
Strike Lessons: A Dispassionate Review of the Great Leadville Struggle (April 5, 1897)

Terre Haute, Ind., April 5, 1897.

The strike of the miners in the Leadville district has passed into history. It was one of the longest and most bitterly contested battles ever fought between organized labor and organized capital. Beginning June 19th, 1896, and continuing until March 9th, 1897, the strike extended over a period of eight months and 18 days.

It is a trite declaration that a strike is a war. This is more or less true of all strikes, but it applies with peculiar force to the prolonged strike of the Leadville miners. It was, indeed, war and both sides so regarded it and made preparations accordingly. There are those who regard all strikes as unmixed evils. They are forever telling us about the losses entailed, the damage that has been done, the bitterness that has been aroused, and so on to the end of the chapter. It is admitted that in the great labor strikes of the past many things occurred that were to be deplored, but it is safe to declare that there was not one but had its good results. And so, whatever there may be to regret in connection with the Leadville strike, it is certain to be productive of good and to have its lessons for those who are capable of profiting by observation and experience.

At the time of the strike there were about 2,600 members in the local union, or about 97 percent of all the miners employed in the district. It will thus be observed that the miners were what may be called thoroughly organized, and it must be said to their credit that from first to last, through all the long and weary months, through good and evil report, they stood together, true to their organization, and only an insignificant number returned to work while the strike was in progress. Having been upon the ground and having had the opportunity of meeting and talking with these men, I speak advisedly when I say that they were impelled by pure and honest motives and that they conscientiously believed they were in the right, and this no doubt accounts for the facts that there were scarcely any deserters from the ranks and that the strike lasted so long a time.

What was the cause of the strike and were the men justified in declaring it? In answering this question as in all other matters which I shall discuss in these articles,¹ it will be my purpose to be fair and to state facts. I quote as follows from the official report of the joint special legislative committee by whom a thorough investigation of the strike was made. Under the head of "Grievances Before the Strike," the report says:

It is in evidence that for some time, at least several months, before the strike was declared, the miners complained that a miner and his family could not live on \$2.50 a day unless he worked every day, including Sundays, and that even then he would run in debt in case of sickness in his family or other temporary misfortunes and that these complaints were communicated to the mine managers from time to time in an informal way and the suggestion made that the scale be raised to \$3; it is also in evidence that there was a fear on the part of some miners that some of the mines paying \$3 per day would reduce the scale to \$2.50, and two officers and a member of the union testified directly and unequivocally that one of the mine managers who was paying the \$3 scale without discrimination had told them that unless the scale was raised to \$3 throughout the camp, he would be compelled to reduce the scale to \$2.50; this was unequivocally denied by the manager in question, but your committee is of the opinion that these officers of the union relied upon their understanding of the interview and entertained a fear that the general scale might be reduced to \$2.50....

It is not my purpose to enter into details, but simply to state the salient points in the causes that led up to the strike and when the reader has these fixed in his mind he will be better able to determine whether or not the miners were justified in their subsequent action. It will hardly be disputed by fair-minded persons that a miner with a family at Leadville must live with rigid economy on a wage of \$2.50 per day. Living expenses are perhaps higher than in any other city in the Union. Every item that enters into the household necessities, even to water, must be purchased. If sickness or injury falls to his lot, he is doomed. Wages cease and debt begins and a workingman in debt is no longer a free man. I am aware that there are those who declare that \$2.50 per day is a good wage and that a miner and his family should be able to get along comfortably at that rate, and for their benefit I quote again from the report of the legislative committee. In presenting the statement of the expenses of the soldiers who were quartered

at Leadville during the strike, which amounted to almost \$200,000 for a period or less than five months, or about \$40,00 per month, the committee says:

Taking the amount of the total expenses and dividing it by the number of days each man served, it appears that the average expense per man per day was \$2.71.

This statement, considered in connection with the matter of living expenses, is in the nature of an "eye-opener." A wage of \$2.50 per day of hard and hazardous work is sufficient for a miner to support his whole family, but the state is required to pay \$2.71 per day to support a soldier who has nothing to do but kill time. In other words, it costs a soldier 21 cents per day more for his own expenses while doing nothing than is allowed a miner who works like a galley-slave for the support of himself and wife and four or five children. Those who are interested in such affairs and are capable of fair play may ponder the proposition at their leisure.

Then again, there was a fear on the part of the miners, as reported by the legislative committee, that a general reduction to \$2.50 would be made if the scale of the \$2.50 miners was not raised to \$3. The miners declare that the statement was made by a prominent mine manager, the fact remains that the miners were under that impression. They felt that their wages were in jeopardy. Some of them knew by experience that when reduction begins it does not usually stop until the bottom is reached. They had seen coal miners in Pennsylvania gradually reduced from \$4 and \$5 a day to 65 cents per day and at last driven from the mines as if they had been wild beasts to make room for the degraded creatures who had been imported to take their places. They were anxious to maintain, if possible, an American standard of living. They desired to preserve their own self-respect and independence. They thought of home and wife and children and resolved to defend their rights by such proper means as they had at their command. They perfected their organization, appointed and authorized committees to present their complaints to the mine managers, which was done, but as the concessions that were asked were refused, the strike was declared and this by a unanimous vote of the miners in mass meeting assembled.

Much has been said about the strike having been caused by the "labor agitator," the "demagogue," etc., but nothing could be farther from the

truth. The abuse which was heaped upon President Boyce of the Western Federation of Miners and some of his associates was wholly unwarranted and grossly unjust. The miners themselves ordered the strike and if a single one of them was opposed to it, he uttered no word to indicate his opposition. Neither have the miners at any time attempted to shirk the responsibilities of their acts. They have avowed again and again that the strike was their own voluntary action and that win or lose, they had no regret for what they had done.

Published as "Strike Lessons: A Dispassionate Review of the Great Struggle" in *The Western Miner*, vol. 1, no. 26 (April 10, 1897), pg. 1. *The Western Miner* was the official organ of the Cloud City Miners' Union No. 33, WF of M of A, the organization which conducted the Leadville strike.

¹ This was the first of six weekly articles by Debs in *The Western Miner* on the Leadville strike and other affairs of the Western Federation of Miners.