

A Year of Trial for the Western Federation of Miners (December 20, 1902)

Cheney, Wash., Dec. 20th [1902]

The radical departure of the Denver convention in May last [May 1902] makes this a year of trial for the Western Federation of Miners and for organized labor in general in the Western states. The latter movement was lifted bodily out of the old ruts and grooves and placed upon a higher plane than it has hitherto occupied. the change was not accomplished without great effort and the convention simply proved that it was equal to the task. It was this, and this alone, that brought the convention into such bold prominence and that will ultimately give it an honored page in the history of industrial emancipation, and every delegate who had part in the work is entitled to the respect and approbation of the working class.

But the man who did more than all others to give the federation its rightful position in the labor world, who months before the convention, worked ceaselessly to that end, though he did so quietly and without display, was Edward Boyce, the retiring president, and one of the bravest men and truest souls that ever fought for labor's freedom. Arrested, clubbed, jailed, denounced, and persecuted, he was always calm, loyal, and at the front of his hosts. Ed Boyce led forward, not backward, as many "leaders" do. He understood his duty and performed it. Never once did he show the white feather.¹ Utterly forgetful of self, his one absorbing thought and controlling passion was the welfare of the Western miners and the toiling mass. He accepted office under protest and avoided all display. He was heard no oftener than was necessary, but when he did speak it was with clearness, earnestness, and to the point.

I have traveled with him worked and slept with him, and I know of no man of nobler character, purer integrity, loftier courage, or rarer common sense than Edward Boyce, the man who blazed the way to the highlands of duty and glory for the Western Federation and then with characteristic modesty retired to private life.

More than half the year is gone and the next convention already looms in the future. The difficulties in adapting the organization to the changed conditions and carrying out the new policy have been by no means small, and yet they have been steadily conquered, and upon the whole the organization has made greater progress and is in a more healthful, vigorous, and promising condition than ever before. The new administration, like the old, have been a unit from the start and the rank and file have given their energetic support in pushing the organization to the front and crowning its struggles with victory.

As I write, some battles are being fiercely contested in California, and the federation will be tried to the core. All the better is this for the organization. It will strengthen its stamina and develop its latent powers, and the final result is not in doubt for one moment. However long the battles may last, the ultimate victory will be with the organization. There will be no surrender to any "Civic Federation."

This is a good time, at the beginning of the new year, for each member to ask himself if he is doing his full duty as a member of the organization. Are you active, alert, and thoroughly in earnest as a soldier in the federation army? Anyone can wear the badge, but it takes a good may to supply what the badge represents.

Every available mine worker in the West is to be brought into the organization; every point in the mining districts is to be organized; every local is to be strengthened; every possible subscriber is to be secured to the Magazine, and every other obligation, financial and otherwise, is to be met in the prompt and resolute spirit of true manhood.

The political program of the federation must not only be carried out, but strengthened. The last vestige of opposition to it, whether through ignorance or corruption, must be overcome. The whole body of members must become conscious of their class interests and stand solid as a stone wall. They must vote as they strike. Election day is the supreme test of a man's unionism. If he votes the old party tickets to keep his class in chains he is a traitor to his fellows. You can't be a trade unionist and a political non-unionist.

The old parties stand for the capitalist class — the mine owners and their hirelings. The Socialist Party is for the miners and the working class. They cannot compromise. It is all one or all the other.

The union man of today has to understand the class struggle and be on the right side of it in a strike, at the ballot box, and at all other times and places.

Between now and the convention every effort must be made to bring the federation into Denver in shape to do battle for its very life. Its greater work lies before it and each member and local union should strain the last nerve in fitting and equipping the organization for its emancipating mission.

The Magazine, under the able and fearless editorial management of John O'Neill,² the wheel horse of progressive unionism, has become a power in the labor movement. In every line there is a snap, and in every sentence fire. It is quoted and passed around Workingmen are thrilled and inspired by its burning appeals; plutocrats damn it.

All the signs are cheering. On to victory!

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¹ "Show the white feather" was a nineteenth century British expression for the demonstration of cowardice. The expression is believed to derive from cockfighting.

² John M. O'Neill (1857-1936), a committed socialist, became the editor of the *Miners' Magazine*, official organ of the Western Federation of Miners, in 1901 and remained at the post for more than a decade.