

# **“We’ve been robbed long enough. It’s time to strike” : Remember the 1916 strike on Minnesota’s iron range**



Jeff Pilacinski takes a look back at a 1916 IWW struggle in northern Minnesota.

On Saturday, June 3 we remember the valiant struggle of over 15,000 fellow workers and through our continued agitating in 2006, carry their fighting spirit forward. This date marks the 90th anniversary of the great mine workers strike on Minnesota’s Mesabi, Cuyuna, and Vermillion Iron Ranges – a strike that threatened the economic grip of the U.S. Steel war profiteers and strained relations between several prominent Wobbly organizers and the union’s general headquarters.

After a large uprising was crushed with the help of immigrant strike breakers in 1907, Minnesota mine workers were poised to confront the steel trust once again. In a report to the Minneapolis headquarters of the IWW’s Agricultural Workers Organization dated May 2, 1916, one organizer had “never before found the time so ripe for organization and action as just now.” The appeal from one Minnesota miner in the May 13, 1916 issue of the Industrial Worker summarized the workers’ discontent best as “the spirit of revolt is growing among the workers on the Iron Range,” and that there was a need for “workers who have an understanding of the tactics and methods of the IWW and who would go on the job, and agitate and organize on the job.” Less than a month later, an Italian worker at the St. James underground mine in Aurora opened his pay envelope and raged over his meager earnings under the corrupt contract system, whereby wages were based upon the load of ore dug and supplies used, not hours worked. By the time other miners arrived at the St. James for the night shift, production at the mine was halted. All pits in Aurora were soon shut down as the strikers proclaimed, “We’ve been robbed long enough. It’s time to strike.”

40 striking workers from Aurora, along with their families, then marched through other mining communities on the Iron Range and discontent spread like wild fire. By month’s end, almost 10,000 mine workers were out on strike. Frustrated by previous experience with

Western Federation of Miners and having been ignored by the Minnesota State Federation of Labor, the disorganized strikers appealed to the Industrial Workers of the World for assistance. Wobbly organizers, including the likes of Carlo Tresca, Joe Schmidt, Frank Little, and later Joe Ettor and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn arrived to help local strike leaders draw up a list of demands. IWW membership in the Metal Mine Workers' Industrial Union swelled amongst the strikers with the following list of demands crafted: an 8 hour working day timed from when workers entered the mine until they were outside; a pay scale based upon the day worked; pay days twice a month; immediate back-pay for hours worked upon severance; abolition of the Saturday night shift; abolition of the contract mining system. With a majority of the strikers being non-English speaking European immigrants, IWW and local leaders conversed with the workers in their native language - from Polish, German, and Croatian to Finnish and Italian. This commitment to engaging workers in the language of their homeland was sustained through IWW publications and the Work Peoples College well into the 1970s.

Without asking for union recognition or IWW affiliation, the strikers closed the mines that shipped vast quantities of iron ore to plants producing the highly profitable materials of the great European war – iron and steel. This direct threat to wartime profits forced the employing class to mount an all-out attack against the striking workers. U.S. Steel companies on the Iron Range deputized 1,000 special mine guards and strike breakers to keep the picket lines open. Bloodshed soon followed.

In the town of Virginia (where the strike was headquartered), armed company thugs confronted a group of pickets holding signs of “One Big Union, One Big Enemy” and opened fire on them. When the smoke cleared, a Slovenian striker by the name of John Alar was dead from gunshot wounds. Despite city bans against mass marches, several thousand mourning workers marched from Virginia to the fairgrounds in Hibbing where speeches in many different languages urged the strikers to maintain the struggle and fight back in spite of company repression. With this show of boldness by the workers, the U.S. Steel bulls struck back and raided the Biwabik home of a Montenegrin miner in search of a “blind pig” or illegal alcohol still. Violence ensued, leaving one deputized strike breaker and a bystander dead. Philip Masonovich and his wife were arrested along with three immigrant boarders in their home. Within a day of the incident, a number of IWW organizers (who were at strike headquarters in Virginia during the scuffle) were also jailed on the grounds that they were accessories to murder. It was claimed that their impassioned speeches against the bosses encouraged chaos. Despite violent repression and with strike leaders locked up, the miners' struggle pressed forward.

The mining companies refused to recognize any of the strikers' demands and instead red-baited the workers by calling them IWW revolutionaries and vile anarchists in the newspapers. After futile negotiations between U.S. Steel and local businessmen/public officials in support of the strikers, the workers looked to the federal government to mediate. Mediation broke down, and with winter fast approaching, the Iron Range locals of the IWW voted to end their strike on September 17, 1916. Though heralded as a defeat for the workers, their bold confrontation struck fear in the companies, who by mid-October granted a few of the strikers' primary demands. In November of 1916, only two months after the strike's end, large wage increases were introduced by all of the mining companies. The bosses claimed these increases were meant for workers to benefit from wartime prosperity, but the IWW and even the otherwise hostile local papers realized what prompted this action. The Duluth News Tribune accepted that the concessions by the bosses were an “answer to the threat of a renewed IWW strike on the ranges next spring.”

Attentions then turned to defending those still in jail from the Biwabik episode. A large defense campaign was mounted, with support coming from the IWW's AWO office in

Minneapolis and other workers from around the country, including Eugene Debs. Shortly before the murder trials were to begin, a settlement was reached between prosecutors and attorneys speaking on behalf the IWW whereby Masonovich and two of his immigrant boarders would plead guilty to manslaughter, and all others would be released. Masonovich and the two immigrants accepted the offer with the understanding that they'd serve one year. However, the three were handed terms up to twenty years with parole eligibility after one year served. This outcome angered Bill Haywood, the IWW's General Secretary-Treasurer for what he saw as a betrayal of the workers in exchange for the freedom of the Wobbly organizers. Haywood lashed out at Gurley Flynn and Ettor, who in turn criticized the IWW's leader of withholding much needed defense funds for the case while transforming the organization into a top-heavy bureaucracy. Some say this tension led Tresca, Ettor, and Gurley Flynn to withdraw from IWW involvement. Whatever the organizational fallout from the legal settlement, the workers on Minnesota's iron ranges continued to participate in IWW agitation, with many of the 1916 strikers involving themselves in the great lumber workers struggle the following year.

With the 90th anniversary of the strike upon us, Twin Cities and Duluth IWWs will host a public event on Saturday, June 3rd in the old Virginia Socialist Hall, where the 1916 strike was headquartered. The program will feature music, historical presentations, poetry, and the stories of area residents about the strike. The event is free and open to the public. Area residents with old stories from the strike or the IWW are encouraged to attend and share.

We gather to remember those who came before us, and also to celebrate the renewed organizing efforts on Minnesota's iron ranges. Fellow Workers, we've been robbed long enough. We must continue to bite the hand that robs us of the products of our labor.

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