allowed the miner's traditions and values to be renourished, even while they were under attack.

In traditional mining, the miner worked in teams in rooms spread out over miles of underground passages, largely without effective supervision. Because of the difficulties of supervision, mining continued to be organized around principles of piecework, and the pace of work was left to the determination of the individual miner. Even when cutting machines began to replace hand-pick mining, production imitated old work patterns. Mechanization was complicated because conditions underground varied greatly from one coal seam to the next and from one mine to the next. Few machines could be as adaptable as the skilled mine worker.

Ultimately, the nature of coal production, the difficulties of supervision, and particularly, the wide range of mine conditions, hampered factory-style reorganization of the mines. Because mechanization was spread out over such a long period of time, the miner, instead of experiencing the reorganization of production as a hopeless situation that offered the displaced craftsman little alternative, was able to organize on the basis of work traditions and customs to struggle to sustain his concept of life and community. The bituminous coal miners were able to organize an industrially advanced industrial union

to preserve essentially pre-industrial artisanal organization of work. Their union gave them the ability to keep the "miner's freedom" alive and teach it to new groups of miners.

Many of the traditions of the industry enforced by local unions had their origins in pre-industrial patterns of work. Once a miner had established a place in the mine as his own, the place was his as long as his tools remained there, even if he did not appear for work over a long period of time. The miner established his own pace of work and often ended his day when he decided that he had mined sufficient tonnage. European miners brought with them a tradition of piece work output based on traditional needs rather than market place demands. Workers expected a fair day's pay for day's work. They were unlikely to increase their weekly output even when they were able to mine their accustomed volume of coal in a shorter work week.

A West Virginia miner, heir to both the southern agrarian tradition and the artisanal tradition of the coal miner succinctly summarized the miner's attitude towards attempts by industry to reorganize tradition patterns of work. When asked why he had given up a more highly paid factory job to return to the mines as a relatively unskilled loader, he replied that in the mine he set his own pace, was visited only once a day by a foreman, and in the mine "they (supervisors) don't bother you none."

UMWA locals played a primary role in the miner's fight to sustain his sense of freedom by opposing efforts to impose greater factory discipline in the mines. Union local pit or bank committees fought vigorously to prevent operators from reassigning miners to new tasks arbitrarily. Workers whose jobs were threatened were defended no matter what the infraction. In one documented case a pit committee defended a locally renown loafer, arguing that the contract did not dictate how hard a man must work.

The miner's ability to make decisions about how to utilize his time and efforts most efficiently also contributed to his sense of freedom on the job. For example, in 1920 20 percent of the coal mined in the United States was still hand-picked, and even in machine cut mines, decisions about when to drill blasting holes and how heavy the charge should be, were still left to the judgement of the individual miner.

For industrialists, the miner's perception of himself as a free artisan was a major source of consternation. In December 1921 Industrial Magazine warned factory managers to avoid hiring former miners. In the mines "the possibility of constant supervision or of surprise visits does not exist. The coal miner is accordingly trained to do as he pleases Transport such a man into a factory where production is speeded and no imagination is required to picture what will happen he chafed under the necessary restrictions of employment resents all suggestions as to his working methods, resents all efforts to compel continuous application, and assumes in general a hostile attitude to all supervision." No

wonder, examining this phenomenon from a different perspective, John Brophy, a former UMWA district officer who served as the C.I.O. Director of Organization during the initial organizing drives in the mass production industries, viewed the exodus of union miners to the war preparation factories during World War I as the foundation for developing unions in mass production industries. According to Brophy these former miners were the hardcore of experience around which present day union organization centered and achieved its great success."

Other factors in the miner's experience helped to reenforce his self-image as a free artisan. The British miner brought with him a tradition of political activism, trade unionism and socialist ideas. John Brophy argued that much of the democratic tradition of the UMWA on the local level can be attributed to the British experience, which he believed gave the miner a basic familiarity with formal organizational structure and parliamentary procedure.

Oral traditions, community life and religion all played roles in creating a sense of class identity and building the consciousness of the miner. The "boney pile orator," so named because the underground slate waste heaps were his speaker's platform, was a miners' institution. While the men rested, waited for coal cars, or ate, from the ears and eyes of supervision, the boney pile orator would explain the issues, recount stories, detail traditions, initiate the new miner, and organize all miners within hearing.

The isolation of mine communities contributed to the miner's sense of himself as a class apart. All village life was organized around the mine. Population expanded and contracted with the affairs of the mine. Miners, passing skills from father to son, tended to form a virtual hereditary occupational caste. High rates of diseases of the respiratory system, causing early aging, chronic sickness and death in the coal fields, contributed to a glum solidarity in the mining community. The constant risks of accident, and the fear of the mine whistle signalling disaster held mine communities together.

Religious customs often transformed pre-industrial ideology to the industrial scene, contributing to a sense of solidarity, and preparing Eastern and Southern European immigrants to accept the miner's idea of unionism. In 1910 and in 1911 striking Italian and Slavic miners in the district paraded through town carrying church symbols reminiscent of peasant protests. Rather than religious tradition undercutting unionism, in some cases it seems to have inspired protest in the name of traditional rights.

The bituminous coal miners have a long legacy of folk music which graphically illustrates continuity and change in their values. For example the ballad, "Two-Cents Coal," was traced by UMWA folklorist George Korson to 1878. The song shows the miners' class identification and a traditional sense of justice. In this song the operator violates this sense of justice only to be vanquished by an act of God.

Specifically, the ballad retells the history of the harsh winter of 1876; operators cut the prevailing piece rate to two-cents a bushel, or approximately fifty cents per ton. The miner and his family tottered on the brink of starvation. Vengeance for the miner came when an ice flow on the Monogahela River breaks, the tipple is destroyed, and the two cents coal sinks. Through songs barely literate miners could share ideas and experiences.

These oral and religious traditions helped to transmit the trade union experience, the artisanal values and the early socialist ideas that the British Isle miner brought with him to the United States, to new generations and ethnic groups entering the coal fields. The concept of the "miner's freedom" as a living part of the rank and file coal miner's way of life developed in response to a rapidly expanding industry where his skills and style of work were being eroded by gradual mechanization and attempts by capital to reorganize work to enhance the prerogatives of management. It was also sustained by the miner's sense of class and community, the buddy system at work, and the local union committee structure.