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COEUR d'ALENE MINERS UNIONS, 1899-1902

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A long bitter Coeur d'Alene mine labor war erupted with an 1892 dynamiting of a mill near Burke and reached its climax with a similar Bunker Hill and Sullivan concentrator demolition, April 29, 1899. Episodes of martial law followed each of those explosions, which led to a systematic effort to exclude a militant element of union miners from that area in 1899.

Miners' unions had been active for more than a generation in some western lodes, and many of them had been brought together in a central organization as a direct result of Idaho's Coeur d'Alene mine war of 1892. Cooperating as the Western Federation of Miners, a number of Coeur d'Alene local unions received support from many other local mine labor organizations. By 1899, Coeur d'Alene mine owners, except for Bunker Hill and Sullivan managers, generally negotiated working and wage agreements with Western Federation unions. Even though they lacked Bunker Hill and Sullivan recognition, miners there quietly organized their own Western Federation organization and finally insisted upon similar treatment and union wages. They won their wage demand but failed to obtain a collective bargaining agreement. After a large number of Coeur d'Alene miners came down from Burke, Mullan, and other union camps to demonstrate at Wardner, another dynamiting incident shut down Bunker Hill and Sullivan operations and sent their managers into exile. Company officers saw that they could not reopen Idaho's largest mine without military support. They also preferred to drive out active Western Federations members, refusing to bargain with any union representatives.

A state operated permit system, under which no miner could be employed without formal certification he had not demonstrated against Bunker Hill and Sullivan management at Wardner, April 29, was instituted to suppress Western Federation activities when mining resumed under martial law. To obtain a permit to work, a miner had to be able to prove that he had been on duty for his own company that day. With more than 800 miners disqualified and held as participants, a large number of replacements had to be imported--mainly from Joplin, Missouri, lead mines which regularly supplied strikebreakers for western lode mines at that time. But miners tended to move about anyway, so a substantial number of replacements continued to turn up as they always did. Displaced Coeur d'Alene miners--especially those without

families--easily moved on to other camps, spreading a militant variety of unionism while they were finding new employment.

Coeur d'Alene mining resumed under martial law, which lasted for almost two years. Mine owners continued to insist upon anti-union permits even after Idaho's state employment system had to be withdrawn, January 11, 1901. They simply continued to operate a previously state-managed system through their mine owners association. A less militant union had been allowed to organize, but they could not get along without employing Western Federation members as well. Only 99 Federation's miners had been employed in 1899, but more members began to come back or to move in from other localities. Many local Western Federation workers simply assumed new names when they applied for permits. Explaining they had gained experience in other camps--as they often had, in fact--they went through an empty formality of renouncing their Western Federation allegiance. So Western Federation activists continued underground, just as they had in Wardner prior to 1899. They did not gain collective bargaining rights, but they continued to provide other traditional union benefits, just as they always had. This situation did remain secret, partly because a company detective functioned as Wardner Western Federation secretary in 1900. (That kind of company service to Western Federation unions went back to 1892 when exposure of Charles A. Siringo's combined activities as a Pinkerton detective and a Western Federation union secretary created a great deal of hostility.) Company managers, however, knew that they would not have to engage in collective bargaining or adopt union wage agreements, so they tolerated Western Federation underground activities while creating an impression that they had driven Western Federations unionists out of their mines. At least one important Western Federation official, Vincent St. John, came back from Colorado after Western Federation difficulties there. Under an alias, he was a candidate for public office in 1904. But he did not manage to win, and effective public union organizations did not regain strength there for quite a few years.

Even after martial law ended, Coeur d'Alene mine owners paid for sheriff's deputies employed to maintain a substitute for military government, a system which attracted less national criticism. But company efforts to retaliate against Western Federation leaders got almost nowhere: only one ever was prosecuted for conspiracy in 1899, and he soon was pardoned. By 1902, mining company and Western Federation elements, in spite of bitterness growing out of their earlier conflict, had established an arrangement in which union activities would continue inconspicuously, but company managers would not have to enter into collective bargaining agreements.

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