Labor History: The Ludlow Massacre

By Ed Leavy

Though the Colorado Fuel and Iron strike is marking its 100th anniversary this autumn, the lessons and questions it created are still relevant to us today. The strike might still be remembered today because it confronted two of the most important figures in early 20th century labor conflicts – Mother Jones and the Rockefeller family, as represented by CFI President John D. Rockefeller, Jr. The strike must also be remembered because 19 people, including 11 children, were killed in the violence that ensued.

There can be no question that conditions in the Colorado minefields were deplorable. The work was extremely dangerous; 464 miners were killed in 1913 alone. Miners had to live in company housing and shop in company stores, making them wholly dependent on the company. When the inevitable rumblings of unionizing began, the CFI responded with both the carrot and the stick: they agreed to an 8-hour work day and a rise in wages, but also began having foremen drive through the mines in a prototype of an armored car with machine guns fastened to the roof, which they called the Death Special. While Rockefeller Junior was the titular president of the company and its chief stockholder, he remained removed from the day-to-day running of the organization; he never even visited the mines until well after the strike. There can be no doubt, though, that the men running the company believed they were acting within Rockefeller's wishes. His father had stated, "[T]he real object of their organizing… [is] to do as little as possible for the greatest possible pay." Though Rockefeller Junior did not see the situation at the camp himself, neither did he seem particularly interested: when in January of 1910 an explosion in a CFI mine killed 79 men – the Colorado Bureau of Labor Statistics accused the company of "cold-blooded barbarism" for the conditions they kept – Rockefeller never even mentioned it in his letters to the company, focusing only on the profits.

The miners struck on September 26, 2013. President Woodrow Wilson, fearing violence, sent a representative to speak to Rockefeller, who refused to meet him. Instead, he asked Colorado Governor George Carlson to send the National Guard to protect company property. Strikers were forced from their company-owned homes and set up tent villages five miles away. Mother Jones and other United Mine Workers' organizers exhorted them to continue to fight. Rockefeller did not back down either, telling the management, "Whatever the outcome, we will stand by you." The troops, many of whom were deputized solely for this confrontation, followed them to their village. Since both sides were well armed, violence was inevitable and followed in late April, 2014. Guardsmen entered the village to force them out. In the ensuing fight, one Guardsman and four miners were killed. The real publicity, however, came from the fact that two women and eleven children – families of dislocated striking miners – were trapped in a burning tent and asphyxiated. Though much of the nation was horrified by this incident, labeled the Ludlow Massacre, the strike dragged on until December, 2014.

The Massacre seems like a simple morality tale, suffering and courageous workers confronting an uncaring member of the ultra-rich, but life is rarely that simple. It is impossible to demonize the Rockefeller family without acknowledging, however begrudgingly, that their philanthropy in areas such as medicine and education improved the lives of tens of millions of people. While we may dismiss that philanthropy as "blood money," other industrialists equally contemptuous of their workers spent their money far more selfishly. More tellingly, Rockefeller emerged from this experience a changed man. He reached out to Mother Jones, meeting with her in his home and discussing the needs of workers. He took tentative steps to give workers more of a voice; though his actions were inadequate, they were far beyond what his father and other business leaders were willing to take. More surprisingly, Rockefeller's wife began funding women's trade unions and even donating to striking workers. These actions cannot be overlooked, nor can the fact that it required the death of 11 innocent children for the Rockefellers to take them.

Most of the information for this article comes from Titan, a biography of John D. Rockefeller Sr. written by Ron Chernow. If like me, you think a 700 page book on a 19th century industrialist is great reading, I heartily recommend it.