

INDUSTRIAL WEEKLY REVIEW KINGSTON

THE SITUATION AS VIEWED BY THE ANTHRACITE OPERATOR

Writing in the Retail Coalman of June, one of the presidents of the old-line coal companies, gave the following interview:

To-day the scales in the anthracite field, the wage scales compared with the pre-war period, are 138 per cent. higher. In 1912, under the 1912-16 agreement, we paid minimum labor in the anthracite field \$150 a day for an 8-hour day. To-day that minimum labor, not the skilled labor but the minimum labor, is being paid 52 1-2 cents an hour.

That agreement under which we are now operating was made by order of a commission appointed by the president and was made at a time when the peak of living conditions had been reached. The month in which we were arguing this case before the president's commissions at Scranton, namely July, was the very month in which the cost of living figures ceased to go up, and within two months after that they began to come down. In spite of that labor award, providing as it did for a wage increase 18 to 20 per cent. higher than had been paid at any time through the war, as you well know, the miners declined to sign it. A strike of almost a month in duration was precipitated in the anthracite fields, and it was not until December when the miners were finally contented to abide by the decisions of that award and go really back to work.

At that time the operators said to the miners: "You have definitely agreed to abide by the decision of a board to be appointed by the president of the United States. We will not, and we cannot, consider anything but an acceptance on your part of the terms and conditions of that agreement. We cannot, between ourselves, no matter what your arguments may be, agree to pay any wage scale higher than that, and we ask you to abide by your agreement." In that position we were strongly supported by the public.

"No, We Will Not and We Cannot." Now, less than five months after that, we are asked not by the radical papers, but by the old, conservative journals, to deliberately break that agreement and to reduce wages, and our answer to that is: "No, we will not and we cannot." This would be a suicidal policy for this industry and those connected with it, in spite of the conditions of the times, to go to those miners only five months after we held up to them the sanctity of a contract, and asked them to accept, in view of declining prices and wages in other industries, lower wages and poorer terms and conditions than we had agreed to pay. We believe,

gentlemen, that so far as the wage scale is concerned, by all of the laws of ethics, by all of the sanctity of contracts, we are bound to pay those wages during the term of that agreement.

We, therefore, have now a very difficult problem. In July, 1920, the cost of living figures were from 110 to 115 per cent. above normal. To-day the cost of living figures have declined to an excess of about 70 per cent. above the normal pre-war period. Wage scales in many industries have decidedly declined. The earnings of the workers in other industries have declined far faster, and to a far greater extent, than have their wage scales, because they have been deprived of steady work. We, therefore, have to meet this situation, which is very difficult, by the adoption of some policy which will present to the public, whose judgment I believe in all cases will, in the last analysis, be fair, correct and accurate statements of the position of this industry. We will have to work harder than we ever worked in our lives to maintain the product of this industry in competition with other commodities, because in the last analysis this thing is the law of supply and demand, and if other commodities can come in and replace anthracite to a certain extent due to their cheaper cost, they inevitably will do so unless by the statement of our position, by the energy of our work and by the efficiency of our service, we can, in a degree, counteract that situation.

Seventy per cent. of the price on the average that the anthracite operator receives for his coal is turned directly over to labor, leaving the balance, 30 per cent., for his material, for his taxes, for all of those other elements which go into the cost of production. The margin is small, it always has been small, but a price must be received for that product which will maintain the credit of the industry, otherwise the industry will collapse or else prices will inevitably go higher due to the lack of credit of those engaged in that industry.

Increased Costs by Special Taxes. Now, there is one other element which is burdening the operators today. There seems to be no end of these troubles, though I would be glad to bring to you a ray of sunshine if I could, but there is one more and that is the additional cost of the production of anthracite due to the imposition of a state tax by the legislature of Pennsylvania. That tax is a tax, an ad valorem tax of 1-1-2 per cent. on the total mine production.

In addition thereto, two bills have been passed by the legislature, though not yet signed by the governor, which are known as the mine cave bills. As you know, there has been great disturbance in the anthracite fields, in certain sections of them,

due to the conflict between the rights of surface owners and the rights of mine owners. The popular clamor at this session of the legislature was such that bills were passed, which, in a degree, prohibited secondary mining under built-up territories, such as cities, boroughs and first-class townships. With this bill is a second bill which provides that if the operator sees fit to pay an additional tax of 2 per cent. ad valorem, he may escape from some of the criminal penalties imposed by the first act, provided a commission set up by the governor may decide in his favor.

In our judgment these laws are a gross extension of the constitutional rights of the legislature. They impose criminal penalties in a way, which, in our judgment, is in violation of the Pennsylvania state constitution, and we sincerely trust that in the last analysis the governor may see fit to veto the measures. But assuming that these two additional costs are imposed upon the producers, we are faced with an increase in our cost of 3 1-2 per cent. which, unless steam sizes of coal spid in competition with bituminous coal can bear their share, must be added to the cost of the production of domestic coal, and it takes very little calculation to see that this would be in round figures 5 per cent. that would have to be added to the mine prices to recoup the operator, or the operator would be forced to bear out of his margin that additional cost.

Sometime before Rail Rates Reduced

You all know what the railroad situation is. Unfortunately there has been a great deal of talk that railroad rates would be reduced. Under the existing law known as the Cummings-Esch act, I do not see how they can be reduced over night. That law provides that the Interstate Commerce Commission shall make a rate only after a hearing, which will provide a net revenue on the average for the railroads of 5 1-2 per cent. To-day the average net revenue received by the railroads is only something over two per cent., and even if railroad wages are reduced, as is quite probable after these hearings before the Railroad Labor Board, it will be some time before railroad rates are materially reduced, because government bodies move slowly. In the meantime it is true that all of those talks have had a depressing influence on distribution.

A telescope, which it is claimed will be the largest in the world, is to be erected at Vancouver, British Columbia. The lens will be 10 feet in diameter. Total registration for army draft in the United States was 24,234,021.

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