

Abigail A. Kunkel  
Hegeler Carus Foundation Scholarship Essay

JOHN MITCHELL  
President of the United Mine Workers  
of America  
1870-1919



Abigail A. Kunkel  
Senior from LaSalle-Peru Township  
High School

Practically everyone in the Illinois Valley can trace their roots to find a coal miner in their family. My great-grandfather Anthony Curatolo worked in the LaSalle Coal Mine. Like most mine workers throughout the Illinois Valley, he worked an average of twelve hours each and every day in the dangerous, dark, dirty, and diminutive mine shafts for very small wages of roughly ten dollars a week. Also, my great-grandfather and the many other mine workers felt that their hours were too long, wages too small, and benefits nonexistent. My great-grandfather would leave the house before sunrise and would not return until sunset. My grandfather, Joseph Curatolo, told me that his father would not even see sunlight for weeks at a time. He also told me that whenever the ambulance sirens went rushing towards the mines, my grandfather, along with many other children, would sprint to the mines to make sure that it was not their fathers being taken to the hospital for injuries. To the mine workers, the only option to get noticed seemed to be to go on strike. The thought that a man who made his home in Spring Valley, Illinois could solve their problems had never crossed their minds. This man's name was John Mitchell, and he forever influenced the nation's attitude about the rights and working conditions of mine workers.

John Mitchell was born on February 4, 1870 in Braidwood, Illinois to a poor Irish family that had immigrated to Illinois to work in the coal mines. Since both of his parents had passed away by the time he was six years old, he went to work in the Braidwood Coal Mines to help support his remaining siblings. Upon turning fifteen in 1885, Mitchell joined the Knights of Labor. During 1886 and 1887, Mitchell left Illinois to pursue a greater mining profit by working in mines in both Colorado and Wyoming. He quickly learned that he was not profiting in the west, so he returned to Illinois. In 1890 at age nineteen, he became a member of the newly

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formed United Mine Workers of America. Soon after in 1891, Mitchell married a fellow miner's daughter named Katherine O'Rourke. He then began to study law and investigate social and economic problems. Four years later in 1895, John Mitchell was elected District 12 secretary and treasurer, after studying the coal mine problems and their possible solutions.

Prior to 1890, labor unions had trouble getting organized and unified. Delegates of the Knights of Labor Trade Assembly No. 135 and of the National Progressive Union of Miners and Mine Laborers met in Columbus, Ohio in 1890 to create the United Mine Workers of America. In their constitution, the committee banned discrimination based on race, religion, or national origin. It was also decided by the committee that all miners were to acquire a moderately decent share of the wealth they created by working in the dark and dangerous mines. The committee pledged to use all honorable means to maintain peace between the miners and their employers, as well as adjusting all differences by negotiation and reconciliation, hoping that strikes would be unnecessary. Additionally, many British immigrants played an important role in the early days of organization. The first president, John Rae, was born in Scotland, and the first secretary, Robert Watchorn, was born in England.

In the late nineteenth century, labor unions were remodeling themselves to be more wide-ranging of the shifting work force but were not appreciated without substantial domestic friction. John Mitchell was made an international union organizer in 1897, where he worked alongside Mother Jones, a prominent community and labor organizer. At that point, Mitchell was stationed in southern Illinois. Many new German, Polish, and other European immigrants had just come to the area and now had to coexist with the immense and argumentative Irish immigrant population. After several years of being an active member, John Mitchell became vice president of the United Mine Workers of America in 1897. However, his time as vice president was short lived

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because in September 1898, President Michael Ratchford left the union to become the Secretary of Labor under President William McKinley.

On the opposition, labor union's activity was notoriously hazardous throughout the late nineteenth century. Just prior to September 1898, when John Mitchell became president of the United Mine Workers of America, a riot and strike had occurred in Lattimer, Pennsylvania, the location of a major coal producing mine. The mine workers there had gone on strike because they felt that their employers were not treating them respectfully and often with prejudicial insults. While on strike in front of the mines, police officers tried to break up the crowd, but they only caused the crowd to riot. The police officers shot and killed nineteen miners in order to establish control over the riot. Learning from this example, many other groups of coal miners silently suffered without proper treatment, hours, or pay. The employer's controlled the lives of their coal miners, since they owned the mining towns and practically everything in them. The coal miners were often paid with coupons that were only redeemable at company stores, where the prices were inflated compare to most retail stores. Furthermore, they were required to buy and maintain their own tools, as well as buying the oil to light their underground lamps to mine. The coal miners endured all of these conditions until they decided to join the United Mine Workers of America.

As president of the United Mine Workers of America, John Mitchell's main challenge was to help incorporate new workers from various ethnicities into the union. Being possessed with extraordinary leadership skills, John Mitchell accomplished the impossible task of uniting these diverse miners, bridging the language and cultural gaps, as well as overcoming the prejudice between the different races. He trained his organizers to speak five or six different languages and had them mingle into the different ethnic communities to show the immigrants

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that everything could be compromised. Another challenge he faced was attracting more members to join the union. Many coal miners at that time worked under small family establishments. The problem with these family businesses was that since money was tight, the employers would often have to cut costs just to break even, instead of profiting. Many coal miners felt that they were working too many long hours in the hazardous mine shafts, all the while, the company was barely breaking even. With John Mitchell as the head of the United Mine Workers of America, the number of members rapidly grew from 34,000 to 300,000. He reasoned in controversial negotiation with mining companies to ensure better hours, wages, and treatment for the assortment of ethnic groups of mine workers that continually joined the union. Additionally, John Mitchell was often called “Johnnie Da Mitch” by the coal miners as a lighthearted nickname. Many miners respected him because of his priestly qualities. Mitchell respected each of the separate religions and cultures and listened intently to every internal grievance. He used his extraordinary talent of communicating well with people to its full potential. The miners found it very easy to confide in him, not only because he was a good listener, but because he had worked in the mines as a young man and really understood where they were coming from.

John Mitchell maneuvered through and smoothed out many strikes and problems within the numerous coal mines that had joined the United Mine Workers of America union. The vast majority of these strikes occurred between 1899 and 1901. Doing what seemed as their only option, the strikes would just cause their employers to take away their homes. Beginning on July 15, 1892, the coal mine workers of Mount Olive, Illinois began to hold rallies in support of higher wages and shorter work days. By 1897, only 400 of the 35,000 Illinois coal miners belonged to the United Mine Workers of America. Soon after in 1897, the coal mine workers in

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Mount Olive went on a strike and caught the eye of Mitchell. In turn, he welcomed them into the union and negotiated with their employers to increase their pay.

One of John Mitchell's chief legendary negotiations even captured the attention of the current president of the United State, Theodore Roosevelt. In May 1902, a coal strike shut down the coal anthracite (hard coal) fields of eastern Pennsylvania. There, coal miners worked twelve-hour shifts, six days a week, for an average annual wage of \$560. From these annual wages, charges for rent, lamp oil, and medical assistance. Many of these miners were therefore indebted to the company store. The coal miners demanded a ten to twenty percent increase in pay, an eight-hour work day, a fairer system of weighing coal, and union recognition. The industry also was in opposition to any federal role in their strike. Roughly 150,000 miners went on strike, but there were tens of millions of metropolitan inhabitants who needed coal to heat their homes. John Mitchell proposed a list of the coal miners' grievances through mediation through the National Civic Federation and then to a committee of employers for collective bargaining. One of the industry's leading employers, George F. Baer, president of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, immediately rejected and refused to compromise with Mitchell's proposals. Baer commented, "Anthracite mining is a business and not a religious, sentimental, or academic proposition...I could not, if I would, delegate this business management to even so highly a respectable body as the Civic Federation, nor can I call to my aid...the eminent prelates [John Mitchell] have named." Baer was also quoted as saying, "[the ethnic coal miners] don't suffer. Why, they can't even speak English." On May 12, 1902, the coal miners just walked out on their employers. The union had the support of around eighty percent of the area workers or more than 100,000 strikers. Approximately 30,000 coal miners left the Pennsylvania region and went to work in Midwestern mines, while roughly 10,000 coal miners returned to their native countries

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in Europe. The strikers became so violent that the Pennsylvania National Guard, local police, and hired detective agencies came ready to defend the employers.

At first, United States President Theodore Roosevelt decided not to get involved in the strike because it did not threaten the general welfare of the country. After several months of strike, the price of coal in nearby New York City skyrocketed from five dollars per ton to an astounding thirty dollars per ton. Schools were forced to close due to lack of heat, while mobs stole coal cars, and angry citizens began chopping up telegraph poles for firewood. Finally, President Roosevelt asked his Commissioner of Labor, Carroll D. Wright, to investigate the Pennsylvania strike on June 8, 1902. Wright concluded that the companies should experiment with a nine-hour work day. Attorney General Philander Knox advised President Roosevelt not to get involved with the strike because under the Constitution, the president did not have the power to interfere with the union's strike. Therefore, he decided not to release Wright's report for fear of appearing to side with the union right away. The coal strike challenged President Roosevelt's belief that the general welfare of the American people must take precedence over the demands of both labor and capital. President Roosevelt finally decided that instead of choosing a side, he must appeal to the reason of both sides. Accordingly, he had invitations sent to members of both sides of the strike to come to Washington D.C. for a meeting on October 3, 1902. This meeting was the first time an American president had intervened in a labor dispute. To begin the meeting, President Roosevelt stated that he had no legal right or duty to call the meeting but did so by acting as a third party representing the American public. With both John Mitchell and George Baer in attendance and in opposition, tensions grew during the meeting. President Roosevelt commented that Mitchell was the only man in the room who acted like a complete gentleman, especially since Baer conducted himself in a disruptive manner towards Mitchell as

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well as towards President Roosevelt. In turn, President Roosevelt took action and threatened to appoint troops to run the mines in Pennsylvania under his command. George Baer, as well as the other company executives, declared President Roosevelt's idea ridiculous, so American finance industrialist J.P. Morgan came up with a compromise to make all sides happy on October 23, 1902. The compromise consisted of a ten percent pay increase for the coal miners and a nine-hour work day, instead of the eleven or twelve-hour days. The employers still refused to recognize the United Mine Workers of America union, but a committee was established to settle labor disputes that consisted of equal numbers of management and labor representatives. The coal strike that John Mitchell had described as the "most remarkable contest between labor and capital in the industrial history of the nation" was finally over after 163 days.

John Mitchell remained president of the United Mine Workers of America until 1907. He was succeeded by Thomas L. Lewis, John P. White, and Frank Hayes. Mitchell lost the presidency in 1908 largely because he was involved in several other organizations. In 1900, during his presidency of the United Mine Workers of America, Mitchell helped organize the National Civic Federation. With Lewis's election to the presidency of the United Mine Workers of America in 1908, he declared that members of their union had to resign from their memberships to the National Civic Federation and only belong to one organization. John Mitchell also served in the American Federation of Labor as fourth vice president from 1898 to 1900 and second vice president from 1900 to 1914. With the American Federation of Labor's president Samuel Gompers and secretary-treasurer Frank Morrison, Mitchell was sentenced to prison for violating a court injunction during a strike at the Buck Stove and Range Co. in St. Louis, Missouri. On May 15, 1911, Mitchell, Gompers, and Morrison took their trial to the Supreme Court, and it was overturned, finding that the court of appeals had made a mistake in

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permitting the company to take the complaint of contempt rather than the district court itself.

Mitchell also is the author of *Organized Labor* (1903) and *The Wage Earner and His Problems* (1913). In 1914, Mitchell was appointed commissioner of labor for the state of New York and was chairman of the state industrial commission from 1915 to 1919. He held his positions for New York until his death in New York City on September 9, 1919.

John Mitchell was one of the most respected American labor leaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Growing up in Illinois and temporarily making his home in Spring Valley, Illinois helped him to protect his mining heritage, which is the same heritage that a vast majority of people in the Illinois Valley can trace their roots to. He used his background of mining to help miners nationwide receive less hours, higher wages, and above all, more respect throughout the country.

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