

THEY BROKE OUR STRIKE

BY JOHN MULLEN

JOHN's wife opened the door and let me in. Even the clear light of the mid-day sun cannot drive the damp gloom out of these clapboard shacks that are the homes of the steel workers here in Carbon, Pennsylvania. And John's house is no exception. As I stepped in out of the light, John's wife smiled at me, but it was plain that she was worried.

"He's pretty poorly," she said. "We keep him downstairs so's we c'n watch him the better." She inclined her head toward the next room. I walked in quietly. John Hatfield, our strike chairman, was lying on an old horse-hair sofa, covered to his unshaven and stubbled chin with a threadbare quilt, sleeping. In the semi-dark of the room I could make out the various objects that had become so familiar to me these last six weeks. Many long meetings in this very room, discussing our strike and the knotty problems that arose daily, with John and the strike committee had left a lasting impression on my mind. The surrounding poverty was typical of any worker's home in the coal and iron regions of Western Pennsylvania. I had been born and raised in one, and John's house somehow reminded me of my own.

I selected the rocking chair that John always sat in during our meetings in his house and seated myself quietly. I didn't want to wake him. For three days he had been stricken with some strange illness and the fever had worn him out. Sleep had only come that morning. I sat very still,

watching his parchment-colored face, seamed from the years of grubbing in the pits and facing the blast of the steel mill furnaces. The last six weeks of the strike had driven the lines deeper in his face.

Each day of the strike, the one longer than the last, John had been on his feet, encouraging the pickets, quieting the panicky, and assuring the militant in the ranks. These weeks had been replete with worry and ever new and harder jobs to be done to keep the strike going in the face of tremendous odds. Such is the job of any good local strike leader. And John had been a good one. It had come to a pass with John about a week before the strike ended, that the strike committee had felt it necessary to pass a special decision regarding John Hatfield. The decision read:

"Whereas, our chairman, John Hatfield has been working very hard for the success of our strike, and

Whereas, he has in the course of the last month worn the only pair of shoes he owns to tatters on the cinder paths on the picket lines:

Therefor be it resolved, that the strike committee hereby instructs the treasurer of our local to immediately appropriate the sum of \$2.50 for the purchase of a new pair of shoes."

The treasury itself was in tatters but the motion was carried.

And then, only a week after John started wearing his new shoes up and down the

picket lines and tramping from one place to another trying to gather enough food for the soup kitchen, the strike gave its last militant gasp. Human endurance had reached the breaking point, the pain of hunger accompanied by the State Police had suddenly ridden into our midst and finished it. The strike was broken. From the top of the mill the blue eagle on the white flag continued to flutter as it had done throughout the strike. Elsewhere throughout the country, the newspapers kept right on informing everybody that all workers "have the right to join any union of their own choosing." But after all, who's to know what had been going on up in this little town of Greensburg in the mining country of Westmoreland County?

When the strike broke and there was nothing more that John could do, he walked away from the last mass meeting we held near the mills and trudged up the long thin dirt road to his shack in Carbon. I got to his house later that night, feeling sort of empty inside. I expected to find John sitting in the rocking chair he always claimed he could think better in; but he was upstairs in bed instead. His wife, a quiet-voiced, thin woman from the mountain country down in West Virginia, told me what had happened.

"No sooner did he walk in the house and I knowed the strike was lost," she said.

"He looked queer-like, th' same's he did back in 1921 when the army came in and bloodied up in Mingo County."

John had been a Hatfield faction miner in the Mingo County coal war right back in those epic days.

"I was fixin' to get us some supper when he came home," she continued, "and I thought p'rhaps it'd take his mind off things, but he just wouldn't eat. Then, the next thing I know of, he's laying on the

couch jist a shiverin' and shakin' like a leaf. His head was burnin' and for a time I thought it was th' ague. I guess he was out of his head a bit, and we got the doctor—I sent Sissy on down to town for him. He comes and looks John over, but he don't tell us anythin's the matter with him—just says to keep him warm and quiet."

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So his wife had been doing just that for the last few days. I had told her to keep everybody away from him until he showed signs of improving; and in the meanwhile, I had been stopping in twice a day, when not busy fighting the company's attempt to blacklist us.

So, as I sat there, three days later, thinking of the bitter things we had gone through these recent weeks and of how John had fought until there wasn't a shred of energy in him, he murmured a little and woke up. I became alarmed and thought I had disturbed him, but his smile of recognition and the fresh light in his eyes assured me he was much better.

"How be ya, Red? Come t'see us old women?" He grinned sort of apologetically at me, as though he had done something wrong.

"How do you feel now, John?" I asked him.

"Fair to middlin'," he answered. But his voice lacked that rich timbre that used to ring out at our meetings, laughing our fears away, encouraging us on. His voice sounded hollow now. He was still sick with whatever this strange illness was. The doctor had mumbled something that sounded like "complete exhaustion" when I last saw him.

I had made up my mind not to bring up the matter of our lost strike, but John brought it up himself. He shifted around

painfully on his sofa and looked steadily at me for a moment. Then, glancing away at nothing in particular, he said slowly, "Well Red, looks as though they beat us . . . we fought hard . . . but," and his voice trailed off.

"Don't talk about it now, John. Plenty of time when you're up and around again," I said. He grinned once more at me.

"Oh, I don't feel so bad . . . I'll be up soon."

"Not until the doctor tells us you can," I answered. He looked at me surprised. "Great day!" he says, "Was there a doc here?"

"Twice," I said.

"Must a bin sick at that."

"Yes, you had a hundred and four fever."

There was a knock at the door and I heard John's wife talking to someone an instant later. Then she came in to where we were talking and said, "Donati wants to see John." She wasn't sure that John should have any more visitors. But John quickly assured her that it was all right for Donati to come in.

I hadn't seen much of Donati either since that last meeting following the break of the strike. He had worked as hard as John, especially among the strikers of his own nationality, the several hundred Italian workers who had stuck with us to a man. He was the leader of these workers and I knew he was just about as hard hit as we were. He came in and shook hands with us. I noticed he was dressed in his Sunday best, although it wasn't Sunday. He looked a little funny in that high celluloid collar and bright brown box-toed shoes. Donati was anything but a handsome man like John, but his ugly features were somehow pleasant.

He took a chair and sat with his elbow

on the window at the head of John's sofa.

I was secretly hoping that Donati would not start talking about our defeat, and he didn't. We just sat and talked about how John was looking better and how he should stay in bed for a while until he was better.

Then I got up and went out to talk to John's wife for a while and left them alone. John's wife is a swell woman. Not much to look at as women go, maybe. She's too tall and thin—her hands are always raw-looking from the toil of a steel worker's wife, but I've never seen a woman with kinder or more understanding eyes. And all through the strike, when the kids were often hungry, she stood by with us, making black coffee when our meetings ran to the small hours of the morning, and never complaining. When the strike broke, she never changed; she just got busy taking care of John, nursing him like she would one of her kids.

After talking with her for a few moments, I walked back to the next room. I got to the door leading into John's room and halted, taken back by the unexpected sight that greeted my eyes. John had thrown the covers off his chest and was reaching out, softly patting Donati's knee. Donati was half-way around in his chair, leaning on the window sill, crying like a baby. Not loud, but sort of shaking, with great rending sobs. He was clumsily trying to hide his face and the tears by holding his derby between him and John. John was saying nothing, just patting Donati on the knee. He saw me standing there surprised and signalled with his eyes to get out of the room. I nodded and walked back into the kitchen. John's wife started to talk to me again, but I didn't hear her.

Nodding mechanically to her words, I tried to fathom the sudden change in Donati. We had seen him in action through-

out the strike. No softness in this man, that was evident. He was a hard task-master; we often thought he was too strict on discipline. Tireless, enthusiastic, always on the go. That was Donati. Hard-boiled in the face of the company thugs, unmovable against company manoeuvres, always demanding the same from everybody else. No wonder I was amazed at this sudden change in Donati. It's pretty awful to see a man cry, especially a man like our Donati.

A moment later I heard the front door close, and I knew he had gone. I went back into the room with John. He was lying there, with his covers up to his chin again and I thought he looked a little grim. I sat down in the rocking chair again and looked askance at John.

"He's pretty bad broken up about us losin'," he said.

"He was crying, wasn't he?" I asked.

"Yeah, a bit. He takes it hard. Says he'll

never go back to the mill again. Says he'll stay on strike the rest of his life."

"That's wrong," I countered. "As many of us back as possible, that's what we need right now."

"I know," answered John. "I got to feelin' like him m'self, but one man can't do any good, strikin' forever b'hissself."

"Right," I said.

We sat quiet for a while, both of us feeling pretty bad. There's no use kidding ourselves. When you lose a strike you feel rotten for a while.

Then John grins to himself a bit, turns to me and says, "How about callin' a meetin' of the boys night after next?"

"So soon? What for?" I asked him.

"To get things movin' again. We got to reorganize the local and get ready for the next one. We'll win next time!"

"Right," I said.

And then I left John and went back to town.

COWS AND HORSES ARE HUNGRY

BY MERIDEL LE SUEUR

WHEN you drive through the Middle West droughty country you try not to look at the thrusting out ribs of the horses and cows, but you get so you can't see anything else but ribs, like hundreds of thousands of little beached hulks. It looks like the bones are rising right up out of the skin. Pretty soon, quite gradually, you begin to know that the farmer, under his rags, shows his ribs, too, and the farmer's wife is as lean as his cows, and his children look tiny and hungry.

Drive through Elbow Lake, Otter Tail County, Elk River and Kandiyohi County, Big Stone County, Yellow Medicine County and Mille Lacs, and you'll see the same thing. These are only the counties that are officially designated as in the droughty area by the Federal government. This is only in Minnesota. In the Dakotas they say cattle are leaning up against the fences. There is a shortage of water as well as of pasturage.

If you are officially in the droughty areas you will come in on the government purchasing of starving cattle. On May 31, the day after the last hot wind and the temperature at 112° in some areas, the papers announced the working plan of the machinery set up by the Federal government to aid farmers in the drought stricken areas of the Northwest. The animals will be bought and those that are not too far gone will be fattened and given to the F. E. R. A. for the relief departments. If you're on the breadlines you'll be getting some

starved meat for your own starved bones. They could feed you some choice farmer's ribs, too. But you can't buy up farmers and their wives and shoot them. Not directly.

The government has been pushing straw into these communities all winter to keep the cattle from starving for lack of grain until the pasturage came in. Well, now there is no pasture. The grass is brown and burnt as if it might be mid-August instead of May and June. The farmer is milked at one end and given relief at another. Well, the farmer says, they wanted a scarcity, and by God, now they have it. They shot off the pigs and cows, they tried to keep what was left alive because they couldn't feed them, now they're trying to keep them from dying off and rotting on the ground and making too big a stench.

The farmer can't sell his cattle to the stockyards. They're too far gone, too thin. The cattle thus turned over to the government will be left temporarily on the farms, fed by the administration and then moved to the packing houses or redistributed to other farmers or turned directly over to relief channels.

The administration of this plan seems similar to the other plans, with a regional director for seven Northwest States, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Montana, Wisconsin, Iowa and Nebraska; with State directors from the farm-schools working through county agents. The county director will have an advisory committee made up of the members of the corn-hog allotment