

---

# The Yellow Streak in Coal.

by J. Louis Engdahl

Published in *The Liberator* [New York], v. 9, whole no. 65 (Sept. 1923), pp. 23-25.

“COAL!” is the word that is drawing biggest upon the fear of America, with the passing of these summer days, just as the mark worries the Germans, and the British and French tussle over the Ruhr. There is no other word that registers so large in the thoughts of all in the United States today. Calvin Coolidge, “the Strike-Breaker President,” mounts the throne of world imperialism vacated by Harding at Washington, DC, and announces that he will not permit a coal strike. He has negotiated with the republican political boss and multimillionaire mine owner, John Hays Hammond, who is also chairman of the anti-labor Coal Fact Finding Commission, and he has spoken. President Coolidge even threatens to call a special session of Congress to consider the question of *Coal*, at the same time denying that it is necessary to summon the Democratic and Republican statesmen to Washington to talk about *Wheat* although the farmers of the west stand to lose billions of dollars unless the grip of the grain gamblers upon their throats is loosened.

“Coal!” grips all, not only because the need of it touches all, but because the struggle of the most militant section of American labor is tied up with this human necessity. The profiteers on the Chicago Board of Trade and in the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce sneer in the faces of the farmers as the new wheat crop comes in and prices automatically drop, as in previous years, this time from \$1.60 to 75 and 80 cents a bushel. This fall in the price is made because the food baron wants to buy cheaply, and he controls everything, the banks, the railroads, the grain elevators, and because the farmer is at his mercy, an easier victim than the prey of the highwayman. To be sure the farmer-labor revolt elected a United States Senator in Minnesota, but that is only a beginning.

But with “Coal!” it is different. There is another factor, another power: the 500,000 organized

coal-miners, the United Mine Workers of America, demanding the right of the workers in the coal pits to live, seeking the necessities of life for their families. And there is something else. The spirit of these hundreds of thousands of unionized coal miners is a militant, aggressive spirit. These mine’ workers have the courage to fight. They have shown it in the past.

President Coolidge comes from Massachusetts, the keystone of the group of New England States. These states burn anthracite in winter. When the miners of the Pennsylvania anthracite fields begin talking about the recognition of the union through the “check-off” system, as well as higher wages and shorter workday, Coolidge begins talking about the “special session” of Congress, because he knows the miners mean business. At the same time his ears are deaf to the mortgage-burdened farmers and fruit growers, even those of his own New England states, because these land workers have no organized power, no militant spirit.

And greater than organized power is militant spirit. This past summer the big topic of interest in the anthracite coal fields was whether Rinaldo Cappellini or John Brennan was to be president of the Scranton-Wilkesbarre District. This struggle attracted national attention. A study of the columns of the *New York Times* during this period would create the impression that there was a campaign on for governor of Pennsylvania. Brennan stood for reaction in power, Cappellini was the champion of a rising militant spirit. Cappellini was elected overwhelmingly, a high water mark in militancy in the coal miners’ union.

But no sooner had the votes for Cappellini registered the militancy of the anthracite coal miners, than the machine power of the reactionary miners’ union officialdom, headed by the international administration of President John L. Lewis, began to work.

Cappellini succeeded to the presidency held by Brennan, even with Brennan's good wishes. Cappellini immediately after his election betrayed the militant spirit of the rank and file coal miners and went over to the organized officialdom. An old story, often repeated in the miners' union, as it has been enacted time and time again in other labor organizations.

But in the days that Cappellini was campaigning for official place among the anthracite miners there was organized in Pittsburgh a representative conference, the International Progressive Committee of the United Mine Workers of America. This conference represents not only militancy in spirit, but militancy in its organization clothes. President Lewis had accepted Cappellini, the militant, because he knew he could with his own machine break this individual militant. But these "breaking" episodes are doomed to pass in the miners' union with the growing strength of the International Progressive Committee. This is the phenomenon that is unfolding in the miner's union today. President Lewis rallies every strength to fight it. He has buried the hatchet in his long and deep-rooted feud with another powerful and reactionary figure in the miners' union, Frank Farrington, President of the Illinois Miners. He has reached an open alliance with Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor, whom he opposed for reelection at the Denver, Colo., Convention in 1921. He has opened the columns of the union's official organ, *The United Mine Workers' Journal*, to the most scurrilous attacks on the progressive miners, at the same time closing this publication to all replies of those attacked. He stabbed in the back, with an expulsion order, the heroic coal miners of Nova Scotia, Canada, for their effort come to the aid of their striking comrades in the steel mills. In fact, he has declared open war on the militant spirit that built the United Mine Workers of America to a membership of half a million, the spirit that has made the miners' union the hope of the American labor movement, capable, as in 1922, of breaking the nationwide open-shop drive against all organized labor.

The Gompers-Lewis fight against the militants, therefore, becomes an anti-labor war, in the sense that it is in opposition to every advanced step the organized workers are trying to take. In the mining industry the Gompers-Lewis machine finds itself in opposi-

tion to nationalization of the coal mines, against organizing the unorganized, against cooperating through alliances with other industries, against amalgamation, opposed to national agreements and to international affiliation.

Mr. Lewis and Mr. Gompers, with their official supporters, in reality have developed an anti-labor war in which they seek to create, where they have not already created it, an entente with the great employers. This plot to unite the bosses and the Lewis-Gompers bureaucracy against the forward-looking workers is no secret. Gompers urges this entente in *The Magazine of Wall Street*, in the August number of which his closing paragraph declares with black' face type:

**"The Employers and the Organized Employees of America Should Stand Shoulder to Shoulder in This Fight."**

This is a confession of the Gompers-Lewis outfit that their position is growing desperately weak.

When this issue of *The Liberator* reaches its readers, the Second National Conference of the Trade Union Educational League will be in session in Chicago. The First Conference, one year ago, in the days of the miners' and railroad shopmen's strikes, was invaded by Daugherty's raiders, and fifteen arrests were made, including that of Earl R. Browder, editor of the *Labor Herald*. Masses of workers immediately rallied to the support of those attacked. This year the masses of labor, in increasing numbers, are with the Trade Union Educational League, especially its miners' section, while the labor bureaucracy has taken its stand with the raiders of one year ago. Last year the Trade Union Educational League was confronted with the work of developing a militant program of action against the "open-shop" bosses. This year it faces the task of meeting both the bosses and their allies, the "labor lieutenants" of capitalism. The situation develops with crystal clearness especially among the miners. But it stretches all the way from the conservative building trades, through the miners' union, and into the "Socialist"-controlled needle workers' organizations.

On the 5th of last May, Frank Farrington, head of the Illinois Miners, then supposedly a staunch supporter for the reinstatement of Alex Howat and the Kansas miners, wrote to a union miner that:

"I do not think the men who are behind the so-called progressive movement have any intentions

whatever of establishing a dual organization of Mine Workers, instead, their activities, I think, are due entirely to their determination to clean up some of the corruption that is going on in our International Union.

“Alex Howat has repeatedly declared that he will have nothing to do with the establishment of a dual organization of mine workers, and I am satisfied that he meant just what he said. I do think, however, that Howat has much reason for complaint and he will no doubt identify himself with this element in our union because he believes that is the only way he can secure justice for himself and the Kansas Mine Workers.”

During the Pittsburgh Conference of the Progressive Miners, however, Farrington was already meeting with Lewis and Gompers, in Springfield and Chicago, Ill., with the result that he began writing letters urging closer cooperation between reactionaries “who believe in constructive progress,” while in a letter dated June 29th, he openly repudiates Howat, charging the Kansas miner had aligned himself with those “who are working to destroy the United Mine Workers of America.”

Farrington would have intelligent workers believe that those who were working “to clean up some of the corruption in the union,” to use his own words, had suddenly become the “enemies of the union.” The real development was that Farrington, the platonic supporter of the militants, had suddenly turned turtle and joined the Gompers-Lewis front with the bosses against the rank and file of labor. The big obstacles that had to be overcome to secure this alliance may well be imagined. One of Farrington’s many public charges against Lewis was to the effect that Lewis had received \$100,000 from Kentucky mine owners for allowing the Kentucky miners to work during the 1921 coal strike. This is the corruption against which the lips of Farrington will now be sealed by the alliance.

To be sure it now becomes the function, not only of Farrington, but even more so of Lewis himself, to blacken the character of those who, as Farrington testified, would “expose corruption” in the union. This Lewis proceeded to do with all the viciousness of Mitchell Palmer’s “Anti-Red Raids” in Wilson’s days and the brutal cunning of Harry M. Daugherty’s anti-labor onslaughts during Harding’s time.

Thus the workings of the labor-bureaucracy front with the bosses are fully revealed by President Lewis’

activities at the Tri-District Anthracite Miners’ Conference, at Scranton, Pa., June 26-29, and the resultant treatment of these events in the July 15th issue of the *United Mine Workers’ Journal*.

The Scranton Conference was called to discuss the new wage agreement to take the place of the contract that expires August 31. Hundreds of delegates were gathered from all the coal towns of the Pennsylvania Anthracite field. For the first two days the delegates were regaled with oratory. Not until the third day did President Lewis appear. Then he used up an hour and half of the two hours the conference was in session. On the fourth day the scale committee was ready to report, and it was felt that the gathering might get down to its real business. But instead of an intelligent discussion on the wage scale problem, the Lewis machine provided something different. As the result of an admitted frame-up, one of the bureaucracy’s henchmen on the floor opened an attack on the militant miners’ activities. This was immediately taken up by President Lewis from the platform, and after one of the most cowardly attempts at incitation to lynching, succeeded in having Joseph Manley, at that time secretary of the Miner’s Progressive Committee, and other militants, mobbed from the convention hall. Lewis’ object had been achieved. The radical delegates in the convention had been intimidated. Their spirit had been broken. The bureaucracy put through its program for the wage negotiations to be held at the Atlantic City seaside resort. Lewis had performed the work of the bosses at Scranton. Lewis had carried out Gompers’ program of fighting the progressives in the union, instead of uniting the union against the bosses. The anthracite profiteers laughed, sneered at Lewis when he came to Atlantic City with his program, and deadlocked the negotiations over the question of recognizing the union through approval of the check-off!

Instead of using the *United Mine Workers Journal* to rally the anthracite miners for the crucial struggle ahead, the issue of July 15th of that *Journal* is given over to Lewis’ “Rule and Ruin” speech at Scranton, published under the heading, “Complete Harmony Prevails at Tri-District Convention of the United Mine Workers.” The speech is set off with a cheap attempt at a cartoon picturing the militant miners as “Industrial Buzzards,” one of the favorite expressions of Mr. Lewis, who has not yet answered Farrington’s charges

of bribe-taking. The artist's pencil must have been driven, unconsciously to be sure, by visions of the "Industrial Buzzard," Mr. Lewis, feeding on the chaos he himself has produced in the miners' ranks. Instead of having his wage propositions accepted by the hard coal mine owners at Atlantic City, Mr. Lewis has been confronted with the promise of the soft coal mine owners to support their fellow coal profiteers in their demands. Thus, while Mr. Lewis is dividing the miners in carrying out the Gompers' policy of attacking the radicals, the mine owners are busy strengthening their forces.

During the strikes of the steel workers and coal miners against the British Empire Steel Corporation, in Nova Scotia, Canada, we see this Gompers-Lewis alliance with bosses carried to its logical conclusion, in the open struggle. These Canadian coal miners constitute District No. 26, of the United Mine Workers of America. They are among the most militant in the miners' union. They are disciplined union members. They withdrew their decision to affiliate with the Red International of Labor Unions when the Lewis administration declared it was "unconstitutional." They were willing to wait until the remainder of the union membership had expressed itself in an international convention. But when these union coal miners saw the armed forces of the British King, even the frowning guns of His Majesty's battleships, being used against the striking steel workers of Nova Scotia, they could not remain inactive. A sympathetic strike was called that met with a hundred-percent response. Lewis immediately outlawed the strike in a lengthy telegram from his palatial suite in the Ambassador Hotel at Atlantic City. He joined the Canadian steel and coal czars in crushing this magnificent display of working class solidarity, on the same theory that he betrayed the 1919 miners' strike, the theory that "we cannot fight the

government." Mr. Lewis had shown himself just as loyal to the King of England as he had previously been true to the Princes of Wall Street.

This is the working out of the anti-radical program of the labor bureaucracy. It is not only a Gompers-Lewis Farrington policy. It spreads as the masses in the labor unions awaken to the needs of the present struggle against the bosses. This policy is bearing its despotic fruit in the needle workers' unions, where "Socialists" control, as well as in those organizations where the official reaction carries its industrial alliance with the employers also into the political struggle.

Cappellini was broken in the anthracite fields by this labor reaction. He may come back. He may not. But the organized strength of militancy will continue to grow, as it is growing. It carefully picks its leaders. Such surrenders as that of Cappellini are being made, for the future, impossible. Real support is being given those, like Howat, who have the courage to battle corruption in high places, who speak the will of the inarticulate many.

The day of free men is dawning in the mining industry, as well as in the miners' union. The progressives among the coal diggers are receiving the brunt of the Gompers-Lewis attack, because they are in the vanguard of the struggle against the entente of capitalist bosses and labor bureaucrats. But these militants always remember the words of William Z. Foster, at the historic first conference of the Trade Union Educational League:

"In this great struggle we must expect to meet with some casualties."

And the struggle forces the one word "Coal!" upon the ear of the nation, and it is a great struggle because it will be crowned with the final victory.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

*Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2005. • Free reproduction permitted.*