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# Colorado's Role in the American Labor Struggle: Western Unionism and the Labor Question 1894-1914

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**Colorado's Role in the American Labor Struggle**  
**Western Unionism and the Labor Question**  
**1894-1914**

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History Department Honors Thesis  
University of Colorado at Boulder

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## **Abstract**

Colorado workers have traditionally been viewed as more radical than their eastern counterparts. The dramatic strikes in Cripple Creek, Leadville, and Ludlow all highlighted this fact. These strikes contributed to the creation of what became known as western unionism. Historians have viewed western unionism as distinct from eastern organized labor because of its militant and radical nature. Yet, how the popular press, academics, and labor leaders at the time viewed Colorado's role in what became known as the labor question remains unclear. This thesis sets out to reconstruct the discourse of labor's role in commerce and Colorado's place in that discussion. By examining how three dramatic events in Colorado's labor history were represented in the popular press, this thesis will reveal how Colorado's role evolved over time and how what transpired in Colorado ultimately had strong implications on the labor question. The Cripple Creek strike of 1894 demonstrated the strength and ability of organized labor, the Leadville strike in 1896-1897 led to deep divisions between western laborers and the eastern unions (as represented by the American Federation of Labor), and the Colorado Coalfield strike of 1913-1914 witnessed the closest that America came to full class war. The impact that these strikes had on the national discourse surrounding the labor question has been largely left out from existing literature on the subject.

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## **I. Introduction**

American labor historians have largely viewed major strikes in Colorado's early labor history as indicative of a radical unionism unique to the American West. Unions in Colorado generally operated distinctly and independently from unions in the Eastern and Midwestern United States, which were largely controlled by the American Federation of Labor (AFL). When examining western unions, historians have described them as radical, militant, and even socialist. These examinations draw on the changing dynamics of the western labor unions and their efforts to engage in local and state politics in order to secure policies that met their interests. The drama that unfolded in Colorado over two decades during its most intense industrial conflicts coincided with an era of intense strikes (and capitalist responses) which threatened to cripple American commerce. Strikes in Colorado influenced the debate within organized labor, business, and in the popular imagination over how to perceive and discuss what was popularly known as the labor question.

While some works have been written on the role that Colorado played in the broader American labor struggle, there has been significantly less written on how the popular press throughout the country portrayed the strikes, and how national labor leaders viewed Colorado's importance at the time. These historians have not addressed how laborers, capitalists, and the broader American public viewed the events taking place in Colorado and how these events affected the broader national labor movement. Drawing on a wide range of sources including newspapers, popular magazines, specialized journals, letters, and speeches, this thesis will reconstruct the dialogue that took place in broader American culture about the meaning and importance of Colorado in the labor question. This work seeks to fill an important gap in the history of labor in the American West, which has until now primarily focused on how events

played out and how they were different from the broader national movement. The existing literature reveals a failure to rigorously incorporate western labor into the national labor movement and the broader conception of the labor question.

Looking at three major strikes in Colorado will allow for a thorough reconstruction of the dialogue pertaining to Colorado's contributions to the national labor struggle. These strikes are the Cripple Creek Strike of 1894, the Leadville Strike of 1896-97, and the Colorado Coalfield Strike of 1913-14. Examining these strikes highlights the gradual evolution of western unionism into the more radical and militant form that historians remember it for.<sup>1</sup> The evolution of events shows an initial strong victory for organized miners in Cripple Creek in 1894 and then subsequent losses that eventually solidified the end of radical unionism in the west. In Cripple Creek, the miners were able to secure a powerful victory over the mine owners that sent shockwaves through the country. Leadville witnessed a protracted battle over union recognition, eventually leading to the collapse of the strike and sparking the discussion on the role that radical unionism should play in the national movement. The Colorado Coalfield Strike is the culmination of the Colorado labor story when the miners took to the national stage by challenging John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s Colorado Fuel & Iron Company, and were met with a violent assault on the Ludlow camp which precipitated ten days of labor revolt.

Those who are familiar with Colorado labor history will note the absence of the Cripple Creek strike of 1903-1904 from this analysis. Though it was certainly dramatic and would have provided another great opportunity to further expand on the thesis, it ultimately proved to exceed

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<sup>1</sup> For this thesis, the term "militant" refers to strong tactics during the course of a strike; it is represented by the willingness to use aggressive picketing, harassing or attacking strikebreakers, destroying property, and/or fighting—sometimes with firearms—with company guards and militiamen. "Radical" refers to political and economic ideologies that seek to go "to the root" of the problems that are perceived by some in the labor movement; this is represented by socialists and syndicalists because they sought to replace the capitalist system entirely.

the practical limits of this project. Understanding and analyzing the impact of these three strikes proved to be a much more substantial task than had originally been anticipated. Ultimately, there simply was not enough time to give the 1903-1904 Cripple Creek strike the treatment that it deserved. Preliminary research did suggest that it would have provided more evidence and support for the thesis explored here. It was an important strike in western unionism and American labor history. The strike in Cripple Creek was called by the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) in support of a strike called by the United Mine Workers in the southern coalfield. Though the coalfield strike was quickly crushed, the Cripple Creek strike witnessed martial law, strikers deported from the district, and the radicalization of William “Big Bill” Haywood. Further, the strike spurred the WFM (with Haywood as its president), along with Eugene Debs and other prominent labor leaders, to form the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). While extensive research would be the only way to understand how contemporaries viewed this strike and its role in shaping the labor question, based on the details surrounding the strike, it would appear to further confirm this thesis.

Examining the contemporary literature surrounding these major events can reconstruct the national discourse on the nature of labor in commerce, and this can help to more accurately place western labor into the American labor movement and begin to remove it from its distinct field of inquiry. In particular, this can show how observers outside of Colorado’s labor struggles assigned significance to the strikes and incorporated them into the American labor struggle. How did the discourse surrounding the labor question at the time define the terms as well as set limits on the American social and political imagination, and why don’t Americans today talk about the labor question on the same terms as they did previously? Finally, what role did Colorado’s strikes have to play in this transformation?

## Western Unionism

Understanding organized labor in Colorado requires a basic understanding of the broader history of organized labor in America. Any examination of Colorado labor history will draw conclusions about the radical nature of Colorado union members and their connection to the formation of a more radical or “western” unionism. Colorado labor historians have drawn an evolution of union thought from the Irish Land League to the Knights of Labor, on to industrial unionism represented by the Western Federation of Miners (WFM), and then the WFM’s pivotal role in the formation of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The various strikes in Colorado from the 1890s through the dramatic Colorado coalfield strike in 1914 all played a role in the establishment of a radicalized movement of Colorado workers and, by extension, other American workers.

Many historians point to the influence that western labor, particularly the WFM and one of its presidents, William D. “Big Bill” Haywood, had on the promotion of radical syndicalism within organized labor and the IWW in particular.<sup>2</sup> Much work has been done to show the influence of the IWW on organized labor and later radical American thought. Melvyn Dubofsky is one of the foremost scholars on the IWW and on Haywood and has studied the impact that these two forces had on the broader labor movement.<sup>3</sup> John Enyeart demonstrated that Colorado workers were not torn on the issue of political versus economic action in the way that the broader, eastern movement was (as demonstrated by the American Federation of Labor and the policy of “pure and simple” politics) but that Colorado unions understood the importance of

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<sup>2</sup> Syndicalism is a philosophy espoused by many in the IWW that direct action tactics such as sabotage and militant organization should be used in order to seize power from the owners in order to secure the interests (economic and social) of the workers over the owners.

<sup>3</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky, *“Big Bill” Haywood* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc, 1987).

building a social democracy; this unique aspect of western labor resulted largely from the fact that most of the western states were only recently established as states.<sup>4</sup> As a result of this recent statehood, there was not enough time for capitalist-dominated political machines to entrench themselves in state and city politics as they did in the more industrialized cities and states out east.<sup>5</sup> David Brundage points out that as capitalists gained political power in Colorado, miners developed a more radical and militant spirit in their organization, and began a schism between themselves and the American Federation of Labor (AFL).<sup>6</sup>

Some historians, such as Nick Salvatore in his biography on Eugene V. Debs and the numerous accounts of William “Big Bill” Haywood’s life, have made an argument about the extent to which western union organization influenced the broader labor struggle in America. Salvatore explains how Debs encouraged the WFM to form the American Labor Union (ALU) in 1902 and sparked the discussion of union tactics and philosophy, directly opposing the AFL.<sup>7</sup> Dubofsky details how Haywood’s experience after the 1904 Cripple Creek strike radicalized him and led him to form the IWW, whose place in American labor history cannot be disputed.<sup>8</sup>

However, despite the significant work done on the subject, there has not been as much attention paid to how the popular press across the country viewed and portrayed this Colorado radicalism and the discussion that took place about how to handle it. Samuel Gompers, president of the AFL, famously clashed with Debs over the difference between trade or craft unionism (as represented by the AFL) and industrial unionism (as represented by the radicals in Colorado). Trade unionism sought to organize workers according to their particular trade or skill, while

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<sup>4</sup> John P. Enyeart, *The Quest for "Just and Pure Law" Rocky Mountain Workers and American Social Democracy, 1870-1924* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Enyeart, 114.

<sup>6</sup> David Brundage, *The Making of Western Labor Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*, 2nd. Ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 204.

<sup>8</sup> Dubofsky, 32-33.

industrial unionism sought to organize all workers within an industry, regardless of their particular job. Yet beyond these two famous icons there has not been very much exploration of how the national press and popular opinion felt about western unionism at the time.

### The Labor Question

Because the primary purpose of this work is to examine how the Colorado strikes from 1893-1914 affected the way that contemporaries framed and discussed the labor question, it is important to lay out what this question looked like. Rosanne Currarino, in her exploration on the subject, provides an intellectual history of what was frequently dubbed the labor question. She notes that “in the popular imagination, [the labor question] was linked to the economic downturn between 1873 and 1897.”<sup>9</sup> This downturn coincided with the second industrial revolution, which drastically changed the shape of the American economy and led to the creation of major industrial cities in the northeast, increasing availability of consumer goods, and an explosion in immigration, among other transformative factors. The rapidly changing society of late nineteenth century America also saw a dramatic transition from the prevalent individual-producer to the wage worker. The labor question, then, was an effort by thinkers and reformers in society to address “the basis of American democracy; the relationships among civil, political, and economic participation; *the meaning of citizenship*.”<sup>10</sup>

Prior to the 1870s, the proprietary producer was the fundamental ideal basis of American society. For these thinkers, America was exceptional because it represented social equality centered on a producerist economy that was largely comprised of white, male individuals who freely used their labor and had some sort of control or ownership over the means of production.

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<sup>9</sup> Rosanne Currarino, *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Currarino, 9-10. Emphasis mine.

With the economic crash in 1873, many of these producers were forced into wage labor, which immediately began to change the discourse on the labor question. Economists in the universities began to assume that the American economy would be built around wage labor rather than on large-scale producerism. This fundamentally transformed the question to be, at its core, “What would ‘democracy’ now mean in an industrial society?”<sup>11</sup>

The Knights of Labor throughout this period advocated for a co-operative economic system which would allow workers in the new industrial economy to maintain ownership over the means of production by proposing that workers move away from the wage system.<sup>12</sup>

Economists considered the implications of the wage system and industrial producerism, and eventually Samuel Gompers, founder and president of the AFL, embraced the wage system and began advocating for “more.” Calling for this “more” meant accepting the wage system, but arguing that workers should primarily demand “more” wages, “more” leisure time. Gompers declared that “only in so far as we gain economic independence can our political liberty become tangible and important” and that “with [workers’] own improvement and emancipation, [they] will develop the possibilities, grandeur and true nobility of the human family.”<sup>13</sup>

After the Haymarket Affair of 1886, pro-labor economists were forced to moderate their ideas and the public turned away from radical labor philosophies. The formation of the AFL in the same year, along with this intellectual denunciation of radicalism, precipitated a dramatic reduction in the power and influence of the Knights of Labor.<sup>14</sup> Around this same time, the labor theory of value became unseated as the dominant theory and was replaced by the marginal utility theory of value. The implication of this was that economists minimized the impact of the

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<sup>11</sup> Currarino, 63.

<sup>12</sup> Currarino, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Gompers, “Organized Labor in the Campaign,” *North American Review* 155, no. 1 (July 1892): 96.

<sup>14</sup> Currarino, 62.

individual on industry and noted that “any answer to the labor question had to consider labor’s rights in a broader social context.”<sup>15</sup> The most prominent voices, then, became the economists who advocated for the wage system and Samuel Gompers’s model (through the AFL) of “more,” which sought to make the current capitalist system acceptable for the worker.

Currarino asserts that the last vestige of the industrial-producerist model as a solution to the “labor question” came with the resolution of the Pullman Strike of 1894. Eugene V. Debs, president and founder of the American Railway Union, had used the language of producerism to rally the workers to strike, and they were ultimately violently crushed and the strike ended when Debs was arrested by the United States Army and imprisoned. The AFL convention of 1894 witnessed the overwhelming “defeat of the socialist political platform, which was replete with producerite ideas and language, merely confirming its demise as a central language in the mainstream discussion of the labor question.”<sup>16</sup> The AFL, instead, wanted “more” for its workers, so that they could make “a claim [to citizenship] by insisting that the definition of American democracy include economic participation as well as political involvement”; the only way to achieve this economic participation was to elevate the worker to the status of active consumer. Currarino seems quick to assert that this was the moment when the AFL’s push for “more” became paradigmatic. She notes that “the AFL is seen as helping to destroy the democratic promise of the labor movement’s alternative culture, whether exemplified by the Knights, the Socialist Party, or the IWW.”<sup>17</sup>

*The Labor Question in America* ends with a discussion on economic democracy and the freedom of choice embedded in individualism. The Progressive Era reforms (including laws on

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<sup>15</sup> Currarino, 81.

<sup>16</sup> Currarino, 118.

<sup>17</sup> Currarino, 107.

saloons, laws on maximum hours of work, minimum wage laws, and the like) reflected a growing economic democracy that saw American citizenship defined as having the leisure, expendable income, and free time to become comfortable and active members, not just in the economy, but in society and politics as well.<sup>18</sup> However, these laws directly contradicted the fundamental principle of freedom of choice by preventing a person from freely entering into a contract on his/her own accord, which further threatened to deny the worker his/her full dignity as a citizen.<sup>19</sup> Currarino ends the book here, and declares that these are the same issues that comprise the labor question in our society today. Under this formulation of the labor question, the western labor struggles appear, then, to be peripheral battles—old remnants of the producerist system. Ultimately, western unionism and the discussions between industrial unionism and trade unionism are absent from Currarino's formulation of the labor question. So, while she provides valuable insight on the significance of these questions in relating them to American citizenship and the nature of the worker in American democracy, she does not adequately explore how western unionism and the Colorado strikes impacted the labor question.

Various issues surrounding organized labor and their tactics fell under the purview of the labor question. For the purposes of this thesis, Currarino's formulation, which places the changing nature of the citizen at the forefront of the labor question, will be the guiding principle. Within this question are issues such as the role of the state, not only in helping workers achieve shorter working hours or higher levels of pay, but in settling industrial disputes and strikes themselves. There is the issue of anticompetitive behavior, as seen in the Sherman Antitrust Act and the various applications of this Act, on the sides of both labor and capital. Perhaps one of the largest issues is the discussion on how best to organize workers into unions, whether through

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<sup>18</sup> Currarino, 115.

<sup>19</sup> Currarino, 139.

the trade union model or the industrial union model. These are questions and issues that specifically surround industrial and class relations during the 1890s through the years just before the First World War. The western labor movement had its own unique and valuable contributions to the issue of the labor question that have been largely overlooked by historians. This thesis will explore those contributions and will fill the hole by illustrating how western unionism impacted the labor question at the time.

## II. Cripple Creek, 1894: Against All Odds

### Introduction

Just eight years after the Haymarket Affair and the dramatic shift from producerist thought in the labor question, the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) launched its first major strike within Colorado, leading to the establishment of what was being regarded as western unionism. Inasmuch as it was a successful strike by the WFM, it was pivotal in underscoring western unionism's uniquely radical nature. Denver had been a hot-bed for radical union thought. Davis Waite, the governor in 1894, was from the Populist Party and was himself a member of the Knights of Labor.<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Jameson, in her analysis of the Cripple Creek district, notes that the miners subscribed to the labor theory of value and to a producerist perception of society (their social positions relied on whether they were wage earners or not).<sup>21</sup> The strike witnessed the intervention of the state, and the ultimate victory of the WFM would eventually lead to the formation of larger and more cohesive labor groups dedicated to the industrial model of unionization and specifically designed to be an alternative to the American Federation of Labor (AFL) model of trade unionism.

### The Strike

The Cripple Creek strike of 1894 was widely regarded as a success for organized labor, and it set the tone for the emerging discussion taking place within the ranks of labor in the United States. After the Panic of 1893, the price of silver plummeted, leading to the closing of some of Colorado's largest silver mines. However, gold was stable, and this led to silver miners switching to gold mining, causing a surplus of available labor, encouraging the gold mine owners

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<sup>20</sup> David Brundage, *The Making of Western Labor Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 130.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Jameson, *All That Glitters: Class, Conflict, and Community in Cripple Creek*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 12.

to make the miners work longer hours for less pay. The mines' operators offered miners different pay and hours, ranging from \$2.50 to \$3.00 per day in wages for eight to ten hours of work. The owners colluded after the Panic in order to impose uniform wages, and they decided that on February first all mines would impose a ten hour rule (for \$3 pay) while some offered \$2.50 for eight hours. One week after the new rule came into effect, on February 7, the WFM struck the mines, demanding \$3 for eight hours, and the owners were in disarray. By the end of March, the owners offered to provide arms to the El Paso County sheriff, M. F. Bowers, if he would break up the strike. Sheriff Bowers agreed, and when he sent the newly-deputized forces to Cripple Creek, they were met by armed strikers and a pitched battle ensued, claiming a number of casualties. Governor Davis Waite issued an order to disband the sheriff's forces, but when Bowers refused to obey the order, the Governor sent the state militia to intervene and protect the workers.<sup>22</sup>

By April, most of the mine owners had given into the union's demands and were working again at eight hours, but seven of them were still holding out against the strike. These were the ones held by the owners with the largest stake in the new railroad being built to the district, with David Halliday Moffat as the most prominent of the mine owners and also owner of the Bimetallic Bank in the Cripple Creek district. In May, the owners paid for Sheriff Bowers to deputize 1,200 men, and 200 of them met strikers at Bull Hill and were turned away after the miners seized a non-union mine, the Strong Mine, and its shaft house was destroyed in an explosion. A pitched battle occurred as the miners moved towards Colorado Springs, anticipating another attack, and they were met by 300 of Bowers' men. The battle resulted in some casualties and union men were arrested, during which time some non-union workers were

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<sup>22</sup> Jameson, 54-56.

rescued from the Strong Mine shaft and held hostage in exchange for the arrested miners. On May 26, Governor Waite intervened again, calling for an end to the hostilities and declaring Bowers' posse to be an illegal army. Waite visited Cripple Creek and left with John Calderwood (the WFM president) to arbitrate a settlement with J. J. Hagerman (another prominent mine owner) and Moffat. On June 4, Moffat and Hagerman conceded to the miners' demands and effectively ended the strike. However, Bowers' 1,200 new deputies continued their march onto Bull Hill, where the miners were camped out. On June 6 they entered the camp, cut telegraph wires and exchanged shots with the miners. Waite again sent the militia to intervene. They arrived the next day, on June 7, and camped between the sheriff's army and the miners. Waite ultimately had to threaten to impose martial law as Bowers refused to disband his army, and the conflict was finally resolved when deputies were disbanded, the mines returned to the owners, and a series of trials placed some union men in prison for destruction of property.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, the strike proved a success for the miners, who won their demands of \$3 pay for eight hours work. The role of the governor was pivotal in their victory, and the conflict showed the strength and power of the mine owners when dealing with the miners. There were, of course, various interpretations of the event. Colorado Springs was largely Republican and allied with the mine owners, while the Cripple Creek district was more Democratic or Populist and allied with the working class. Establishing what the labor press and the popular and business press were discussing in regard to this strike will help to demonstrate how people viewed the role of the state and of labor in the industrial economy. This event is particularly telling because it occurred in the midst of a broader discussion taking place in the American labor movement

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<sup>23</sup> Jameson, 56-59.

about the most effective way to organize workers. The strikers' success at Cripple Creek in 1894 stands out as an important event in this context.

As with all events in history, this strike happened within a broader national context that was experiencing a period of industrial and social upheaval. The Cripple Creek strike of 1894 began in February, though it did not reach dramatic levels until mid-March. Later that month, Jacob Coxey led his army on a march to Washington, D.C. The next month, soft rock miners went on strike at bituminous coal mines across the country. Then, in May, the American Railway Union (ARU) began a strike in Pullman, Illinois which led to one of the most dramatic and widespread strikes in American labor history. With these events as a backdrop, it seems that the struggle of a small (though significant) mining district in Colorado went largely unnoticed. Indeed, this was the case, and the impact of the strike in Cripple Creek against the mine owners did not gain very much attention outside of Colorado until historians later wrote about it in connection with the Western Federation of Miners and its contributions to western unionism.

### Covering the Strike

Before the strike, much attention had been paid to the Cripple Creek district from varying sources and for different reasons. The district was geologically unlike the other major gold mining regions in Colorado, and some even wondered whether gold would be found there in any significant amounts. Cripple Creek quickly became world renowned for its remarkably high quality ore and it began being compared to other mining districts in the world, such as the Rand in South Africa.<sup>24</sup> When the panic of 1893 caused the price of silver to plummet, silver mine owners across Colorado began downsizing their silver mining operations and shifted their focus to procuring gold from the Cripple Creek district. Because silver miners were out of work, the

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<sup>24</sup> T. A. Rickard, "Cripple Creek Gold Mines and the Stock Boom, *Engineering Magazine* 10 (1895): 607-611.

subsequent flooding of the labor market for gold miners led the owners to try to negotiate lower wages from their workers, with the numerous unemployed silver miners eager to take their jobs at lower pay.

When one examines what was written about the Cripple Creek strike of 1894, it quickly becomes clear that not much was really written about it at all. Colorado and major national newspapers had the most comprehensive national coverage of the strike, but besides that, the affair received just a few short sentences (if even that) in other periodicals. Some religious journals found the space to write about it and there were features in the largest of the popular periodicals, but in the bigger labor publications, the strike was largely overshadowed by the other strikes and events taking place where workers were agitating for other gains for the working class.

Outside of Colorado, the strike was covered by most of the country's major newspapers with varying levels of depth and interest. An examination of the coverage from the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* demonstrates that with the exception of the *Wall Street Journal*, each paper reported regular updates beginning when Governor Waite sent the state militia in response to the mistaken report of Sheriff Bowers' death in March 1894 and then ceased when the miners reached an agreement with some of the mine owners (excepting the holdouts). All of them resumed regular updates in May when the mine owners paid to deputize 1,200 men and an armed conflict seemed imminent.

None of the reports from these major newspapers was from the perspective of the miners, but in some articles it was revealed that the reporters were working with and interviewing the mine owners. A March 19 article in the *New York Times* explained a "conference" held of mine owners and militia leaders which determined to aid the El Paso County Sheriff in the strike. The

article cryptically referred to the strike as “the organization that seems now to have some purpose beyond making eight hours’ labor a day’s work” but failed to explain any further how the strike might signify more than a dispute over wages.<sup>25</sup> On March 18, the *Washington Post* referred to “Bloodthirsty Mrs. Waite” and included their opinion that she was “the power which sits behind the Colorado Gubernatorial chair.” At the end of their coverage on this day, the discussion of the actual strike and the miners’ demands was explained: “The miners insisted on working only eight hours a day, the owners wanted nine hours, and pending a settlement of the dispute the miners struck.” The fact that the major holdouts leading to the strike had demanded ten hours, and the obvious inclusion of the modifier “only” when discussing the demand for “only eight hours” shows a deliberate attempt to persuade the readers against the miners.<sup>26</sup> This sort of antagonism to the miners was common from these major papers.

The way in which the strike was reported is also significant. The drama and the possibility of bloodshed seemed to fascinate and captivate the journalists more than the stakes of the strike. When violence did break out in late May, the *Los Angeles Times* covered confrontations as if it were reporting on a battle: “The night was dark, the only light being furnished by a pale moon through breaks in the fleeting clouds” The May 27 article set the tone for the battle: “[the deputies] were met with volley after volley from the Winchesters carried by the miners.”<sup>27</sup> This tone was shared by the other newspapers, with considerable attention paid to the possibility and the excitement of battle. Very little space was given to the substance of the strike. It was never very clear what the strikers were demanding and what the mine owners were asking for, though it was mentioned occasionally in a sentence every couple of days. Rather than

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<sup>25</sup> “Soldiers at Cripple Creek,” *New York Times*, March 19, 1894.

<sup>26</sup> “Blood Not to Be Shed,” *Washington Post*, March 18, 1894.

<sup>27</sup> “Night Attack,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 1894.

treating the conflict as an industrial dispute over wages or exploring the broader issues such as industrial unionism, producerism, private property and the ethics of the miners' militant tactics (or of the mine owners' tactics), it was almost entirely reported as one would report a war.

Troy Rondinone, in his work on industrial conflict and the media, has examined the ways in which industrial conflict was reported in the years after the American Civil War. He discovered that “big strikes were painted as wars.”<sup>28</sup> He notes that framing strikes in this way “creates narratives that compel certain interpretations by virtue of what *is* and *is not* included.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, when strikes are framed as wars, victory may be defined as the return to social order, to the status quo. Using this conceptual framework, it becomes clear why the major newspapers would frame strikes in this way.

One final note on how these major newspapers reported the strike concerns how they portrayed the striking miners. While they all maintained a semblance of professional objectivity, there is evidence that they at times portrayed the strikers as anti-democratic rebels trying to subvert the foundations of the republic, and the prominent mine owners as the defenders of the state and of liberal values such as private property. On May 31<sup>st</sup>, the *Los Angeles Times* ran an Associated Press Leased-Wire Service article about the trip that Governor Waite made to the miners' outpost on Bull Hill. The article reported that he was “escorted to the empire of Bull Hill and accorded an interview by the emperor, John Calderwood,” and it referred to “His Excellency, the Governor.”<sup>30</sup> The *New York Times* reported on the “lunacy” of Governor Waite and his wife, drawing on a statement that she made to the Denver Chamber of Commerce: “she went to extremes in giving her views, and proved that the spilling of human blood had no terrors

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<sup>28</sup> Troy Rondinone, *The Great Industrial War: Framing Class Conflict in the Media, 1865-1950* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Emphasis his.

<sup>30</sup> “Not Attacked,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 1894.

for her,” the *New York Times* explained of Mrs. Waite; the article went on to explain that “her arguments are believed to have had great influences with the Governor”<sup>31</sup> The *Washington Post* referred to the “belligerent miners” and noted the indignation of the citizens of Cripple Creek at “being left defenseless” after the troops withdrew.<sup>32</sup>

This sort of reporting is a sign that the newspapers were less focused on objectively portraying the issues of the strike than they were on promoting a particular ideology or point of view in regard to the strike. Michael Schudson looks at the transformation of the media and notes that it was right around this time period that newspapers (he particularly looks at the *New York Times*) began to transition from reports riddled with editorial comments towards an ideal of objectivity. He notes that it was specifically in 1896, just two years after this strike, that “the *New York Times* began to climb to its premier position by stressing an ‘information’ model, rather than a ‘story’ model, of reporting.”<sup>33</sup> “Journalists before World War I,” Schudson writes, “did not subscribe” to the notions of objectivity and suppression of values in their writing.<sup>34</sup> It was not until after World War I that journalists “lost faith in the verities a democratic market society had taken for granted.”<sup>35</sup> According to Schudson, the apparent bias and the sort of blatant anti-worker comments that were seen in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* would not have seemed peculiar to contemporary readers.

While national coverage of the strike was almost entirely restricted to the major newspapers, it was discussed briefly in some minor journals. *The Congregationalist*, a publication from the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, discussed the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> “Militia at Cripple Creek,” *Washington Post*, March 19, 1894; “Troops Ordered Home,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 1894.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 5.

<sup>34</sup> Schudson, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

“Cripple Creek war” and decried Governor Waite as “fanatic, intensely partisan, wily, adroit, exceedingly obstinate and teeming with vagaries,” and claimed that “nearly all the men of business experience and intelligence are arrayed against him.”<sup>36</sup> The *Review of Reviews* in 1896 published “The Story of Cripple Creek,” which detailed the history of Cripple Creek up to that point; it described Moffat as “a Midas” who built the railroad to Cripple Creek and drove its industrial development, but asserted that the district’s development was set back a year because of a strike backed by an “erratic governor.”<sup>37</sup>

Overall, coverage of the strike was sparse. It was mostly covered only in the major newspapers, and it was covered more like an uprising or a war than an industrial dispute. What coverage had been published was exceedingly critical of both the Populist Governor Waite and the miners, and it seemed inherently biased towards the mine owners. A careful examination the labor press revealed virtually no coverage of the strike from that perspective.

### National Impact

The Cripple Creek strike of 1894 proved a unique strike for its time. It was one of the early examples of a state governor calling out the state militia in an industrial strike, and it is the earliest example of the state militia not being used to end the strike by protecting nonunion workers. Likewise, the miners were organized under an industrial union model which organized the workers according to their industry rather than their particular trade. Lastly, it was a strike that was won outside of the AFL and without their support.

It seems that such a strike would have been widely reported and studied by owners of capital as well as workers. When the mine owners realized that they would not be able to use the

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<sup>36</sup> Rev. James H. Gregg, “From Colorado—A Review and Forecast,” *The Congregationalist* 79 no. 40 (October 1894).

<sup>37</sup> “The Story of Cripple Creek,” *Review of Reviews* 13 no. 2 (February 1896).

state government to quell the strike, they pooled their funds and paid for the county sheriff to deputize 1,200 men, raising a *de facto* private army. The miners, realizing that these forces were coming for them, responded by stocking up on arms and creating a fort at Bull Hill, away from the citizens in the nearby towns.

Perhaps it was this militant nature of the strike that contributed to the strike's near-nonexistence in the broader consciousness. The national newspapers that reported on it seemed to view it as a battle being waged in a wild western mining district. It did not seem to capture the attention of other workers who were taking part in Coxey's Army, the nationwide bituminous coal strike led by the United Mine Workers, or the Pullman strike being waged by the ARU. As the *Wall Street Journal's* coverage indicates, owners of capital were happy to downplay the events and their significance. Their intentions could have included trying not to spread the workers' model and tactics, trying to calm potential investors, or other reasons that are not easy to understand without their having written about them.

Finally, the strike may not have been more widely reported in the labor press simply because it was unlike anything that had really been witnessed before, and because it was carried out directly contrary to the views of Samuel Gompers and the AFL. This strike had been organized by the WFM under the industrial model, just as the ARU had been organized during the Pullman strike, which coincided with this conflict. Gompers used his influence and that of the AFL to attack the Pullman strike, which he opposed from the beginning, as impulsive.<sup>38</sup> For Gompers and the AFL, the Cripple Creek strike would have been a much smaller version of the Pullman strike: producerist in intent and rhetoric, and organized under the industrial model. This, coupled with the other events occurring at the same time, could explain why the Cripple

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<sup>38</sup> Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 135.

Creek strike of 1894 was largely missing from the labor press—as it was from broader discussions of the labor question.

### III. Leadville, 1896-1897: Both Sides of the Story

#### Introduction

In 1894, shortly after the Cripple Creek strike had “revealed the class fissures within the [Populist] party,” Davis Waite had lost the governorship to Republican Albert W. McIntire.<sup>39</sup> McIntire had tried to maintain an even-handed approach to the strike, but he ended up revealing himself to be on the side of the mine owners by deploying spies to report on the Cloud City Miners’ Union (CCMU). William Philpott argues that this spying on behalf of the governor, along with the presence of the troops, severely limited the ability of the union to protect its interests in the strike, and that the state ultimately sealed the strike’s fate.<sup>40</sup> The Western Federation of Miners (WFM) had continued using the industrial model that it had achieved such resounding success with two years earlier in Cripple Creek. The WFM had begun the strike affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), but by the end of it, Gompers had refused them aid, and the president of the WFM, Edward Boyce, was prepared to withdraw “from Gompers’ ‘autocratic’ control.”<sup>41</sup> The Leadville strike of 1896 represents a continuation of the industrial model, as well as the beginning of western unionism’s solid break from the broader national movement, represented by them leaving the AFL to form the Western Labor Union (WLU) the following year. This chapter will lay out the main events of the strike and their coverage, but then will examine some interesting new information concerning the 1896 presidential campaign that may explain the way the strike was covered, and why the newspapers would be interested in suppressing the news.

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<sup>39</sup> John P. Enyeart, *The Quest for “Just and Pure Law”* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 110.

<sup>40</sup> William Philpott, *The Lessons of Leadville Or, Why the Western Federation of Miners Turned Left* (Denver: Colorado Historical Society, 1994) 43-44.

<sup>41</sup> Enyeart, 123.

## The Strike

Two years after the strike at Cripple Creek had been resolved, the price of silver had recovered from the drop it saw during the panic of 1893 and the city of Leadville was seeing great returns. In *The Lessons of Leadville*, William Philpott notes that “by 1895 the city’s mines had recovered impressively, posting their largest combined output (measured by value) since 1889, and returning Leadville to its position as Colorado’s most productive mining camp.”<sup>42</sup> Even though most of the mines had been closed in 1893 as a result of the economic crisis, the Knights of Labor (which represented the mine workers at the time) agreed to a sliding scale that allowed mine owners to pay miners \$2.50 when silver was below 83.5 cents per ounce.<sup>43</sup> In 1896, the Knights of Labor no longer represented any Leadville miners. Even though the price of silver still had not climbed above 83.5 cents, Leadville’s local of the Western Federation of Miners, the Cloud City Miners’ Union (CCMU), represented close to 90% of Leadville’s miners, and they wanted to return to the \$3.00 per day standard.<sup>44</sup>

Two committees from the CCMU had visited various mine owners in the district, who rejected their requests. On June 19, the evening of the second rejection, the CCMU held a meeting at which the workers voted almost unanimously to go on strike until their demands were met. Instead of meeting with the union to discuss their demands, the mine owners responded by closing down all of their mines, effectively doubling the amount of miners who now had no work, and would soon join the CCMU. As in the Cripple Creek strike two years before, David H. Moffat was one of the chief mine owners, and in partnership with Eben Smith, owned some of the largest mines in the Leadville district.

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<sup>42</sup> Philpott, 30.

<sup>43</sup> Philpott, 95, note 2.

<sup>44</sup> Philpott, 2.

Shortly after the strike began, the owners of twenty-nine of the district's mines entered into an agreement that they would not accede to any demands by the CCMU, nor would they recognize the CCMU under any agreement unless such an agreement was accepted by a majority of those twenty-nine owners.<sup>45</sup> On August 13, the mine owners presented an "August offer" which adjusted the original scale, offering miners \$2.50 when silver was below 75 cents per ounce, and \$3.00 when it was above that. They did not offer union recognition for the workers. The miners refused the offer, and the owners responded by threatening to hire strikebreakers to reopen the mines.<sup>46</sup>

The owner of the Coronado Mine, which was conspicuously located close to the houses of many of the strikers, began fortifying its premises; by August 22, it became clear that it was preparing to reopen.<sup>47</sup> Tensions began to flare. In the early morning hours of September 20, dynamite exploded the shaft house of the Coronado mine. Shots were exchanged between the guards and the perpetrators for roughly fifteen minutes. Gunfire rang out throughout the night, and the Emmett Mine successfully repelled an attack that was aimed at destroying it as well. In all, five men were killed that night. Governor Albert McIntire ordered out the militia, which arrived the next evening.

While tensions flared, there were no more violent outbursts. The militia remained in Leadville for another four months, providing security and safety for the growing number of strikebreakers who were imported from states with weak union sentiments—particularly southern Missouri. The strike became a protracted stalemate; the mine owners were beginning to operate again using strikebreakers, and did not seem interested in arbitration with the union. The

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<sup>45</sup> Philpott, 31.

<sup>46</sup> Philpott, 2-3.

<sup>47</sup> "Bound to Start," *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 1896.

influential labor leader Eugene V. Debs (who just two years previously had led the American Railway Union strike in Pullman, Illinois) visited the Leadville district to reach an agreement, but was unsuccessful. The Colorado state legislature's Strike Investigation Committee produced a report on February 14, 1897, which faulted both sides of the dispute and ordered that they submit to arbitration.<sup>48</sup> On March 9, the CCMU, less than half the size it had been at the strike's beginning in June 1896, voted overwhelmingly to end the strike, having won no concessions from the owners.

### Covering the Strike

Leadville was already a well-known district in America. It was the highest-altitude mining district in the United States, and its mines were well known for producing great amounts of silver each year. The price of silver had been recovering steadily since the panic of 1893 and the district—preparing for a year of great prosperity—had inaugurated the year 1896 by constructing a grand ice castle. This feeling of excitement in the district must have equally affected the miners. Though the price of silver had not risen above the current price scales (as negotiated under the Knights of Labor), the miners had witnessed the success of the WFM at Cripple Creek in 1894, and realized that their Cloud City Miners' Union represented a majority of the miners in the district.

Much as they had done during the strike in Cripple Creek two years earlier, the press paid little attention to the strike at its beginning. It only drew real attention after the destruction of the Coronado Mine, as evidenced in the pages of the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Boston Globe*, *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. These six newspapers used Associated Press wire reports, but they all also published original reporting on

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<sup>48</sup> "Report on the Miner's Strike," *New York Times*, February 21, 1897.

the strike, and three provided editorial comments that reveal their disposition towards the strike. However, unlike the Cripple Creek Strike of 1894, and perhaps because of it, this strike did receive attention from the national labor press; in particular, it received some (though not significant) coverage in the American Federation of Labor's *The American Federationist*.

Of the five major newspapers, only the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* even reported on the beginning of the strike. They both detailed the demands of the union, and the *Chicago Tribune* even noted that the miners wanted union recognition, though neither of the articles specifically mentioned the CCMU or the WFM by name. The rest of the newspapers began reporting on the strike only after the Coronado Mine was destroyed on September 20. Immediately after the destruction of the Coronado, most of the newspapers abandoned any sympathy for the strikers, and on the whole, press coverage blamed the strikers for the prolonged strike. Yet this was not always the case, as occasionally an article would appear to blame the mine owners for refusing to consider such minor demands as the ones the miners were making.

For the labor movement across the country, it was immediately clear that the destruction of the Coronado Mine would significantly reduce public sympathy for the miners. In October 1896, *The American Federationist* reported on the event and declared indignantly that “it is an insult to imagine for a moment” that the organizers of the strike in the CCMU “would countenance, much less encourage or permit, a conflict of this character.”<sup>49</sup> The article later maintained that the miners would be exonerated, and that the mine would be found to have been destroyed by “some enemy’s scheme or [by] rough and over-zealous outside sympathizers.”<sup>50</sup> Two issues later, a brief editorial explained why the miners were asking for \$3.00, explaining that “\$3 a day in Leadville has no greater purchasing power than \$2 a day in Denver”—a

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<sup>49</sup> Bulletin, *The American Federationist* 3 no. 8 (October 1896): 164.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

perspective that was completely absent in all of the major newspapers.<sup>51</sup> After the strike ended, *The American Federationist's* eulogy noted the heroism of the miners; it observed that “every scheme that the opposition, with the power of wealth[,] could bring, was utilized,” and still maintained that the efforts of the striking miners were warranted and noble.<sup>52</sup> For *The American Federationist*, the official publication of the AFL and the voice of organized labor in America, the miners were justified in their demands and were up against a powerful opposition that was able and willing to use a wide variety of strategies to crush the strike.

Outside of *The American Federationist*, in the more widely-read newspapers, there was a very different way to read the strike. When the strike began and the only newspapers that reported on it were the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*, the coverage seemed overall not to be overtly editorial. There were no official statements issued by any of the mine owners regarding the strike, and the *Los Angeles Times* even noted that the CCMU had received letters of sympathy from other unions across the state of Colorado.<sup>53</sup> Though some of the newspapers did note the terms of the strike, and especially later into the strike some would even identify the WFM and the CCMU by name, none ever mentioned that union recognition was one of the workers' main demands and one of the chief issues at stake in the strike. In some newspapers, such as the *Boston Globe* and the *Wall Street Journal*, it seemed as though the strike offered nothing interesting or that they were unaware of what was happening. The *Boston Globe* ran a special by reporter Frank Carpenter on August 23 (a full two months after the strike had begun) in which Carpenter toured the Leadville district, spoke with various mine owners, and expressed interest in visiting one of the mines. In one interaction with a mine owner who would

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<sup>51</sup> Editorial, *The American Federationist* 3 no. 10 (December 1896): 220.

<sup>52</sup> “Brave Leadville Miners,” *The American Federationist* 4 no. 2 (April 1897): 34.

<sup>53</sup> “The Miners Receive Sympathy from Other Unions,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 1896.

only permit Carpenter to visit the mine if he did not write about his experience, the writer supposedly responded that he wouldn't agree to the request because he was "in Leadville to get the news and not to suppress it."<sup>54</sup> This is an interesting statement considering that his newspaper had not even mentioned that there was a strike occurring there for two months, a fact that also was never acknowledged in his article.

The editorials reveal a glaring hostility to the miners. On the first page of the September 24 issue of the *Los Angeles Times*, an editorial called for martial law in response to the Coronado mine's destruction. It declared, "when the mob rules liberty dies... martial law at Leadville is society's answer to mobocracy."<sup>55</sup> Though the editor would never actually get to see formal martial law in Leadville, he congratulated Governor McIntire on immediately sending troops to calm the situation, and compared it to the Cripple Creek strike of 1894. While Governor Waite did send troops immediately after the outbreak of violence in Cripple Creek, he did not send them to enable the mines to begin operating with strikebreakers; thus the *Los Angeles Times* editor rejoiced that "there are numerous advantages in having a man instead of a jackass in the gubernatorial chair."<sup>56</sup> These editorials became even more hostile as time went on.

On February 18, 1897, five months into the strike, the *Los Angeles Times* published another editorial titled "Our Modern Robespierres," in which the blame for the strike was laid entirely on labor agitators. The editorial didn't decry anyone in particular, but rather painted a caricature of a traveling labor agitator whose commitment to radical ideology caused more harm to the working man than anything that his employer could do. The writer accused "agitators" of living well at the expense of the workers while producing intolerable poverty amongst them, and

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<sup>54</sup> Frank Carpenter, "In the Mines at Leadville," *Boston Globe*, August 23, 1896.

<sup>55</sup> "At Leadville," *Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 1896.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed that “all methods of the agitator are tricky and underhanded, not to say criminal.”<sup>57</sup> The comparison of these labor agitators to Maximilien Robespierre was purposefully used to conjure images of harsh ideologues, driven by radicalism, whose commitment to their radical ideology knew no limits, including the destitution of their followers (and perhaps the country itself). Because of the protracted strike and the gradually-increasing weakness of the strikers, Leadville seemed to embody this image for the *Los Angeles Times*’ editorialist.

On March 15, 1897 The *Chicago Tribune* published an editorial that blamed the Leadville strike on a “walking delegate” from Coeur d’Alene, home of radical and militant miners and viewed as the birth place of the WFM’s militant strategy. Rather than noting the fact that the mine owners refused to consider any settlement that didn’t involve the destruction of the CCMU, the editorial blamed the strike (and its failure) on “the poor men who allowed themselves to be led into this fatal blunder.”<sup>58</sup> Two weeks later, the *Los Angeles Times* emulated the *Tribune*’s sardonic prose and again blamed the strike on a walking delegate. It showed no respect for labor leaders, calling Debs a “silly and visionary creature” and proclaimed that these “walking delegates” (business agents, assumed to be labor agitators) had “no higher aim than to create trouble and dissension between *master and man*.”<sup>59</sup> In this sense, the Leadville strike’s failure allowed these newspapers to create the perception that labor unions were antithetical to the interests of the common working man, going so far as to declare the employers and owners of these mines as properly the workers’ “masters.”

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<sup>57</sup> “Our Modern Robespierres,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 18, 1897.

<sup>58</sup> “A Walking Delegate Strike and What it Cost,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 15, 1897.

<sup>59</sup> “For What Good,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 1897. Emphasis mine.

However, even in these major newspapers, the miners were not entirely blamed for the strike and the economic damage that it inflicted on the Leadville district. Occasionally there would be references to the mine owners being unreasonable, and to the fact that their refusal to negotiate with the CCMU was costing the State of Colorado so much to keep the militia in Leadville (\$600,000 for a six months' stay).<sup>60</sup> The *Washington Post* published a letter from the CCMU which asked that Colorado citizens encourage the mine owners to reach an agreement with the union that would end the strike.<sup>61</sup> However, none of the newspapers openly supported the miners, and some, such as the *Boston Globe*, did not publish a single article on the strike without blaming the strikers solely for the troubles in the district.

One of the more interesting articles was published by the *New York Times* on September 20, reporting on the destruction of the Coronado Mine. The article referenced a letter the paper had received from "a prominent business man" in Denver. The writer of the letter claimed that "the newspapers have suppressed all information of violence in order that the camp might not suffer," because the district had already suffered so much economic damage from the strike. The man from Denver seemed most worried that news of the strike might get out to investors and capitalists who were most interested in funding the mining operations. This is most evident by the end of the article, when the business man blamed the strikers squarely for the economic damage, and stated that "unless the miners weaken immediately the doom of the camp is sealed."<sup>62</sup>

However, there may have been another reason that kept the newspapers from reporting on the strike. The year 1896 was a presidential election year, and that July William Jennings Bryan

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<sup>60</sup> "Silver Mine Owners to Blame," *New York Times*, December 19, 1896.

<sup>61</sup> "Miners Appeal to the People," *Washington Post*, November 27, 1896.

<sup>62</sup> "Nice Times in Colorado," *New York Times*, September 20, 1896.

delivered his famous “Cross of Gold” speech to the delegates of the Democratic National Convention. He won the Democratic nomination and campaigned on a platform designed to defeat William McKinley. Bryan’s Cross of Gold speech made bimetallism a major issue of the campaign, and his bimetallism program would have established a gold and silver standard, and would have fixed the value of silver to gold at a ratio of 16 to 1. While the feasibility of this plan was questioned by McKinley’s supporters, it seemed to its proponents that if this 16 to 1 ratio were established and maintained, it would have effectively doubled the value of silver. Although this conversion of value was questioned by some, it was the general belief of the free coinage advocates.<sup>63</sup> Mine owners, and especially those in the largest silver-producing camps, then, had quite an incentive to see Bryan elected president. And they did try. David Moffat contributed heavily to Bryan’s campaign, as did many other Colorado mine owners whose fortunes were tied to the state’s silver mines.<sup>64</sup> In Colorado alone, mine owners pledged \$500,000 for Bryan’s campaign—over \$13 million in 2012 dollars.<sup>65</sup>

The mine owners’ interest in the campaign is evident enough. What made the strike particularly troublesome for Bryan and the Democrats who would have supported him was that Populists were generally allies with organized labor. The free silver platform was generally supported by organized labor because it promised to greatly weaken the power and wealth of the railroads and the capitalists who financed and benefited from them. As was alluded to in the *Chicago Tribune* article “Free Silver and Pay of Silver Miners,” silver mine owners tried to convince their employees that supporting Bryan in the election would lead to greater wages and

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<sup>63</sup> “Free Silver and Pay of Silver Miners,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 17, 1896.

<sup>64</sup> “Cash from Mine Owners,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1896.

<sup>65</sup> Morgan Friedman, “The Inflation Calculator,” <http://www.westegg.com/inflation> (accessed October 27, 2013); Dave Manuel, “Inflation Calculator,” <http://www.davemanuel.com/inflation-calculator.php> (accessed October 27, 2013).

greater riches for them, as much as it would for the mine owners.<sup>66</sup> This is perhaps why, on October 1, the miners declared that they would end the strike if Bryan were elected the following month.<sup>67</sup> However, Bryan himself was always more inclined to represent farmers than to ally with the organized labor movement. Therefore, the strike in Leadville would have presented a thorn in Bryan's side, as some of his major funders were opposing the miners. It would not be difficult to imagine that this was one reason for the Bryan campaign and the newspapers to pay so little attention to the strike. McKinley was not portrayed as a pro-labor candidate, though he had enlisted the founder and old Grandmaster Workman of the Knights of Labor, Terence V. Powderly, to endorse him and travel around to events. Insofar as newspapers did mention McKinley and the strike, it was to note that McKinley had supported preservation of the law, and that he would have come out against the destruction of property during the strike (though McKinley made no statement on this subject that was uncovered in the primary sources).<sup>68</sup> What attention the strike had been given by the newspapers was directed at blaming the strikers for creating an unwanted distraction for the campaign—a distraction the Bryan forces would have preferred to ignore.<sup>69</sup>

## National Impact

As in the Cripple Creek strike two years earlier, the CCMU under the leadership of the WFM used the new model of industrial unionism to organize all of the workers in the mines

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<sup>66</sup> "Free Silver and Pay of Silver Miners"

<sup>67</sup> "The Strike Will Go On," *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1896.

<sup>68</sup> "The Lesson of Leadville," *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 1896. This article points to McKinley as being in favor of government preventing destruction of property. "Bryan Men Seek a Row," *Chicago Tribune*, October 4, 1896. This article describes an event held by McKinley that is interrupted by Bryan supporters. Terence V. Powderly is with McKinley and the article details a speech he gave for why workers should support McKinley. The article makes it clear that Powderly was a minority voice within the labor movement.

<sup>69</sup> George Frisbee Whicher, ed. *William Jennings Bryan and the Campaign of 1896*, vol. 22 of *Problems in American Civilization* (Boston: D.C. Heath Publishing, 1953). None of the primary research revealed any statements by Bryan regarding the strike. Further, the cited secondary work did not mention any striking miners.

under the CCMU, trying to secure higher wages for the workers. When Eugene Debs showed up to seek an agreement, he was not only bringing national attention to the strike and trying to use his influence to reach an amicable agreement, he was also placing the Leadville strike within this greater movement towards industrial unionism. Debs' American Railway Union (ARU) had adopted the model, and the Pullman Strike became one of the largest and most vigorously fought strikes in American history. Debs was one of the first prominent leaders to identify the strikes in Colorado as distinct from the broader labor movement. In a 1902 article, he noted that the Leadville strikers attended the AFL convention in late 1896 (in the midst of the strike) to appeal for aid, and the aid had only been vaguely promised but never received. Debs went on to lay out why these early strikes were so important for the formation of western unionism, which became the clearest example of the new industrial unionism.<sup>70</sup> Unlike the Pullman Strike, which was referenced in numerous newspaper articles from 1896 (two years after the strike), the Leadville strike would not become a major event referenced by organized labor for years to come, and the tactics used during the strike would only find their way into the discussion of organized labor in the context of western and industrial unionism.

The real importance of the Leadville strike was that it showed to the country, and to the world, that western unionism and the WFM were not just a novelty with a few accidental victories, beginning with Cripple Creek in 1894. This explains why the mine owners collectively refused to deal with the CCMU, even though the economic cost of crushing the union would seem to have far outweighed that of meeting the strikers' demands.<sup>71</sup> In the autobiography of Samuel Gompers (the founder and president of the AFL at the time), he noted that it was in 1897

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<sup>70</sup> Eugene V. Debs, "The Western Labor Movement," in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Y. Tussey (Pathfinder Press, 1970), 73-84.

<sup>71</sup> Philpott, 6.

that “the WFM... withdrew from the A.F. of L. and began sowing seeds of disruption.”<sup>72</sup> Gompers and the AFL did not provide the Leadville strikers with the support they asked for because Gompers had suspected that the WFM president Ed Boyce was “determined to subordinate the labor movement to Socialism.”<sup>73</sup> In fact, Boyce had left the 1896 AFL convention reeling when the WFM was refused assistance, and he was determined to have the WFM leave the AFL.<sup>74</sup> Two years later, in 1898, WFM delegates took part in the formation of the Western Labor Union.<sup>75</sup> When the WFM withdrew from the AFL, this seemed to confirm Gompers’ fear that they represented a competing union—an example of what was referred to as dual unionism—which threatened to upset the monopoly on organized labor that was represented by the trade union model of the AFL.

Perhaps the most important impact of the Leadville strike was the effectiveness with which the CCMU was crushed in the district. The mine owners entered into an agreement that was specifically designed to destroy the union, and their efforts were bolstered by the militia (funded by the tax payers) that protected the nonunion workers who were imported to keep the mines running. This hostility by the mine owners, coupled with that of the labor leaders who viewed the WFM as a threat to national organized labor, had the effect of radicalizing the WFM. The WFM helped establish the WLU, and by 1902 it had changed its name to the American Labor Union (ALU).<sup>76</sup> By the next Cripple Creek strike in 1904, members of the WFM and ALU would openly espouse radical syndicalism. William “Big Bill” Haywood would emerge from this strike as one of the most radical and militant voices in organized labor, and would work

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<sup>72</sup> Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1984), 125.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Enyeart, 123.

<sup>75</sup> Enyeart, 124.

<sup>76</sup> David Brundage, *The Making of Western Labor Radicalism: Denver’s Organized Workers, 1878-1905* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 137.

to create the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1905. The origins of this spirit of radical unionism can be found, then, in the Leadville strike of 1896. In Leadville, the mine owners had thoroughly rejected the CCMU's call for more pay and more leisure time, and the AFL had unofficially declared them as heretics to the Gompers model. The labor question was entering a new phase, in which some of the potential answers looked increasingly dangerous to capital.

## IV. Colorado Coalfield Strike, 1913-1914: Two Worlds

### Introduction

In the height of the Progressive Era and just before the outbreak of the First World War, industrial tensions were running high all across the country. The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) had organized Colorado's northern coal fields and had been striking for two years by the time they decided to turn their efforts to Southern Colorado. In Southern Colorado, the main areas affected by the strike were in Huerfano, Las Animas, Fremont, and El Paso counties; the principal population centers in these counties were the cities of Trinidad, Pueblo, and Colorado Springs.<sup>77</sup>

The strikers in Cripple Creek and Leadville had been hard rock miners organized under the Western Federation of Miners (WFM). After the Leadville strike, the WFM had produced an alternative to the American Federation of Labor (AFL) by establishing the Western Labor Union (WLU), and the WFM ultimately played a pivotal role in the formation of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1905 which sought to upset the moderate AFL and provide a producerist alternative to the philosophy provided by Samuel Gompers and the AFL.<sup>78</sup> The UMWA had organized the soft rock miners in Colorado and had prepared for a strike. The UMWA and the WFM were not entirely different; they both saw mining as dangerous work that appeared to produce great wealth for the mine owners (often at the expense of the workers), they both organized workers according to an industrial union model, and they were militant in their tactics. The UMWA organized the coal miners, a majority of whom were living in company towns owned and administered by the same mine operators for whom they worked. The UMWA

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<sup>77</sup> "Unions Fail to Close Colorado Coal Mines," *Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 1913.

<sup>78</sup> The WLU was a federation of unions, very similar to the AFL. Though the word "federation" appears in the WFM's name, it was not actually a federation in the same way as these two. Rather, the WFM was a union that represented miners, whereas the WLU was a federation that represented all of its member unions, like the AFL.

represented an ideology that was less concerned with a producerist philosophy; their chief efforts were aimed at making the mines safer, allowing workers to be paid in legal tender (as opposed to the scrip system common in company towns) and gaining shorter working hours.<sup>79</sup> However, the WFM and the UMWA had a lot in common, as evidenced by their joint efforts to provoke federal investigations into industrial disturbances, and to call a national general strike in response to both the Ludlow Massacre and the simultaneous violent suppression of the WFM's copper miners in Michigan.<sup>80</sup>

Ultimately the Colorado Coalfield Strike shows that the UMWA had organized workers along industrial lines and had taken a militant stance against the State of Colorado when Governor Ammons had deployed the National Guard; they were truly representative of the western unionism that had been laid out by the WFM. However, the UMWA did not use the language of producerism in the way that the WFM and the IWW had done. Instead, the UMWA's involvement in the Colorado Coalfield Strike represents a confounding element to the labor question because it had all of the radical and anti-Gompers elements that were indicative of western unionism, but it acknowledged and accepted the need for workers to be active in the sort of economic democracy that was envisioned by Progressive-Era reformers.

## The Strike

The Colorado Coalfield Strike was a major strike called for by the UMWA that encompassed almost all of the major coal fields throughout Colorado. Though most of the strikes were contained to southern Colorado, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that there were

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<sup>79</sup> John P. Enyeart, *The Quest for "Just and Pure Law" Rocky Mountain Workers and American Social Democracy, 1870—1924* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 145-148.

<sup>80</sup> Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 277.

miners out on strike as far north as Boulder.<sup>81</sup> By September 1913, the UMWA had organized the miners in the southern fields in response to the poor working conditions and the conditions of the company towns. Most of the miners lived in mining camps that were owned by the company that employed them, and these were known as company towns. In Colorado, these towns featured modern houses, modern medical facilities, and schools that educated the foreign miners in English and gave the miners' children a chance to escape a life of labor. Thomas Andrews, in his book *Killing for Coal*, calls these company towns an example of "new paternalism," because even though they offered these things to the miners, the miners were in turn expected to shop at the stores owned by the company, were subjected to harassment by the company guards, and were not allowed a voice in the administration of these company towns. The colliers and their families were aware of the contradiction between these conditions and the liberty and democracy that America prided itself on, and they quickly became critical of the pseudo-feudalism in which they were forced to live.<sup>82</sup>

By September 1913 the UMWA was already engaged in a strike in northern Colorado with Northern Coal and Coke Company. The strike, three years old by this time, had been barely limping along when the UMWA decided to begin organizing the southern fields in an attempt to stem the flow of strikebreakers from that region.<sup>83</sup> Union officials tried to meet with representatives from the Colorado Fuel and Iron (CF&I), Victor-American, and Rocky Mountain Fuel companies (the three largest coal companies in the region). Their efforts were rebuffed by the mine operators and in late August 1913, the union organizer Gerald Lippiatt was murdered in Trinidad by agents of a spy agency hired by the companies to report on suspected union

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<sup>81</sup> "Unions Fail to Close Colorado Coal Mines," *Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 1913.

<sup>82</sup> Andrews, 199-200.

<sup>83</sup> Scott Martelle, *Blood Passion: The Ludlow Massacre and Class War in the American West* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 60.

activities.<sup>84</sup> It became clear to many of the miners that a strike was imminent. In meetings led by UMWA executive member John Lawson and the famous labor agitator Marry Harris

“Mother” Jones, the miners organized under the UMWA and adopted their demands:

- 1) Company recognition of the UMWA as the workers’ bargaining agent.
- 2) 10% increase in tonnage rates, coke oven workers’ wages, and all other wages.
- 3) Eight-hour work day for all workers.
- 4) Pay for “narrow” and “dead” work.<sup>85</sup>
- 5) Officials that weigh the coal to be elected by the miners.<sup>86</sup>
- 6) The right to have wages paid in legal currency or notes so miners could shop in any store (not just company stores) and to choose their own boarding.
- 7) The state of Colorado to enforce its own law and abolish “the notorious and criminal guard system.”<sup>87</sup>

The workers set the deadline for the companies to respond for six days away, on September 23, 1913. When the deadline came, the operators had prepared for the strike by agreeing to assist each other in keeping their mines operating, and to refuse any recognition (formal or informal) of the UMWA. Miners began striking even before September 23<sup>rd</sup>, but when the day came, miners from all across southern Colorado stopped work. The strike had enough support by miners to reduce coal production in October to 29 percent of the previous October’s output (from 420,086 tons in 1912 to 121,680 tons in 1913).<sup>88</sup> In the months leading up to the strike, the UMWA had anticipated that the striking miners would not be allowed to continue living in the company towns, and had begun buying up land in the region from sympathetic land owners in order to establish tent colonies.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, when the strike officially

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<sup>84</sup> Andrews, 235.

<sup>85</sup> This refers to work that is necessary to reaching and extracting coal, but because the miners were paid only by tonnage of coal retrieved, it was unpaid, therefore “dead” work.

<sup>86</sup> The men who weighed the coal and determined the pay rates of the workers were exclusively chosen by company officials. This created suspicion among workers that there would be inaccurate reporting on weights.

<sup>87</sup> Andrews, 238.

<sup>88</sup> Martelle, 77.

<sup>89</sup> Martelle, 68-69.

began, families were told to leave their homes, and in some instances were forced out by company guards.<sup>90</sup>

What ensued was a protracted and highly charged conflict between the miners and the operators. The operators had continued employing mine guards, and throughout the first month of the strike, the guards and the strikers met each other in various armed clashes. On October 7, the first of what would be a series of skirmishes occurred when the superintendent of the Victor mine was shot at when he approached the Ludlow tent colony, located roughly twelve miles north of Trinidad. Shooting between the mine guards and the strikers continued for two hours until the superintendent and the guards turned back, carrying a wounded guard, the first casualty since the strike officially began.<sup>91</sup> Ten days later, mine guards approached the Forbes tent colony and were met with gunfire from the strikers. The guards turned the machine gun, “which heretofore had been used for show of force only,” on the tent colony and opened fire, killing one and mortally wounding two more.<sup>92</sup> Various scuffles continued to transpire, and on October 26, a battle that lasted for twelve hours in the Ludlow tent colony killed a mine guard and spurred Colorado Governor Elias Ammons to dispatch the state militia to the strike zone to stop the violence. By the time the militia had entered the strike zone on October 28, more than two dozen people had been killed in the fighting (with casualties on both sides, including innocent bystanders).<sup>93</sup> Ammons put Adjutant-General John Chase in charge of the militia; Chase was the same person who had overseen martial law ten years earlier, the last time the Colorado National Guard had been called out to a labor dispute, in the Cripple Creek strike of 1904.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Andrews, 247-248.

<sup>91</sup> “Strikers Defeat Guards in Clash,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 8, 1913.

<sup>92</sup> “Use Machine Gun in Strike,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 18, 1913.

<sup>93</sup> Andrews 255.

<sup>94</sup> Martelle, 123. *Chase was also a Captain Major and was stationed in Leadville during the 1897 strike.*

Chase used the militia to rule the strike zone under *de facto* martial law, even though it was never officially declared by Governor Ammons. One of Chase's primary directives from Ammons was to disarm everyone in the strike zone—both the mine guards and the striking miners. Chase confiscated the miners' arms, often through warrantless searches, and summarily arrested those he suspected of being union radicals.<sup>95</sup> Ammons organized a conference in late November designed to serve as a forum for the miners and the operators to lay out their differences and troubles in the open so that a peaceful and agreeable solution could be reached. Thomas Andrews notes that the transcripts from the conference reveal that “miners and operators found it impossible to agree on even the most minor points.”<sup>96</sup> While no agreement was reached in the conference, Andrews notes that it “provided the coal companies with the leverage they needed to trick Elias Ammons into shifting his stance, thus placing the weight of the state of Colorado behind the operators.”<sup>97</sup> The mine owners agreed to all but one of the miners' demands; they refused to recognize the union. When the miners turned down Ammons' declaration, he became frustrated with them and the operators appeared to have the support of the governor.

After the conference, Ammons ordered Chase to provide protection so the operators could import strikebreakers, something that he had previously explicitly ordered him not to do. In early December, strike leaders were indicted by a federal grand jury for breaking the Sherman Antitrust Act and creating a monopoly of labor in the southern coal fields.<sup>98</sup> The Colorado National Guard was being stocked with new recruits, many of them dually employed by the coal

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<sup>95</sup> Martelle, 133.

<sup>96</sup> Andrews, 258.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Andrews, 267.

operators as mine guards.<sup>99</sup> In January 1914, when Mother Jones came to the district to show support and to reinvigorate the strikers, she was held in Trinidad and then deported back to Denver. She returned to Trinidad, was arrested by Chase, and was held in the San Rafael Hospital for ten weeks without being charged for any crime.<sup>100</sup> The House Committee on Mines and Mining launched an investigation into the strike, and for four weeks Representative Martin D. Foster of Illinois investigated the cause of the strike and the conduct by both sides. When the investigation concluded on March 8, it found that the National Guard appeared to be on the side of the operators, and though it also found fault with the miners, the investigation largely condemned the conduct of the operators and the National Guard.<sup>101</sup> As if in a sort of epilogue to the proceedings, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the majority shareholder and chair of the board of directors of the Colorado Fuel & Iron company, testified regarding the strike in Colorado in front of the House Committee on Mines and Mining in Washington, DC. Rockefeller made his intentions clear: he and his associates would rather “lose all of their millions invested in the coal fields...” than recognize the UMW as the bargaining agent for their workers.<sup>102</sup>

Shortly after this, Governor Ammons ordered that all but 200 National Guard troops be withdrawn from the strike zone. The ones who remained were almost entirely in league with the operators; many either were employed by CF&I or Victor-American or had previously been before the strike.<sup>103</sup> Thomas Andrews describes the mood in the strike zone: “It was a formula for disaster: two armies preparing for a battle that both had come to perceive as inevitable. In this context of paranoia, threat and counterthreat, any enemy movement seemed to presage a full-

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<sup>99</sup> Andrews, 268.

<sup>100</sup> Martelle, 153.

<sup>101</sup> Martelle, 156.

<sup>102</sup> “Rockefeller, Jr., Defies Union Rule,” *New York Times*, April 7, 1914.

<sup>103</sup> Andrews, 270.

blown assault.”<sup>104</sup> On the morning of April 20, militia officers met with Louis Tikas, the leader of the Ludlow camp, to discuss a claim that a man was being held in the camp against his will. Tikas returned to the camp to investigate and then met again later with Major Hamrock to tell him that the man wasn’t there, and that the military had no authority since Ammons had withdrawn the National Guard from the area. Militia men with machine guns had been stationing themselves around the camp all morning, and made the strikers nervous. The strikers armed themselves and moved out of the camp and into the nearby arroyo, a maneuver that was interpreted by many as an attempt to move a potential battle away from the tent colony and away from their families.<sup>105</sup>

It’s not clear which side fired the first shot, but what occurred was as near to an all-out battle as the Colorado Coal Strike would see. Both sides began relentlessly barraging each other with bullets. Another company of the National Guard arrived from Trinidad and reinforced the militia, driving the armed strikers back into the hills. As Ludlow lay defenseless, the National Guardsmen entered the camp. When militiamen moved from the hills into the camp, a fire began and spread through the tents. Louis Tikas, trying to help the defenseless in the camp, was discovered by some of the militia soldiers and taken to Lieutenant Linderfelt, who argued with him over which side had started the battle. Linderfelt smashed his rifle’s stock over Tikas’ head and left him with another miner, James Fyler, after which both were summarily executed by the National Guard soldiers. The real horror of the event, which earned this battle the title of the Ludlow Massacre, was the discovery of a pit in the camp. These pits were common in the tent colony, providing shelter from the gunfire that was indiscriminately fired into the camp on a frequent basis. One of these pits contained the bodies of three women and eleven children,

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<sup>104</sup> Andrews, 271.

<sup>105</sup> Andrews, 272.

suffocated when the burning tent sucked the oxygen out from the pit where they were hiding.<sup>106</sup> In all, at least nineteen miners and family members were killed; one National Guardsman was killed in the shooting.

What followed was what became known as the Ten Days War: a virtual insurrection of miners that took control of the strike zone. According to Thomas Andrews, “By the time the fighting stopped... the strikers had killed more than thirty strikebreakers, mine guards, and militiamen, destroyed six mines, and laid Forbes [tent colony] and parts of other company properties to waste...”<sup>107</sup> President Woodrow Wilson ordered in the United States Army to end the insurrection and ordered Ammons to withdraw the National Guard as soon as the Army arrived. The fighting had spread from Trinidad all the way north to Louisville, a span of 225 miles.<sup>108</sup> After the destruction of Forbes by miners, another group of miners engaged with the militia near the town of Walsenburg, where the battle eventually wore down (claiming five lives) and a truce was agreed between the miners and the militia. The following day, the Army came into the region and disarmed both sides, and the National Guard was disbanded and its members sent home.<sup>109</sup>

The strike wore on for another eight months. The federal troops were under orders not to allow the companies to import strikebreakers, but they did not stop miners from seeking work at the mines. Because of this, operators were able to begin putting the mines back to work, almost completely breaking the strike. The UMWA leadership saw the writing on the wall and tried to end the strike, but the operators continued to refuse to negotiate with a union for any purpose, even if it was to call off the strike. On December 10, 1914, the UMWA leadership voted to end

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<sup>106</sup> Martelle, 161-176. Andrews, 1-6.

<sup>107</sup> Andrews, 278-279.

<sup>108</sup> Martelle, 197.

<sup>109</sup> Martelle, 207-210.

the southern coalfield strike, and in the process, also voted to end the northern coalfield strike as well. The UMWA had exhausted their funds, having spent more than \$870,000, and admitted defeat in the Colorado coal fields.<sup>110</sup>

### Covering the Strike

Unlike the Cripple Creek strike of 1894 and the Leadville strike of 1896, the Colorado Coalfield Strike was picked up almost immediately by a variety of publications. At the time, the Western Federation of Miners had been involved in an unrelated strike in the copper fields of Michigan. There had been a charged feeling across the country, with the Industrial Workers of the World fanning the flames of discontent, but there was no other major labor dispute occurring when the UMWA miners pulled out of the mines in Colorado's southern coalfields.

The southern coalfields were a large contributor to the nation's coal supply, and one of America's most well-known capitalists had his company, the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company, stationed there. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. had been given a controlling stake of shares by his father, John D. Rockefeller, Sr. The famous labor agitator Mother Jones had been involved with the UMWA from the beginning of the strike, and other labor leaders were watching closely. Colorado's organized labor had truly reached the national stage. The UMWA had been trying to organize Colorado's coal fields since 1910, and so when they declared a strike in the southern fields, the press paid close attention to what was sure to be a showdown between a large and well-resourced union and the Rockefeller family.

Reporting on the conflict was polarized from the beginning. There were few moderate voices in the press, a fact that reveals itself by the disparate interpretations of the strike and the events surrounding it. Thomas Andrews notes that "the companies also proceeded to enlist

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<sup>110</sup> Andrews, 285.

sympathetic newspapers” that would portray the strikers unfavorably.<sup>111</sup> There also were labor-friendly publications that covered the strike, providing a platform for the UMWA to make their case to the public and provide a counter-argument to the views expressed by the nation’s largest newspapers.

These major newspapers included the *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. From the beginning, these newspapers knew that it would be a drawn-out confrontation. On September 24, the *Wall Street Journal* declared that “little hope for a peaceful settlement is entertained.”<sup>112</sup> The strike was generally reported as just a strike; most articles listed the demands of the union and the numbers reported to have walked out on that day. They all noted that the operators were not cooperating with the union and had insisted that they would refuse to negotiate, no matter the cost. Coverage by these major newspapers was sparse, though when violence broke out throughout October it would be reported on as if it were a battle, and they were all interested when Governor Ammons issued the call for the National Guard to enter the strike zone in late October. They all covered the federal investigation by the House Committee on Mines and Mining with great interest, and reported the findings of the investigation in detail. After the massacre at the Ludlow tent colony, the newspapers followed events closely, though with an attempt to blame the miners for the battle. What is most particularly interesting about the major newspapers is the information and news that they ignored compared to the stories that they were eager to report on.

The *Los Angeles Times* represented the most vehemently anti-union of the newspapers. A weekly section ran in the newspaper at this time titled “The Strike News of this Uneasy World,” and on November 9, the newspaper applauded Governor Ammons for bringing the

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<sup>111</sup> Andrews, 244.

<sup>112</sup> “Colorado Labor Situation,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 24, 1913.

National Guard to the district. It favored Ammons' initial order to prevent strikebreakers from entering the district because doing so would only serve to "[aggravate] a situation of this kind." There was no attempt by the *Los Angeles Times* to disguise their distrust of unions. The same report later urged the mine operators and the miners to reach an agreement, though "one that will not call for 'recognition of the union' (industrial slavery) by the employers."<sup>113</sup> This represents what appears to be an effort by the mainstream press to adopt the rhetoric of labor in order to discredit organized labor. Rosanne Currarino notes that advocates for the producerist model of citizenship had adopted this language of wage slavery in the postbellum years, and that workers before the Civil War would "compare their wage work to the enslavement of African Americans."<sup>114</sup> It seems that the *Los Angeles Times*' equating "recognition of the union" with "industrial slavery" is drawing on the antipathy of slavery that was common in the North, and especially in major industrial areas.

Seemingly out of nowhere, the report continued that "Idaho Hayward [sic] and his I.W.W. gang should, at their next outbreak, be faced with the rifles and the force of State or Federal troops." This was particularly curious because the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) didn't play any direct role in either the agitating or the organizing of the miners in the Colorado southern coalfield.<sup>115</sup> However, the IWW was a common name, and their radical ideology created a lot of anxiety in the broader middle-class population. The IWW was largely blamed for inspiring the bombing of the *Los Angeles Times* building in 1911 by John and James McNamara. The "Wobblies" (as members of the IWW were known) espoused a philosophy of syndicalism, which encouraged sabotage of the means of production in order for the working

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<sup>113</sup> "The Strike News of this Uneasy World," *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1913.

<sup>114</sup> Rosanne Currarino, *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 40.

<sup>115</sup> "The Strike News of this Uneasy World," *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1913.

class to achieve their demands. John Enyeart notes that this became wildly unpopular even among the western miners who were openly affiliated with the Socialist Party.<sup>116</sup> It would seem that for the major newspapers to suggest connections to the IWW would serve a dual purpose of swaying the broader public opinion away from the strike, while also appealing to the more moderate unionist.

After the massacre that occurred on April 20 and amidst the Ten Days' War, the *Los Angeles Times* published an editorial, titled "The Treason of Lawless Labor Unions," which pointedly blamed the violence on the union. It noted that "some time ago the miners asked for an increase in wages. The company gave an increase." While technically true, is an incredible oversimplification of the strike. The article blamed "agents of Gompers and Moyers," both of whom were labor leaders unaffiliated with the UMWA directly, and claimed that the union asked for a closed shop. Union recognition was often conflated with a closed shop in these major newspapers.<sup>117</sup> Finally, the editorial ended by blaming the union for "[abrogating] the individual liberty of workers to make them into slaves of union boodlers, the tool of dynamiters."<sup>118</sup> The *New York Times* shared a similar sentiment. On April 27 an editorial again conflated union recognition with the closed shop, and pointed to the uprising of the miners as proof that union radicals believed they were above the law.<sup>119</sup>

Throughout the strike, none of the major newspapers commented on the conduct of the Colorado National Guard under John Chase's command, except solely to express that they all hoped that the National Guard would be able to enforce peace. After the failed conference to

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<sup>116</sup> Enyeart, 210-211.

<sup>117</sup> The concept of a closed shop is that no employee can work for the employer unless he or she is represented by the union. In contrast, union recognition, which the UMWA was asking for, is merely to be recognized as a collective bargaining agent that represents the members who freely join the union and pay dues.

<sup>118</sup> "The Treason of Lawless Labor Unions," *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 1914.

<sup>119</sup> "Class or Country First?" *New York Times*, April 27, 1914.

resolve the strike, Governor Ammons issued a new order to Chase to make it easier to import strikebreakers; this was entirely absent from the newspaper reporting. Likewise, there was never any mention that the miners felt as though the Colorado National Guard was aligning itself with the mine operators, often enlisting their guards and employees. The reasons for these omissions can only be speculated at, but it would seem unlikely that they were simply unknown facts. Strike leaders had been publicly making these claims since the National Guard first set foot in the strike zone. In comparison, three of these newspapers charged that the miners had rifled through a post office and deliberately destroyed mail, though there was never any follow-up on this charge, nor did it appear as a significant event in any of the secondary sources.<sup>120</sup> The claim that workers were interfering with the mail was famously used as a pretext in the Pullman Strike in 1894 for President Grover Cleveland to call in the United States Army and arrest the strike leader, Eugene Debs, effectively ending the strike.<sup>121</sup> In this light, it would seem that the effort by these newspapers to charge the miners with tampering with the mail was a coordinated effort to put the possibility of federal intervention into the public consciousness.

In the labor and reform press, the operators were much more highly scrutinized, and the miners were portrayed as hardworking men who were just seeking to realize the American dream. Where the newspapers were careful always to qualify any statements that would appear sympathetic to the strikers, these pro-labor journals were much more frank and detailed. A February article from *The Survey*, a sympathetic reform journal, examined the grand jury indictment from December which charged the strike leaders with violating the Sherman Antitrust Act and establishing a monopoly of labor. The author pointed out the indictment's

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<sup>120</sup> "Strikers Storm Two Mines," *Chicago Tribune*, October 30, 1913.

<sup>121</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky and Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America: A History*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2004), 158.

acknowledgement that most of the demands made by the miners were already state laws that were not being enforced. What *The Survey* acknowledged that most of the mainstream popular press had not was that the grand jury indictment was equally critical of the coal operators, even though they had not received a grand jury indictment. This article further points out that the National Guard no longer appeared to be a neutral enforcer of peace, but rather was enforcing a *de facto* state of martial law by arresting many strike leaders and holding them *incommunicado* until the military commission decided to hear their cases.<sup>122</sup>

In the pro-labor magazine *The Masses*, Max Eastman described the Colorado Coalfield strike after the attack on Ludlow. Early in the article, Eastman emphasized the national significance of the strike and explained that it “is not local, and moreover it is not ‘western.’”<sup>123</sup> He explained that the Ludlow tent colony was strategic because it was located just next to the railroad, and so “held the strategic point for warning strike-breakers on incoming trains.”<sup>124</sup> The article itself occupied a full four pages of the issue, and was supplemented with drawings that portrayed the atrocity of the Ludlow attack and a cartoon that portrayed John D. Rockefeller, Jr. as a king sitting at his throne at 26 Broadway, with President Woodrow Wilson on his knees in front of him holding a sheet of paper with “Please End the Colorado Strike” written on it.<sup>125</sup> Eastman detailed the conditions of the strike, portrayed the strikers as generally peaceful, and then summed up the various skirmishes and attacks on the tent colonies that eventually led to the battle on April 20. In the end, Eastman explored the implications and justifications for the Ten Days War. “Is it a thing to regret or rejoice in that Civil War followed?” he asked.<sup>126</sup> “For once

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<sup>122</sup> Witt Bowden, “New Developments in the Colorado Strike Situation,” *The Survey* 31 (February 14, 1914): 613-614.

<sup>123</sup> Max Eastman, “Class War in Colorado,” *The Masses* 9 no. 37 (June 1914): 5.

<sup>124</sup> Eastman, 6.

<sup>125</sup> Eastman, 8.

<sup>126</sup> Eastman, 8.

in this country,” he exclaimed, “middle ground was abolished.”<sup>127</sup> He ended the article by celebrating the destruction of property: “the most bloodless would find joy in going up the valleys to feed his eyesight upon tangles of gigantic machinery and ashes that had been the operating capital of the mines.”<sup>128</sup>

## National Impact

The Colorado Coalfield Strike, and particularly the Ludlow massacre, represented for many the cruelty of an industrial system that would rather kill innocent women and children than provide better lives for their workers. Looking at it through the long lens of history, the strike seems to have been inevitable. The militancy of the miners and the aggressive organizing strategies employed by the UMWA resulted from decades of efforts by these same companies to eradicate unions. As Max Eastman and Governor Ammons himself even noted, the battle was not being fought in Colorado alone. Unions had been gaining in strength and were radicalizing. The WFM was waging a strike in the copper mines in Michigan when the Colorado Coalfield Strike was called on September 23, 1913. Likewise, the IWW was growing and recruiting new members on a regular basis, and they were a household name, representing the epitome of the division of views regarding organized labor. The *Los Angeles Times* derided them as the “Industrial Workers (wreckers) of the World,” and other newspapers denounced them as being anti-liberal zealots bent on destroying private property and the industrial order. The IWW was formed in no small part by Eugene V. Debs, who in the 1912 presidential election secured 6% of the popular vote as the candidate from the Socialist Party of America (representing 900,000 votes, the highest percentage of the popular vote that any Socialist candidate would ever receive

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

in a federal election). Clearly, many American workers felt that they were losing to industrial forces that sought to keep them from achieving a fair standard of living, and that they were not being represented by any of the traditional powers at the time.

The Colorado Coalfield Strike witnessed a sort of alliance between the WFM and the United Mine Workers when both unions endorsed a general strike in the United States, which was only narrowly rejected by the American Federation of Labor at Samuel Gompers' insistence.<sup>129</sup> This alliance was very informal and only existed inasmuch as officials of each union were in discussion with each other and were seeking various ways to achieve assistance and federal action on behalf of their respectively violent and militant strikes. The Ludlow massacre and the failure of the Colorado Coalfield Strike inflicted deep wounds within the ranks of organized labor. Eugene Debs wrote in the September 1914 issue of the *International Socialist Review* that the UMW and the WFM should establish a gunmen defense fund with the purpose of arming miners with rifles and providing "enough Gatling and machine guns to match the equipment of Rockefeller's private army of assassins."<sup>130</sup> He represented the hopeless feeling of workers across the country, exclaiming that "you have absolutely no protection under the law."<sup>131</sup>

From the perspective of capital, the coalfield strike represented the need to provide a sort of pressure valve. The policy of refusing to hear workers' grievances and forcing them into a scrip system in the company towns had erupted in Colorado into a violent confrontation that left John D. Rockefeller, Jr. with an enormous public relations catastrophe. This did not, of course, lead to the recognition of any union, but instead ushered in the era of the company union.

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<sup>129</sup> "Nationwide Strike is Moyer's Hint," *New York Times*, January 6, 1914.

<sup>130</sup> Eugene Debs, "The Gunmen and the Miners," *The International Socialist Review* 15 no. 3 (September 1914): 161.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

Colorado Fuel & Iron adopted the Colorado Industrial Plan in October 1915, which established an internal process for worker representation and was effective in addressing some of the most dangerous aspects of the work that had claimed the lives of many miners. Similar models took off over the next two decades as attempts by employers to provide a means for workers to present their grievances, thereby undermining one of the primary reasons for workers to join an independent union.<sup>132</sup> Though historians have dismissed these company unions as merely a union-busting tactic, they did help mitigate or reduce the immediate material dangers faced by many workers.<sup>133</sup> On top of this, and perhaps more importantly for the owners who were adopting this model, it enabled them to portray their companies as being worker-friendly and responsive to the needs of their employees.

What is most clear from examining the Colorado Coalfield Strike of 1913-1914 and the Ludlow massacre is that they represented perfectly the division between workers and capitalists in American society. The complexity of the strike and the issues surrounding it defied reasonable dialogue and conference. These events represented to the nation the full division between the working class and the elite business class. The scrip system and the use of company towns directly confronted the issue of citizenship in America. Because more than half of the demands by the UMWA were asking for the state to enforce its own laws, the Colorado Coalfield strike represents another interesting aspect to the labor question in connection with progressive reforms. The situation for miners in southern Colorado did not afford wage earners even the most fundamental freedom of choice (to be paid in legal tender and to shop where they pleased), and it also confronted the Progressive-Era model of reform. Workers had already

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<sup>132</sup> Martelle, 214.

<sup>133</sup> Dubofsky and Dulles, 230-231.

achieved an eight-hour work day, an end to the scrip system, and an end to company guards in the state of Colorado, but they were powerless in getting the state to enforce those laws.

When the dust cleared in Southern Colorado, the labor question had been blown apart and the results seemed to confirm that workers were not to be viewed as citizens; they were being excluded from the political and social realms and now also from the economic sphere as consumers. The radical wing of organized labor was reinvigorated after this strike and briefly seemed to pose a threat to the AFL model, until U.S. involvement in World War One brought on both a severe red scare against radical unionism and the AFL's willing incorporation into the war effort. By joining the war effort and allowing the AFL to stand idle as the union radicals were systematically attacked both legally and through vigilantism, the AFL had secured its model as the prevailing concept of citizenship in the new economy. Ultimately, the Colorado Coalfield strike represented one more milestone in the long debate over the labor question, momentarily resolving it by adopting the AFL model of the worker-citizen as a consumer.

## **V. Conclusion**

This thesis has looked at three strikes in Colorado's history. The Cripple Creek strike of 1894 marked the first major victory for the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) in Colorado, demonstrated the militant tactics of the union, and benefited from the intervention of a sympathetic governor. The Leadville strike in 1896 solidified western unionism under the industrial model, but it also saw absolute resistance to the union by the mine owners, resulting in the eventual loss of the strike. In 1913 the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) initiated the Colorado Coalfield strike: a conflict that would continue for almost an entire year, that would represent a complete falling out between the miners and the mine owners resulting in pitched battles, and that would end in failure for the miners after the Ludlow massacre erupted onto the national scene and haunted Americans all across the country.

The reason for looking at these three strikes was because they were emblematic of the type of radicalism and militancy that defined western unionism. These strikes were carried out by miners who had adopted a philosophy and ideology that sought to transform the capitalist and industrial mining system—a system that had created dangerous working conditions for them but had not adequately paid them or given them the time off to actively participate in the democratic socialism that was characteristic of the Denver region. The Knights of Labor (KOL) had once pursued such goals in Colorado, but they no longer represented a substantial number of workers after the Haymarket Affair in 1886. Outside of the West, this hole left by the KOL's demise was happily filled by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which did not question the capitalist system and maintained a trade union model for organizing. In the West, however, the decline of the KOL was met with the rise of a more radical and militant unionism.

This western unionism was not specific only to Colorado. Butte, Montana and Coeur d'Alene, Idaho also experienced hard-fought strikes by miners organized under the WFM. Restricting the thesis to Colorado was helpful for the geographic cohesiveness of the region, but most particularly in being able to look at the shifting political atmosphere. It is not difficult to see the impact that the Cripple Creek strike of 1894 had on the election that swept Davis Waite out of the gubernatorial seat and brought in Albert McIntire, who oversaw the Leadville strike. Likewise, the way that these governors had handled the strikes would serve as a caution to Elias Ammons when the Colorado Coalfield strike occurred and he was forced to try to balance both interests. While a broader analysis of western unionism would need to incorporate the strikes and activities outside of Colorado, it was useful for this thesis to be able to specifically examine the changing role of the state over the course of these three strikes. Based on the research for this thesis, I would speculate that a similar analysis that encompassed unionism in the broader mining West would find similar results. When labor leaders at the time spoke about western unionism, they did not confine it to Colorado, and the newspaper articles about the Colorado strikes made frequent references to the other areas as well.

Roseanne Currarino's formulation of the labor question is useful and important for examining the type of discourse that was taking place during the time regarding American citizenship and the place of the worker as a consumer. She ultimately seems willing to dismiss western unionism as a peripheral discussion that only sought to provide a temporary alternative to the Samuel Gompers and AFL "more" model. However, western unionism represented more than just a marginal aspect of the labor question. Currarino states that the Pullman strike of 1894 represented the final expression of the producerist model of citizenship on a large scale, yet she does not account for the fact that the Cripple Creek strike was also occurring at the same time.

Given that the Cripple Creek strike in 1894 was the first major expression of the new western unionism, Currarino cannot adequately account for this. This thesis has sought to bring western unionism into the labor question more substantially than it has been by previous historians.

The Cripple Creek strike in 1894 ultimately did not have much of an effect on the labor question. Currarino is correct in noting that at the time, there was no large-scale alternative to Gompers' model of "more." The strike's significance lies in its success and the effects that flowed from it. The WFM had organized miners using the industrial model, they had received support from the Governor, and they were ultimately successful. This laid the framework for future strikes and efforts in Colorado that would have far more important impacts on the labor question.

Leadville in 1896 showed the lasting effect of the Cripple Creek strike two years earlier. Using the same model, miners in the Cloud City Miners' Union (CCMU) under the WFM organized along industrial lines. The significance of the strike lay in the decisive breaking with the AFL. Gompers had clear misgivings regarding western unionism and he was not shy about showing that. This strike ultimately complicates Currarino's assertion that Pullman was the last large-scale effort by producerists. The Leadville strike was comprised of a significant number of workers in the district, and the fact that the WFM broke from the AFL was almost directly a result of Gompers' actions. The creation of the Western Labor Union (WLU) in 1897, which would turn into the American Labor Union (ALU) in 1902, and which both helped give rise to the IWW (established in 1905) were all expressly designed to offer an alternative to the AFL. While it's true that membership in these three organizations never achieved anywhere near the membership of the AFL, western unionism was pivotal in actually creating an alternative to the

AFL. However, there would not be another large-scale and viable alternative to the AFL until the Congress of Industrial Organizations broke from the AFL over thirty years later.

Of the three strikes under consideration, the Colorado Coalfield strike represents the most complete contribution to the labor question. By fighting the company town, the scrip system, the reduction in wages, and the long working hours, the UMWA adopted the consumerist model of citizenship. The fact that the UMWA used the industrial union model for organizing its workers only shows that while they may have disagreed with Gompers on tactics, they did not disagree on the basic premises. One way to look at the strike would be to examine the major companies—the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company, Victor-American, and the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company—and their efforts to control their workforce by pushing them into company towns. Thomas Andrews notes that this was a deliberate attempt to “inculcate subservience and loyalty” into the workforce.<sup>134</sup> By creating these towns and reducing their workers to the status of serfs (they did not own the land and they were not given any say over the administration of the towns), the company owners had created a situation in which the fundamentals of citizenship were appallingly violated, and particularly so under the consumerist model. The feat of allowing the workers control over their own houses and their towns seemed like a radical enough improvement in their lives, so appropriating the means of production was not necessary. While the UMWA had appears to have adopted (tacitly or not) this philosophy, it was the reaction that the rest of the radical labor movement had to the strike, and particularly to the Ludlow massacre, that represented the greatest challenge to the AFL.

Colorado’s place in the labor question had evolved over time. Initially, it did not play a prominent role on the national level. As time wore on and continuing industrial strife led to

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<sup>134</sup> Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America’s Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 197.

workers seeking an alternative to the hegemonic AFL, western unionism became a model worth copying. The militant nature of the strikes, along with the industrial union model, was emulated all across the country for decades to come. The national steel strike of 1919 and the battle of Blair Mountain in the Virginia Coalfields in 1921 were both organized under the industrial model and were both militant in nature—as would be the 1936-1937 sit-down strike in Flint, Michigan, which began the wave of successful mass unionization during the New Deal era. While the importance of western unionism has not gone entirely unnoticed by historians, this project has sought to discover how the Colorado strikes affected the way that contemporaries conceptualized and discussed the labor question in America, and to suggest some long term implications of those debates.

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