



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Kansas miners strike and women march for industrial freedom, 1921-22

September

1921

to: January

1922

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Kansas*

Goals:

- 1) The release of labor leader Alexander Howat from prison
- 2) The abolition of the Kansas Industrial Court

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 106. Industry strike
- 107. Sympathy strike
- 117. General strike
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 106. Industry strike
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 106. Industry strike
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 4th segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 106. Industry strike

- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 106. Industry strike
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 6th segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 106. Industry strike
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Coal Miners
- Women

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Alexander Howat, Mary Skubtiz, Fannie Wimler, P.L. Howe

Partners:

Sympathetic citizens of southeastern Kansas

External allies:

Illinois District of the United Mine Workers of America, Mother Jones

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- coal miners
- unionized workers in southeastern Kansas

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

- women

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 1 month*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Coal Industry, Kansas Governor Henry Allen, United Mine Workers of America President John L. Lewis (who believed the strike was illegal and politically harmful to the UMWA), Kansas Industrial Court

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

None known

Campaigner violence:

Beatings, throwing of red pepper and lunch pails, sabotage of mines with dynamite

Repressive Violence:

Incarceration, house raids, presence of Kansas National Guard

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Alexander Howat was eventually released from prison and the Kansas Industrial Court disbanded as a result of the campaign.

In the early twentieth century, Kansas was the third largest coal producing state in the United States, with more than 8,000 unionized miners concentrated in the two southwestern counties of Crawford and Cherokee. In January 1920, the Kansas legislature had established a board of compulsory arbitration, known as the Kansas Industrial Court, which banned strikes against unfair labor practices and working conditions. Miners, however, felt that the right to strike was constitutionally grounded, and in September 1921, nearly all unionized miners in Kansas laid down their tools to defend this belief.

The strike began when a county judge convicted and jailed Alexander Howat, president of the Kansas district of the United Mine

Workers of America (UMWA), for violating the Industrial Court's strike injunction. Howat, hoping to create a test case for the U.S. Supreme Court that would result in a ruling against the Industrial Court, had called a small-scale strike in protest of wage inequality at several local mines. When Howat was predictably charged and sent to prison, nearly all Kansas coal miners walked off their jobs in solidarity.

The striking miners' primary objectives were 1) Howat's release from prison and 2) the restitution of their right to strike through the abolition of the Kansas Industrial Court. Leaders of the strike drew up a resolution declaring that, "not one member of the Mine Workers of District 14 will dig another pound of coal until the doors of [Howat's] Bastille... shall be opened." They called the establishment of the Kansas Industrial Court the "Kansas Slave Act" and argued that because it denied miners their constitutional right to strike, it created a system of involuntary servitude comparable to the enslavement of blacks in the pre-Civil War South. Using this logic, miners likened Howat to both President Abraham Lincoln, who had issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and to the radical Kansas abolitionist John Brown

Foes of the strike included coal industry leaders, Kansas's republican governor Henry Allen, members of the Kansas Industrial Court, local law enforcement officials and judges, and UMWA president John L. Lewis. Lewis opposed the strike because he considered the strike illegal as per a national strike injunction dating to the First World War and also because he considered Howat a personal opponent within the UMWA. Lewis and the UMWA International Board successfully suspended Howat along with all striking Kansas miners from the national union. This action significantly weakened the strike, as families could no longer draw strike benefits from the union treasury. One striker noted that, "The International [Board of the UMWA] is against us, and that is the hardest thing we have to contend with." By early December 1921, many Kansas mines had resumed operation as strikers returned to their jobs and coal companies imported workers from other states.

Appalled by this turn of events, the women of the Kansas coalfields decided to take action. Several prominent women—all friends or relatives of striking miners—called a meeting at a union hall in the town of Franklin. At the meeting, which was closed to men, the women drew up a resolution in which they determined to "stand shoulder to shoulder with our husbands in this struggle." They called for the preservation of the strike and disparaged the Kansas Industrial Court, calling it the "Allen Industrial Slavery Law" and asserting that its purpose was "to enslave our children."

The following morning, 12 December 1921, several thousand women gathered before dawn in downtown Franklin. They carried American flags and sang patriotic songs. From Franklin, the women marched to a local mine, where they intercepted miners reporting for work, declaring that the mine was closed and that all patriotic miners ought to support the strike. After successfully stopping work at this first mine, the marching women divided into several groups and spread out to other area mines. Over a three-day period, the women marched on and closed approximately sixty mines throughout the region, bringing coal production in Kansas to a standstill.

The marching women used their gender as a tool of nonviolent action. They were aware that strikes could quickly turn violent, and they hoped that aggressors would be unwilling to target women. Many marchers brought their children with them or even carried their babies. As one participant wrote to a local paper, "we don't want any bloodshed here in Kansas like there was in the Ludlow strike and in Alabama and Mingo County, West Virginia.

Marchers employed several methods of nonviolent direct action. By singing hymns of patriotism, for example, they demonstrated their solidarity and aligned themselves behind a powerful narrative of traditional American values. This was particularly interesting, as many of the marchers were recent European immigrants. Obstructing traffic and disrupting the workplace were also major tactics. In front of one mine entrance, women unfurled an enormous American flag and "dared any man to drive over it."

Despite its primarily peaceful nature, the march did include some violent encounters. Women threw red pepper into the eyes of several working miners, while others pelted miners with their own lunch pails. A number of brawls broke out, and although no one was seriously injured, several men on both sides of the issue discharged firearms to intimidate their opponents. Fear of a violent popular uprising prompted local law enforcement officials to deputize and arm a small army of World War I veterans,

and Governor Allen dispatched four companies of the Kansas National Guard, including a machine gun division, to subdue the marching women.

When the National Guard arrived on 15 December, the women ceased marching, hoping to avoid a violent showdown. Local, state, and federal law enforcers, however, took advantage of the guardsmen's presence and the resulting militarization of the region to arrest participants of the march and to generally target the immigrant families they blamed for the recent disturbances. Officials arrested over fifty men and women, conducted daily home searches under the guise of liquor raids, and deported non-citizens. Nationally, Americans discussed the women's march in the context of both labor debates and gender issues. The prominent socialist Mother Jones called for more women to "Go out and raise hell," while Alice Robertson, the only woman in the United States congress called the march a disgrace "to be deplored by the womanhood of the nation."

Tensions in the Kansas coalfield subsided in early 1922. The National Guard began leaving on January 4, and eight days later, Alexander Howat called miners to return to their jobs, as they had successfully proven the ineffectiveness of the Kansas Industrial Court.

But while the miners' strike and women's march had both officially concluded, the movement against the Industrial Court continued. During the 1922 electoral season, the women of the coalfields traveled across Kansas by train, "electioneering" for candidates who opposed the Industrial Court. They successfully unseated several anti-strike incumbents and even helped elect a labor-friendly democratic governor. In 1924, Howat and his allies won a U.S. Supreme Court case against the Kansas Industrial Court (*Dorchy v. Kansas*, 264 U.S 286), which in 1925, the Kansas legislature subsequently disbanded.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Kansas miners and marching women were influenced by contemporary labor movements, including mining strikes in Colorado and West Virginia, and also by the nineteenth century campaign against slavery in the United States

Sources:

Goossen, Benjamin W., Like a Brilliant Thread: Gender and Vigilante Democracy in the Kansas Coalfield, 1921-1922, *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Autumn 2011), pp. 206-23

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Schofield, Ann, An 'Army of Amazons': The Language of Protest in a Kansas Mining Community, 1921-1922, *American Quarterly* Vol. 37, No. 4 (Winter 1985), 686-701

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Benjamin W. Goossen, 20/11/2012

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