The movement to nationalize coal in America, 1920s
1890: Formation of The UMWA

- “…entitled to the full social value of their product.”
- Agenda required legislation
  - Safety
  - Payment in legal tender
  - End to company stores
  - Eight hour day
  - End to child labor under 14
  - End to private police
Legislation to regulate mining largely failed
- 1891: PA outlawed company stores
- Miner’s certificate in anthracite
- Workman’s Compensation Act: 1915
- Safety legislation seldom enforced

By 1900, miners began calling for nationalization.
- Joined by portions of the public concerned with price, access, and conservation
- Mirrored developments in Europe
Destructive Competition

- Lack of planning led to overdevelopment of the industry.
  - Slack work (71% of full time)
  - Low wages
  - Unsafe mining practices
  - Waste of coal resources
World War I

- Invigorated rhetoric of democracy
  - Developing vision of industrial democracy
- Positive experience with Fuel Administration
  - Increased safety
  - Protection to join the UMWA
  - Payment in legal tender
  - Steady work under government planning
Post-War Problems

- Crisis of over-development
  - Increasingly slack work
    - 50% of full time labor by 1920
  - Wage cuts and inflation
  - Open shop drive
Cleveland Convention, 1919

September

- President Frank Hayes endorsed nationalization
  - Stabilizing influence of Fuel Administration vs. disorganization of competition
  - Rational use of national resource

- Unanimous vote for nationalization
  - Create a committee to draft a bill for Congress
    - Democratic management (public, miners, experts)
1919 Strike

November

- Nationwide strike in the coal fields
  - Retain wartime wages and conditions
- Marked by operator violence
- President Wilson intervened
  - 14% wage hike
  - Federal Commission
Inaction from the national
1920

- 1920 International Convention reaffirmed commitment to nationalization
- Problems with President Hayes
- Business unionism of John L. Lewis
“A labor movement can never rise higher or go further that its rank and file.”

District President John Brophy
Need for Facts

- Operators maintained control of the industry through control of information.
- “Facts make a fire which cannot be put out.”
- Facts would unite miners and the public in a common desire for nationalization.
- Finding facts required the employment of experts.
The New York Network

- Interconnected groups of moderate socialists, intellectuals, activists, and educators
  - Formed or restructured in 1921
  - All connected to John Brophy through his interest in workers’ education and nationalization
- Separate agendas, but common desire to apply scientific planning to national problems
- Bureau of Industrial Research (BIR)
- League for Industrial Democracy (LID)
- Labor Publication Society (LPS)
- Workers’ Education Bureau (WEB)
- Brookwood Labor College
- American Fund for Public Service (Garland Fund)
- American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)
Bureau of Industrial Research

- Part of the New School for Social Research
- Offered industrial research services
- **Carter Goodrich**, Professor of Economics, University of Michigan
  - Lived in District 2 for a year researching the working lives of miners
  - *The Miner’s Freedom* (1924)
Heber Blankenhorn, investigative journalist

- City Editor, *New York Evening Sun*
- 1921, began project for BIR in District 2
  - Analyze the economic and social ills of the coal industry
  - Instrumental in publicity strategy during 1922 coal strike
  - *The Strike for Union* (1924)
Powers Hapgood

- Harvard graduate dedicated to the labor movement
- Sent by BIR to District 2 in 1921 to live and work in non-union mines and create report of conditions
- *In the Non-Union Mines* (1921)
Arthur Gleason, associate editor of Collier’s Weekly

- Leading activist in workers’ education
- Authored two books about British labor
- Convinced of need for nationalization of mines in Britain and U.S.
- Assisted John Brophy in writing “The Miners’ Program”
The Miners’ Program

1921

- Nationalization of the mines
- National Labor Party
- Full unionization
- 30 hour week

- Refused publication in the UMW *Journal*
  - Ellis Searles, “propaganda, not news”
- Brophy relied on the liberal press for publicity
Summer 1921, Lewis ran for presidency of the AFL

Evaded responsibility for lack of progress toward nationalization
- “personally favored” but “practically an impossibility under our present federal constitution.”

Resolutions Committee recommended a three person committee to study issues
- Passed unanimously
Nationalization Research Committee

- John Brophy, Chair, President District 2, Central Pennsylvania
- William Mitch, Secretary-Treasurer District 11 (Indiana)
  - President of Indiana State Labor Party
- Christopher Golden, President District 9, Anthracite
NRC instructed by Lewis to study the industry, draw up a plan for nationalization, and publicize the plan among the membership and the public.

“...aid in the dissemination of information among our members and the public.”
Involvement of BIR with NRC

- NRC engaged BIR for research and writing
  - 27 categories of facts that were needed, but unknown
  - Legal issues including possible constitutional amendment
  - Coordination with railroad brotherhoods
  - Education of workers and public
    - In November 1921, Brophy spoke in Chicago to the annual meeting of the Public Ownership League
Brophy and Lewis called to testify before Congress. Topics included nationalization.

- Brophy emphasized nationalization as a benefit to miners and the public.
- Lewis testified that nationalization was an “impossibility” under the present constitution.
How to Run Coal
Summer 1922

- NRC recommendation for nationalization
- Intended for distribution to the membership and public
  - Generate debate and revision
  - Final plan intended for National Convention approval in 1924
Elements of the Plan

- Coal lands valued at $1.3-2 billion to be purchased by the federal government
- Creation of a cabinet level Secretary of Mines
  - Permanent fact-finding agency
  - Federal Commission of Mines (miners, engineers, public) to set policy
  - National Mining Council to administer mines
    - 5 engineers, 6 presidential appointees
- Collective bargaining through UMWA
  - Closed shop
  - Retain right to strike
Publicizing the Plan

- Searles refused to publish in UMW *Journal*
  - “not officially approved by the membership”
- Published in liberal press and the journals of other unions
  - Railroad brotherhoods, machinists
- Speaking engagements
  - Union
  - Public
Lewis’ Attack on the NRC

- Chris Golden presentation to the League for Industrial Democracy (December 1922)
- Attack by Searles in the UMW Journal
  - Denounced NRC for “prematurely” discussing its plan at “a meeting of Greenwich Village radicals in New York.”
  - Began campaign of red-baiting, linking NRC to radicals and communists
NRC Resignations

- Intellectuals publicly called on Lewis to renounce Searles and back the NRC
- Committee met with Lewis in early February
  - Lewis made it clear that Searles had his full approval
- NRC members resigned
  - Issued public statements
  - Brophy warned Lewis that he must “either lead according to the wishes of the rank and file, or be swept away.”
Executive Inaction

- Lewis never included nationalization or the work of the NRC in any of his annual presidential reports.
- Resolutions for nationalization continued to pass unanimously at annual conventions.
The LaFollette Hope

1924

- Senator Robert M. LaFollette, Wisconsin
- Progressive Party platform included nationalization of railroads and the nation’s water power
- District 2 organized LaFollette Clubs and promoted the Progressive Party and the local Labor Party through a series of chautauquas and workers’ education classes.
- LaFollette polled almost 17% nationally
  - Died suddenly in June 1925
In 1926, John Brophy challenged Lewis for the UMWA presidency

- UMWA was bleeding membership from a determined open-shop drive
  - Half the nation’s coal was non-union
  - Union miners averaged 1-2 days of work weekly
- Progressive Party was dead.
  - Only the union could promote nationalization
Save Our Union Agenda

- Organize the unorganized
- National Labor Party
- Nationalization
- Reinstatement of progressives expelled by Lewis
Red-Baiting

- Lewis conducted a red-baiting campaign
- Accused Brophy of “communist connections”
- Primary target was Brophy’s campaign chairman, Powers Hapgood
  - Spent the better part of 1924-25 in Europe working in European mines
  - Worked 3 months in Russian mines
    - Praised conditions in Russian mines operating under government ownership
A Stolen Election

- Ballots cast in December 1926
  - Counted locally. Tally sheets sent to national tellers
- Vote traditionally announced in January
  - Lewis held results until June
  - Claimed landslide victory
Brophy Response

- Brophy collected affidavits from local tellers documenting vote manipulation
  - Published a circular letter demanding Lewis’s resignation
- IEB refused to open an investigation
- Brophy prepared to challenge Lewis again in 1928
Expelled from the UMWA

- **Powers Hapgood**
  - January 18, 1927
    - Failure to properly transfer membership between locals in 1921
  - Indianapolis Convention (late January)
    - Beaten twice by Lewis bodyguards
    - Expelled from convention floor
    - Arrested on charges of CP membership
    - Lewis openly repudiated nationalization
    - Resolution to bar communists from UMWA
1927 Strike

- Began on April 1
  - Brophy’s term as District 2 president expired the same day
- Devastating losses
  - Union left a paper shell except in Illinois
    - Districts decertified
    - District presidents appointed by Lewis
Expelled from the UMWA

- **John Brophy**
  - May 27, 1928
    - As he was gearing to run for UMWA presidency
  - Lewis declared Save Our Union to be a dual movement and expelled everyone associated with it.
    - Last of the progressives and challengers to Lewis were no longer part of the UMWA
Legacy

- Movement for nationalization in Europe paralleled US until the late 1920s
  - Failed to gain nationalization in the 1920s, but continued to build labor parties and alliances with intellectuals, activists, and the public.
  - European nations nationalized natural resources, transportation, and energy in the aftermath of World War II
Legacy

- In the US, labor progressives were kept out of the inner circles of the New Deal
  - Industrial democracy was not the vision
- Operators quickly turned to the UMWA with the impending passage of the NIRA
  - Lewis wanted power and prestige within the current system
- All challengers to business unionism were labeled communists
Conclusion

- John L. Lewis is not the only reason that the U.S. never developed a national labor party and never nationalized natural resources, transportation, and power.
- But he is an important part of the story.