The Anthracite Dispute

I. The Case for the Miners.

THERE is nothing new in the controversy now raging between the anthracite operators and the United Mine Workers of America. For many years the mine workers have tried to induce the operators to adjust the many injustices that prevail in that industry, and in this instance they are still trying. Wages of anthracite mine workers always have been too low to afford a decent living for the men and their families. Wages in the anthracite field are far below those paid to bituminous workers who do identically the same kind and class of work. This is unfair. The basic wage rate for day workers in the bituminous industry is $7.50 a day. In the anthracite industry day wages range from $4.20 to $5.42, with many men receiving even less than $4.20, some of them as little as $3.25. In the face of these figures, the miners are unable to understand why the coal companies have the nerve to say that wages in the anthracite field are fair.

It is true, anthracite miners work an average of 271 days a year, as against an average of less than 200 days a year in the soft coal fields, and this fact eliminates some of the inequality between the annual earnings of the two classes. But compensation should be based on service rendered in any case, and it should not be necessary for anthracite miners to work 50 or 75 more days a year in order that their earnings may match those of men in other lines who perform the same kind of labor.

The report of the United States Coal Commission, issued July 19, shows that approximately 20,000 of 45,000 "outside men," who work by the day in the anthracite industry, earned from $1,100 to $1,800 in the year 1921. The men who earned from $1,100 to $1,200 worked 272 days, while those who earned from $1,700 to $1,800 worked 373 eight-hour days. In other words, the latter class worked seven more days than there were days in the year to earn as much as $150 a month.

The last increase in anthracite wages came in 1920, when the Anthracite Coal Commission, appointed by President Wilson, awarded the men an increase of 17.8 percent. In the same year the Bituminous Coal Commission awarded the bituminous men a 27 percent increase, although their wages already were far above those in the anthracite field. Anthracite miners always have felt that they were bilked out of 10 percent which they should have received from the Commission.

Along with the demand for an increase of 20 percent in the wages of contract and consideration miners and two dollars a day for day men, the anthracite miners also demand the establishment of the check-off system for the collection of union dues of one dollar a month in the anthracite field. This system has been in successful and satisfactory operation in the bituminous industry for twenty-five years, and there is no good reason why it should not be adopted in the anthracite industry. There is nothing mysterious nor terrible about the check-off. It means simply that the miner gives the operator a written order or assignment of so much of his wages as is required to pay his union dues and obligations, and the operator deducts that amount from the miner's pay envelope and pays it over to the treasurer of the union. It is merely a plain business proposition and a matter of convenience to the miner and to the union. It is the miner's money and he has a right to do with it what he pleases. The check-off does not cost the operator a cent. And there is nothing illegal about it.

Moreover, the operators themselves use the check-off system which they now denounce when the miners ask for its adoption. By means of the check-off they collect from their employes pay for house rent, beneficial funds, taxes, air drills, oil, detonators, dynamite, electric firing batteries, rental of electric lamps, wages, contributions to the Y. M. C. A., etc., etc. Not only do they check-off and deduct amounts which the men owe the company but they also check-off and collect bills for doctors, undertakers and other business concerns. Yet they refuse to check-off union dues, on the ground that it is illegal.

What the miners want is adoption of the standard check-off provision that prevails in all of the unionized bituminous fields. This provision carries with it a penalty clause which says that when employees indulge in a strike in violation of the contract they shall be fined one dollar a day for each day that the mine is idle. If an operator closes his mine and locks out his employees in violation of the agreement he is fined one dollar a day for each man thus thrown idle. Without the check-off there is no possible method for the collection of these fines against the employees, and this fact means lax discipline. The union is helpless to enforce strict observance of the contract by the men.

These are some of the things the miners believe they should have. They also want to be paid for their coal by weight instead of by the car of uncertain and varying size and capacity. They want the hodge-podge of wage rates in the various collieries made uniform. They want the uniform eight-hour day by elimination of the twelve and fourteen hour shifts. And the anthracite mine workers will not feel that they are properly treated until they win these essential reforms.

Ellis Searles.
Editor, United Mine Workers' Journal.
Washington, D. C.

II. The Case for the Operators

The present controversy between the anthracite operators and mine workers involves far more than wages and working conditions. There are concerned, from the operator's standpoint, the retention of markets, the stabilization of the industry, and, above all, the securing of permanent peace by the orderly settlement of questions in dispute through the means which have been in existence for more than twenty years.

One of the two principal demands of the miners is for the check-off with the closed shop.

Briefly, the check-off is a system whereby the employer, in this case the anthracite operator, deducts, or checks off, from the wages of each employee, the amount of the employee's indebtedness to the union. This includes not only union dues, but such fines and assessments as may be arbitrarily levied by union officials. The money so collected is turned over to representatives of the union and the operator becomes a collection agency for it.

The check-off is in effect in certain of the unionized bituminous coal fields and nowhere else. No other industry employs it. It was instituted about twenty-five years ago for the purpose of insuring payment of the wages of check-weighmen who are employed by the union. It was gradually extended to cover all union dues, fines and assessments.

Constantly increasing union assessments have been used as pretexts to force wage increases under threat of strikes. These increases, of course, have resulted in greater production costs.

President Lewis of the Miners' Union has interpreted the check-off as meaning the closed shop.

The operators' position in this matter is very clear. Anthracite mines are operated under the terms of the awards of the Roosevelt commission of 1902, and the Wilson commission of 1920. Both commissions ruled that the anthracite industry must be so conducted as to offer free opportunity for men to work regardless of union affiliations.

Now the miners' officials would change all this —in spite of the full protection to the union which the present system affords. The operators, knowing the evils of the check-off with the closed shop, knowing also that there is no demand for it from the rank and file of anthracite mine workers, and firmly believing that it would work untold harm to the industry—operators and miners alike—as well as to the public, have refused to agree to any such change. They have, however, agreed to submit this demand of the miners' officials to arbitration. But the miners' officials will not accept arbitration.

The other major demand of the miners' representatives is for increases of twenty percent in the wages of contract miners, and of two dollars a day in the pay of day men.

In this connection, it must be understood that anthracite mine workers are paid wages based on the award of the Wilson Commission, made in 1920 during the peak of the post-war inflation. Wages in all other industries were subsequently reduced, but the pay of anthracite mine workers did not follow the downward trend.

The anthracite operators desire to pay wages that will insure the mine workers a reasonable and comfortable standard of living. They believe the present rate is ample, especially in view of the fact that anthracite mining is a full time industry. They are supported in this belief by the report of the United States coal commission.

Were the wage demands of the miners to be granted there would be added to the labor cost of producing anthracite the huge sum of $90,000,000 annually. Statements of the miners' representatives that this tremendous increase could be borne out of the profits of the industry are by no means warranted by the coal commission's findings.

The operators are unwilling further to increase the already high price of domestic anthracite. Further increases would result in the permanent loss of markets in favor of substitutes. Such a loss would mean, at best, that many men employed in producing anthracite would have to seek other means of livelihood.

Nevertheless the operators have offered to arbitrate this demand also.

They have offered further to guarantee the mine workers against any loss by agreeing in advance that there shall be no revision of wages on a downward scale and that the award of the arbitrators shall be retroactive to September 1. The miners' representatives have refused this offer also.

The operators have agreed to certain of the miners' demands, among them the elimination of the twelve-hour day where it is in effect.

They have repeatedly sought assurance from the miners' representatives that there shall be no suspension of mining on September 1, in order that the public may continue to get coal. The final answer of the miners' representatives is the suspension order which has already gone out and which will result in inconvenience to the public, heavy loss to the industry and loss in wages to the men which, added to the $126,000,000 loss in wages sustained during the 1922 strike, will seriously cripple the resources of the individual. The operators take the position that they have no right to agree to demands which must inevitably react on the consumer and bring disaster to the industry. They believe that in offering arbitration they have proposed the only just means of settling the questions at issue. They are content to leave their position to the judgment of the public.

Samuel D. Warriner.
Chairman, Anthracite Operators'
Policy Committee.
Harrisburg, Pa.