

# LIBERTY, SAFETY, CONSERVATION, AND COAL

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

# District 2 Leadership

- ◎ “A labor movement can never rise higher or go further than 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

# 1921 UMWA Convention

October

- 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

# 1922 National Coal Strike

- ◎ 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

# Save Our Union

1926

- 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.