

Labor History: The WWII Coalminer Strikes

By Ed Leavy

John L. Lewis had a genius in two areas – his ability to build and use worker power, and his ability to make enemies. After all, he began his career feuding with two icons of the labor movement, Samuel Gompers and Mother Jones. He was a man whose only goal was to improve the working conditions of the people he represented, and he could care less about who stood in the way of that goal. During World War 2, he defied the entire country to help “his” coalminers.

At the start of World War 2, the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (the groups were separate at the time) had agreed to a no-strike policy for the duration of the war. To control inflation, the government set up a War Labor Board to set wages. The Board settled on what became known as the Little Steel formula. The Board looked at the cost of living from January 1, 1941 until May 1, 1942 and determined that prices had risen 15%. The Board decided that wages would therefore be allowed to rise 15% from their January 1, 1941 level and remain there for the duration of the war. The formula had obvious problems: the raise workers were given only addressed what they had lost, not the rise in the cost of living moving forward. As the war expanded and more manufacturing became dedicated to military concerns, the price of consumer goods would only continue to rise, and wages were frozen.

This tension hurt all workers, but none more than Lewis’s UMW members. Because miners had to live in remote areas, most of their shopping was done in company-owned stores, and the lack of competition drove prices even higher. The miner’s anger and frustration reached the breaking point when the Office of Price Administration gave Western Pennsylvania soft-coal operators an increase in their price of coal; the owners could get more money, but the workers could not. Lewis faced a dilemma: labor had pledged not to strike and the public would be outraged by one, but the miners were being squeezed and losing patience. In fact, miners were already walking out on wildcat strikes at mine throughout the country. Lewis decided that he would stare down both public opinion and President Franklin Roosevelt, and called for a series of strikes. He attacked the War Labor Board in his usual bombastic manner, saying the Board had “fouled its own nest” and “cast its black shadow in the face of Americans who want to work...” He demanded significant wage increases, vacation pay, and “portal-to-portal” pay; miners had traditionally been paid for the time they spent mining and not for the often hour-long travels into the mines buried deep within the earth.

The press predictably cast Lewis and his miners as traitors, and public opinion followed. The AF of L and the CIO, an organization Lewis founded but had left after a feud with the CIO president, both condemned the action. President Roosevelt – he and Lewis shared a mutual hatred that knew no bounds – issued numerous public statements blasting Lewis by name. He angrily announced that the government would take over the mines, insisted that American flags be flown at the mine entrance, and demanded that the miners return to work. The miners didn’t budge; they had a choice of leaders to follow, and they chose Lewis. Lewis himself did see a line he would not cross; after the miners had been out of work for two or three weeks, he would send them back and thus not derail the war effort. Roosevelt was no less angry when they returned; he knew in a matter of weeks Lewis would order them out again. He threatened to have soldiers work the mines as part of the war effort, a threat that was largely laughed at; not only were all the soldiers overseas, and one UMW told the press, “Let ’em try. You can’t dig coal with a bayonet.”

These intermittent, seemingly random strikes proved effective. Lewis repeatedly won his workers gains in salary while other unions, not willing to be seen as unpatriotic, saw their workers fall ever farther behind. When the war ended and wages were “normalized,” Lewis got his workers those raises too. The effect was dramatic. From 1940-1948, mine workers saw

their weekly take-home pay go up over 283% (the increase in hours was largely due to being paid for the portal-to-portal time that had previously been unpaid), plus vacation pay, lunch pay, improved mine safety, and a “welfare fund” that was the precursor to a pension plan. Lewis was willing to stare down intense – and understandable – criticism for putting his workers out on strike during the war, to achieve tremendous gains for his workers.

Most of the information for this article comes from John L. Lewis: An Unauthorized Biography by Saul Alinsky. A special thanks to my son Zak for finding this rare, out-of-print book for my birthday; he knows his dad.