

"Solidarity Forever" - The Western Federation of Miners and the One Big Union

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The miner's life in the 1890's was a hard one. Most travelled from job to job, carrying their bedding and few personal belongings, working wherever they could for as much as they were able to get. Many were illiterate, or foreign-born, with little or no skills in English. Working in cold, damp tunnels hundreds of feet underground, many were killed in the mines, or in avalanches travelling to or from work, or died lingering deaths from respiratory disease brought on by work in the mines. Even if they escaped death, many were crippled for life by accidents or severe ailments.

Some miners married and had settled lives in town, but most remained single and lived either in one of the many hotels or in lonely little mining camps high on the mountainsides. Those who lived in town had some form of social life, but the men who lived in the camps often came into town only infrequently for one of the four days off yearly- May 24th, July 1st, Labour Day and December 25th. A skilled miner earning top-level wages was making in the vicinity of \$3.50 for a 10-hour day, but there was no guarantee that they would be paid even that much.

As miners flooded into the Slocan following the fantastic "Payne" discovery, many crossed the border from the United States, particularly from Washington state, Idaho and Colorado. A large number of these men were veterans of the bitter and violent labour battles in the Coueur d'Alene area of Idaho, and had learned from past experience that mine owners were more likely to be interested in profits than issues such as the miners' safety or wages. They had good reason for concern, too, as many of the Slocan mines were bought by large mining companies based in the United States.

Along with the men and the companies, the "Payne" strike brought something else to the Slocan- trade unionism. Formed on December 5, 1898, by 110 miners, the Sandon Miners

Union was affiliated with the Western Federation of Miners (WFM), a loose but democratic labour organization based in Boulder, Colorado. The WFM was one of the most militant unions in the United States, and its president was a socialist. Campaigning for safer conditions in the mine as well as better living conditions in the company-owned mining camps, the WFM was concerned with more than just increased wages for its members.

The WFM was supported in its struggle by sympathetic newspapers and editors, such as The Paystreak in Sandon, under "Colonel" Robert Lowery, who argued with wit and skill on behalf of the miners. Some mine owners were receptive to a union, but many fought bitterly against it, and formed the Silver-Lead Mine Owner's Association (SLMOA). These owners and their sympathizers, such as Charles Cliffe of Sandon's Mining Review, characterized the union as the "Western Federation of Dynamiters and Murderers", but despite their accusations there were never any violence in the Slocan camps to match the Coeur d'Alene battles.

Indeed, the Local 81 of the WFM- the Sandon Miners Union- accomplished a great deal, benefitting not only their membership, but the general public as well. Responding to the critical need for local medical care, on March 1, 1899 the WFM opened the doors to the Sandon Hospital. Located on Reco Avenue in the downtown core, it had room for six patients and was open to all, regardless of financial standing. Some of the building costs had come from local merchants, but the bulk of the money had come from the pockets of the miners themselves.

Meanwhile, the situation with the SLMOA was about to boil over. The provincial government in Victoria was proposing changes to the Mines Act that would regulate an eight-hour work day in the mines. Furious over what it saw as government "meddling", the SLMOA vowed that if the work day was cut by two hours, they would cut the miner's wages too- from \$3.50 to \$3.00 per day. Bitter at what it saw as exploitation by millionaire mine owners, the WFM swore to pull its men from the mines if wages were reduced.

Negotiations went nowhere, and on June 21, 1899 the SLMOA pre-empted a perceived strike threat by locking out the miners. As summer and then winter dragged on with no settlement, many miners were reduced to destitution, relying on their union brothers, wives of fellow miners and sympathetic members of the public to help them out. In desperation, many drifted away, looking for work wherever they could find it. In the hospital, the matron, Miss Chisholm, and Doctor Gomm not only agreed to work for free, but placed their own meagre savings at the disposal of the hospital's board.

Finally, in February of 1900, a compromise settlement was announced: the SLMOA would accept the eight-hour day, but top miner's wages would be reduced to \$3.25. As desperate as the situation was for the miners, it was a hard concession for many to make, and the labour troubles were not solved, but only delayed.

Then, barely three months later, disaster struck- on May 3, 1900 the entire downtown core, including the WFM hospital, was consumed by flames. All that was saved was a chair, some bedclothes and the patients. Ever resourceful, the faithful Dr. Gomm soon located a building in the upper gulch which had survived, and on May 9 the hospital re-opened. The new building was located in "unhealthy" territory, however; it was cold and damp, lacked sunlight for three months of the year, and sat dangerously close to a frequent snowslide area.



At the same time, however, the union was busy back in the downtown core, erecting a beautiful two-storey building that housed a spacious gymnasium, union offices, a library and a large auditorium on the main floor. Featuring a stage complete with drop curtains painted to represent local mountain scenery, a suspended dance floor and an upright grand piano, it served as a dance and performance hall for Sandon residents for many years until it was demolished for its lumber in 1952.

By 1904, a snowslide that came within feet of the hospital's front door had forced the hand of the union. With \$2,500 and promissory notes for more in hand, the union began to plan a new hospital. Built on land donated by J.M. Harris and Malcolm Sproat of Victoria, the new hospital was located high up on Sunnyside Hill in a bright, airy location considered much healthier for

the patients. Two storeys tall, with a large basement, it had a modern sewage system, electric light and furnace heat. Featuring a convalescent ward, private rooms for patients of both sexes, staff rooms and running water, it cost almost \$7,000 and was considered the best and most modern hospital in the entire region.

The full picture was far from rosy, however. Falling metal prices were having severe consequences for the union as men drifted away and membership rates fell. By 1906 the situation was so bad that the Sandon Local was forced to turn to WFM headquarters in Colorado for help. A \$2,000 bail-out was arranged in 1907, with the WFM taking a mortgage on the hospital as security.

By 1919, with news of the Winnipeg General Strike filtering in from the "outside world", the Sandon and Silverton Locals joined the One Big Union (OBU), a militant umbrella group formed in Calgary that year that sought to unite Canadian workers unions and promoted a split with the American Federation of Labour. Lead by Welshman T.B. "Tommy" Roberts, the OBU struck in Trail against Consolidated Mining and Smelting and its union-busting general manager Selwyn Blaylock, but after a winter of bitter struggle, it admitted defeat. Roberts determined to try again in the Slocan, and in order to direct operations Roberts moved out to Sandon.

Among the demands were a dollar a day increase in wages, a closed union shop, and blankets for the men in the camps. Again, the mine owners were not unanimous in their reaction, and some made private agreements with the OBU. In general, however, the demands were refused, and on May 1, 1920 the Sandon and Silverton OBU miners walked out on strike. It was to prove to be the last hurrah for the WFM and the OBU, however.

The Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (UMMSW), made up of men who had helped Blaylock break the Cominco strike in Trail, sent a representative to New Denver to watch the proceedings. Soon this representative was negotiating with mine owners to supply workers and circumvent the OBU. On May 18, the UMMSW declared the strike over. Roberts angrily denounced them, and declared the OBU would fight on. Pickets went up around the Silverton and Sandon mines as owners made every effort to import strike breakers. OBU organizers responded by meeting all incoming boats and trains and persuading prospective workers to turn back. As the strike dragged on, into July, the mine owners condemned the OBU as a fomenter of social unrest, labour troubles, defiance of government and anarchy.

By August many OBU men, faced with starvation, had begun to trickle back to the mines.

Things didn't recover, however, and the mines operated at a sluggish pace. Jubilant, Roberts was convinced the strike was working; what he didn't realize was that it was slumping metal prices that had caused the slowdown far more than the OBU strike. As the situation became more desperate, those who could found other work, and many were forced to turn to hunting and berry-picking in order to survive. Churches organized basket socials, and citizens in both communities helped when they could, donating food and money. And still the strike went on, throughout the winter. By spring it was obvious the entire industry was in a slump, regardless of the OBU strike. By May of 1921 when the owners persuaded workers to accept a wage reduction, Roberts could do no more than write indignant letters of outrage. It was the end of the road for the WFM and the OBU in Sandon.

The Sandon hospital, meanwhile, continued to operate until the 1930s, when the Great Depression closed it for good. During the Second World War it was used for a brief time as an apartment building for Japanese-Canadian internees before it was abandoned for the last time. The roof was removed by salvagers in the 1950s, and the rest of it gradually crumbled to the ground. Today, a gigantic ruin on Sunnyside Hill is the only visible remains in Sandon of the Western Federation of Miners.