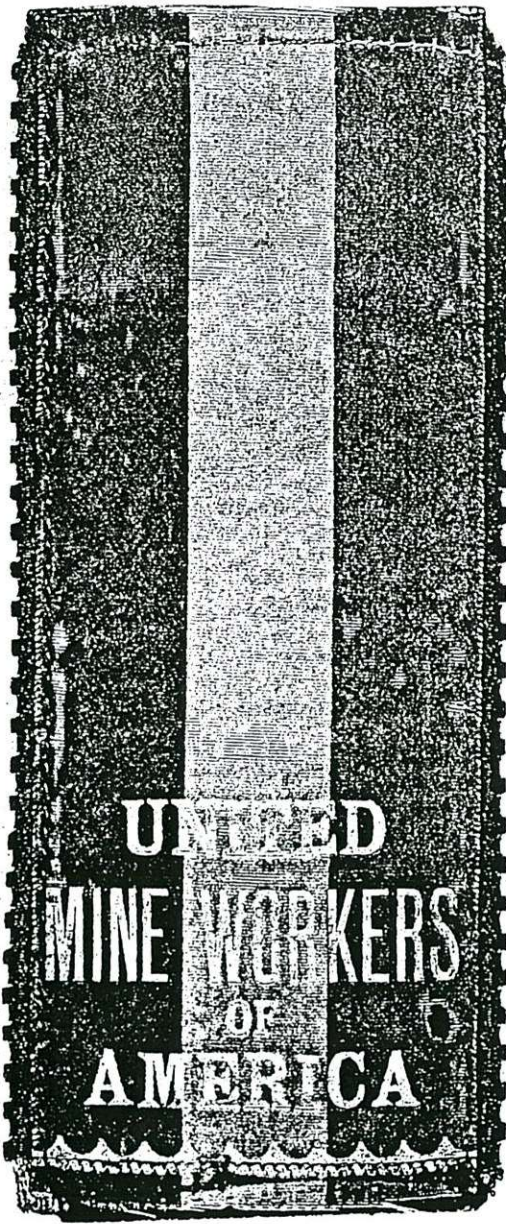


The United Mine Workers of America to 1913

by Jim Steinberg



Founded on January 25, 1890, the UMW of A had as its first president; John B. Rae. Born in Scotland, he started working in the coal mines of Scotland as a boy. He became the Master Workman of the Miners' Trades Assembly of the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor in 1886, only four years after the Miners' Assembly was formed. By July of 1890, the UMW began pressing for the eight hour day. Both the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor pledged their support in this drive. After a series of failed and called-off strikes, a few strikers in Iowa succeeded in getting the first 8 hour day contracts in coal mining.

In 1893 John McBride became the president of the UMW of A. McBride began his career in the coal mines at the age of 15 and joined the Miners and Laborers Beneficial Association shortly after. He also served as the president of the Ohio Miners' Amalgamated Association until 1899 when he became the president of the Miners' National Progressive Union. In January of 1895 he was elected president of the American Federation of Labor in the only election in which anyone ever beat Samuel Gompers. Having become leader of the UMW of A during a depression, he found it difficult to obtain improvements for miners, and instead found the union losing ground on many occasions. In 1893 the UMW of A also became involved in a dispute with Terence V. Powderly, the Grand Master Workman of the Knights of Labor concerning jurisdiction over the Trades Assemblies, formerly with the Knights of Labor.

In 1895 the United Mine Workers of America severed all their ties with the fading Knights of Labor at the annual UMW convention. Phil Penna was also elected president of the UMW of A. With almost no money in the treasury, the union officers had all they could do to keep the UMW of A in operation. Slight pay increases were gained in Pittsburgh and controls obtained on "Company Stores," but the Pittsburgh miners suffered even greater wage reductions within months. Many contracts were ignored and secret miner-operator wage reduction agreements were prevalent, demoralizing the membership. At the 1897 convention Penna declined to run for office. The National Union had less than \$600 in its treasury.

The man elected to replace Penna was Michael D. Ratchford. Having started coal mining at the age of 12, he was 37 as he stepped up to the leadership of the union. Upon observing signs that the depression was ending, on July 4, 1897 the miners of the UMW of A began a strike which would last for 12 weeks. Despite harassment and provocation from the mine operators, the miners followed Ratchford's calm guidance and won public opinion, financial support from the AF of L and ultimately a good raise in the rate of pay per ton of coal. This big win excited many miners, and the membership within the union swelled from 11,000 members to 33,000 paid up members. Finally with \$11,000 in the treasury, the UMW had some money to work with. In 1898 Michael Ratchford began negotiations with Phil Penna who was now working as a commissioner for the mine operators of Indiana. Phil Penna proposed an 8 hour work day to knock out cheap competition to the Indiana mines coming from the mines of Illinois. Both the miners and the Indiana mine operators enthusiastically supported

this. On April 1, 1898, the 8 hour day went into effect in the coal mines covered by this agreement. This was one of the most important victories that the UMW of A achieved and a true moment of glory for Ratchford. On September 8, 1898 he was appointed to a seat on the United States Industrial Commission by President William B. McKinley and left the United Mine Workers of America. John Mitchell stepped up to fill the position vacated by Ratchford. See the separate article on John Mitchell.

In 1908 the UMW chose as its next leader, Thomas L. Lewis. Cold and undiplomatic, he had to lead the union through the years of another depression. Again, the union had to expend all its efforts to avoid cuts in pay. When in dispute, Tom Lewis tended to bully his subordinates into submission, he was after all " the boss". His subordinates, having a good memory of the glorious years of John Mitchell's leadership, looked at Tom Lewis, and found him wanting. They gave him endless resistance and the UMW remained in constant turmoil. Clearly this gave cause to Lewis and his followers to develop a grudge against John Mitchell, which showed fruit in various actions that they took against Mitchell. In 1909, depression turned into panic, and miners were pressed to accept wage reductions. Though most successfully resisted, it was not until April of 1910 that miners in Indiana and portions of Pennsylvania achieved improvements in pay. Later additional states also joined by raising pay rates. One major exception was Colorado where a particularly ugly strike began.



In 1911 John P. White won the presidency of the UMW of A. At convention, the United Mine Workers threatened the American Federation of Labor with secession.. The UMW stated that if the Western Federation of Miners (the union for metaliferous miners) was not granted a full and complete industrial charter , the UMW would join with the WFM to do all those things labor wanted, but the AF of L wouldn't do. The AF of L gave in to the UMW and the WFM got what they wanted.

John P. White was an uneducated but very intelligent leader. Early he faced a problem within the union of "dual unionism" , when districts split up because of internal disputes. At the 1912 convention the union set goals for a 6 hour day and no employment of boys under 16 years of age. The union also put a ban on UMW membership for anyone who was a member of the National Civic Federation or the Boy Scouts. In mid-1912, the UMW negotiated a 10% wage increase and additional improvements in the Anthracite coalfields and achieved UMW recognition from the operators. Better contracts were negotiated in a number of states, but the strike in the Colorado coal fields was still dragging on. Meanwhile the UMW was involved in a nasty situation in West Virginia. The miners were working in bad conditions, at low pay and the union was being subjected to all manner of legal and illegal resistance to organizing. With the state of West Virginia in the pocket of the mine operators, it took a Federal Commission to induce cooperation from the operators. The UMW had won and established a District in the New River valley. By the end of 1913, the United Mine Workers of America had reached a total membership of 377,682.

Reference: Coal and Unionism, David J. McDonald and Edward A. Lynch, 1939, Lynald Books