

John Mitchell

by Jim Steinberg

Many of the miners had tears in their eyes. John Mitchell had just announced that he was resigning from the presidency of the United Mine Workers of America. It was the 1908 convention of the UMW of A. For a decade John Mitchell had led his union through the trials and battles necessary to survive and grow. Through losses and victories, in the unending effort to improve the lot of the miner and protect him from the excesses of the mine bosses and the inherent danger of his work. After ten years of unflagging devotion to the UMW of A, John Mitchell found the work too much, his health failing, he left the UMW of A and the men he loved. The miners loved him too, and showed it with the many gifts presented to their retiring president. Even the rough hewn Big Bill Haywood of the feisty Western Federation of Miners spoke at the 1908 convention. Though Haywood and Mitchell had previously been enemies, the rivalry was no longer acrimonious.

John Mitchell was born on February 4, 1870 in Braidwood, Illinois. By the age of thirteen he was working in the coal mines. In 1885 he became a member of the Knights of Labor. In 1896 he was secretary-treasurer of a subdistrict of the Illinois United Mine Workers of America. In 1897 he became a member of the Illinois district executive board. He rose to the vice presidency of the UMW of A in 1898. At this point, John Mitchell found himself the virtual president of the union because the actual president; Michael D. Ratcheford was taking no part in the affairs of the UMW of A.

One of Mitchell's first acts was to increase union organization efforts. To this end he sent organizers into Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky and Tennessee. This began to add many new members to the Union. In 1899 the United Mine Workers of America was solidly entrenched and showing good progress under the leadership of John Mitchell. There were contacts with the Western Federation of Miners with regard to the joining of the two unions.

At the age of 28, John Mitchell assumed the Presidency of the United Mine Workers of America on September 8th 1898 when Ratchford resigned. Now the true mantle of leadership belonged to John Mitchell.

In 1902 the union weathered a strike that lasted 23 weeks. In the course of the strike, President Theodore Roosevelt attempted to get the miners and the mine operators to sit down together to negotiate. Ultimately, the banker J. P. Morgan (a major holder in the Anthracite coalfields) proposed a commission. Among those representing the UMW of A on that commission was the champion of labor, lawyer Clarence Darrow. The union won several valuable concessions from the operators on wages and conditions. This was a landmark event. Worldwide, no union had successfully weathered and won such a long strike.

The United Mine Workers of America then began supporting the enactment in every state, of safety and child labor laws and wherever possible, the spread of the 8 hour day.

The UMW of A even became the International United Mine Workers of America in 1905 when organizing succeeded in the Nova Scotia, Alberta and British Columbia provinces of Canada.



Ribbon from 1908 convention of UMW of A. 5 inches tall with ribbon in yellow and black. From the Jim Steinberg collection.



Tea tray with black and white portrait of "Mr. John Mitchell." It is 16.5 inches tall with a red rim. In full color is a miner with pick on the left and a woman with a baby on the right. From the Jim Steinberg collection.

Samuel Gompers' American Federation of Labor of which John Mitchell was second vice president, attempted involvement in politics through elective office in 1907. The UMW of A joined in. The intent was to have labor leaders win elective offices in government. Neither the miners union nor the AF of L had much success in this venture however.

In 1907 John Mitchell's health began to fail. He gave his 10th and last report on the United Mine Workers of America at its 1908 convention. When he started running the union in 1898, the membership was 33,000. A decade later Mitchell presided over a miners union which boasted 263,000 members. From the Eastern states to the West, the UMW of A had contracts protecting the wages and the working conditions of coal miners. Only in the Anthracite fields had the union failed to win past the apathy of many of the miners.

After leaving his UMW of A office, John Mitchell served within the American Federation of Labor as assistant to Samuel Gompers, its founder. The new president of the UMW of A was elected at the 1908 convention; Tom Lewis, elevated from the vice presidency of the union. Mitchell continued to attend

the conventions of the United Mine Workers of America and retained massive influence within the union. It was not unusual for the miners to seek him out to assist in the settlement of their disputes. In 1909, followers of Tom Lewis, jealous of Mitchell's continuing popularity, attempted to pass an amendment to the UMW of A constitution, barring him from ever again holding any office within the union. In 1911 at the UMW of A convention, several days were spent debating whether John Mitchell had a right to remain a member of the union while holding his \$6,000 / year job with the Civic Federation, an organization working to promote good industry-labor relations. The convention finally issued an ultimatum to John Mitchell; he must either give up his membership in the UMW of A or his position within the Civic Federation. Friends of Mitchell telegraphed him in New York of the union's decision. He felt that it was a cruel injustice but recognizing the authority of the UMW of A to do it replied "I submit to your wishes, although I shall live in the consciousness that the men and women at home for whom I worked for so many years, will not concur in your conclusions." Mitchell gave up his lucrative job with the Civic Federation and remained a loyal member of the United Mine Workers of America.

Few are the leaders of such stature that their constituents have a true affection for them. John Mitchell however was such a man, and his leadership was missed within the union for many years.

References:

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