
The Coronado Mine Attack (April 27, 1897)

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Terre Haute, Ind., April 27, 1897.

The armed attack on the Coronado mine on the night of September 20th [1896] was fatal to the interests of the union and the striking miners and removed all possibility of a settlement of the strike, if indeed any such possibility ever existed.¹ From that moment the mine managers were triumphant and the strike was doomed. Had those who made the attack sought to play into the hands of the mine managers, they could not have done so more successfully. The provocation was, doubtless, very great. The union miners were exasperated in every conceivable manner. Foreign labor was to be imported to take their places and armed toughs taunted and insulted them.

Of course, it is not claimed that the miners were entirely innocent. That in some instances they acted with indiscretion, goes without saying and that a few of them were guilty of criminal conduct is also admitted. It would be strange, indeed, if under all the excitement incident to a strike of such magnitude there had been no breach of the peace. But after all, the fact stands forth and should be given commanding prominence that as a body, as a union, the strikers were sober, peaceable, and law-abiding, and after the most searching scrutiny, the legislative committee was bound to exonerate them, as an organization, from any culpability for, or in connection with, any crime committed during the strike.

It was freely charged that the Coronado affair was instigated by the mine managers themselves. Whether this be true or not, I have no means of knowing and in the absence of proper proof to sustain so grave an allegation, I shall certainly not make the charge. I am bound to admit, however, that from whatever source the attack was inspired, it was a master stroke for the mine managers. For them it meant the protection and support of the militia and the civil power of the state and, if need be, of the nation. The strike was virtually taken off their hands, the state assuming control

of the mine owners' interests and arraying all its forces against the strikers. It gave all their enemies the opportunity they longed for to open their batteries on the strike and hold up the strikers to public execration as criminals whose atrocities merited the gibbet.² The mine managers were furnished by the Coronado incident with a strong pretext to reject all overtures looking to a settlement and they used it to advantage to the very close of the strike.

In this connection the conclusion of the legislative committee in reference to the attack on the Coronado is immensely significant. The committee says:

On the evening of September 20th the owners of the Coronado and the Emmet received some intimation that an attack would that night be made at these mines; *they did not communicate these rumors to the civil authorities, nor to the committee of twenty*, and there is no evidence that the union of the committee of twenty had any knowledge of any rumored attack, *and the owners of the Coronado made no special preparations for defense.* (Italics mine. —EVD)

Here we find it in evidence that the mine owners were informed that the Coronado and the Emmet were to be attacked and yet no special preparation was made for defense nor was any report of the intended attack made to the civil authorities. This strikes me, to put it mildly, as having been a most singular proceeding and the conclusion can hardly be avoided that if the mine owners had nothing to do with instigating the attack, they at least did nothing to prevent it and this in face of the fact that they knew it was coming and had ample time to at least make an effort to stop it. Doubtless they foresaw what the effect of it must be and simply let it come.

If the Coronado was not a shrewdly laid trap for the miners, it was at least providential for the mine owners, notwithstanding the deplorable incidents that attended it. It was to the Leadville miners what the "sunken road of Ohain" was to the French army on the field of Waterloo.³

I have intimated that even if the unfortunate attack had not been made on the Coronado, it is extremely doubtful if a settlement could have been effected by mutual concession or compromise.

The mine managers were not friendly to the union before the strike, and when it was declared, they avowed their hostility to the organization and determined to disrupt it. Upon this point there is no room for doubt.

Two days after the strike had been declared, on June 22, they entered into a written agreement which, among other things, provided as follows:

To not recognize or treat in any manner or at any time with any labor organization.

This settled the matter. It was, in fact, an agreement not to treat with the miners at all and a declaration of war upon their organization. The miners struck, of course, as an organized body and if they could not negotiate a settlement of their grievance as such, there was nothing left for them but unconditional surrender. This was the central, commanding issue, in fact the only issue, from the day the strike was inaugurated.

If the right of workingmen to organize be conceded — and the most implacable foe of labor dare not go before the American public in opposition to this right — can the arbitrary attitude of the mine managers be justified on any reasonable ground? This “agreement” not to treat with the miners, for that was the purport and import of the compact, was not prompted by the lawlessness or violence of the strikers, for none had been committed. It was entered into in the very beginning of the strike, it barred the door of conciliation and made “unconditional surrender” the only possible basis of settlement. This indisputable fact effectually silences the claim of the mine managers that during the early stage of the strike they proposed arbitration as a basis of settlement, and that their proposition was rejected by the strikers. The “agreement” and the alleged proposal to arbitrate are diametrically contradictory to each other and hence the conclusion that the contention of the strikers that no proposal of arbitration was ever made by the mine managers was correct and must be admitted.

It is axiomatic that a rule, to be fair, must work both ways. Suppose that the miners immediately upon declaring the strike had entered into an agreement “not to recognize or treat in any manner or at any time” with any organization of mine managers? And suppose that in spite of all entreaties they had tenaciously adhered to this agreement and insisted upon the unconditional surrender and utter humiliation of the mine managers, even though such a policy meant misery to thousands, the loss of untold property interests, and the irretrievable ruin of the camp? In reviewing the Leadville strike these interrogatories are in order and are well calculated to challenge thought and reflection in the minds of all men who love justice and fair play.

¹ At 12:30 am during the night of September 20/21, 1897, a mob of armed strikers attacked the Coronado mine, a facility reopened during the Leadville labor stoppage through the use of strikebreakers. A gun battle lasting almost an hour erupted between strikers and armed strikebreakers inside the mine, during which three dynamite bombs were thrown. At 1:45 am an oil tank ruptured and exploded into flames, engulfing the mine buildings and forcing the strikebreakers to retreat. During the battle and its aftermath three members of the Cloud City Miners Union and a Leadville fireman who refused mob demands not to attempt to put out the fire were killed; the surface structures of the Coronado mine were completely destroyed. A similar assault was conducted against the Robert Emmet mine, located about a mile away, although no fatalities resulting from that protracted gun battle. The attacks caused Gov. Robert McIntire to reconsider his previous refusal to accede to mine owners’ requests for deployment of the state militia to protect their property interests. The first troops arrived the very next night.

² *Gallows.*

³ The Chemin d’Ohain was a deeply sunken lane that bisected the battlefield at Waterloo which enabled Field Marshal Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, to conceal his forces and entrap and defeat the advancing French army of Napoleon Bonaparte on June 18, 1815.