
The Story of Alex Howat.

by James P. Cannon

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Alexander Howat is the President of District 14 of the United Mine Workers. He has been an officer of that union for the most of 19 years, and has not yet learned the profession of labor leadership. He still thinks like a coal digger. The Southwestern Coal Operators' Association has had a 20 years' struggle with the coal miners of Kansas and has never been able to deal with the President of the union in the manner in which professional labor leaders are habitually dealt with.

This alone went far to bring about the famous Kansas contribution to statecraft. The legislature was called into special session for the purpose of passing the Industrial Court Law, which forever puts an end, legally, to all strikes in the state of Kansas. Unions are permitted, of course, but they must be strikeless unions. Disputes between employer and employees are legally to be settled by three judges of the Industrial Court appointed by the governor. Thus the function of the state — “to moderate the collisions between the classes” — reaches its ultimate in the state of Kansas. Even on the organized industrial field there shall be no active class struggle. An Industrial Court shall settle disputes “with justice to all concerned” and without stopping production.

Then the coal diggers met in district convention and “repealed” the Industrial Court Law, so to speak. District 14 of the United Mine Workers made it “illegal” under union law for its officers to have any dealings whatever with the Industrial Court Law of the state. The miners union statute provides heavy penalties against members who may

recognize the state Industrial Court statute.

It has been something more than a year since these two conflicting laws were enacted, and now the population of Kansas is split between the two authorities — the government of Kansas and the miners union of Kansas.

Last winter the Industrial Court summoned Alexander Howat, as District President of the union, to come before it to testify in a labor dispute. Not only did he and his Executive Board refuse to appear, but Howat published a statement denouncing the Industrial Court for attempting to interfere with the affairs of the miners' union and to “chain men to their jobs like slaves.” For this Howat and the other officers of the union were sent to jail for contempt of court. The coal miners of Kansas went out in a mass on a protest strike until their representatives were released on bond.

Since the passage of the anti-strike law, it has been the custom for the miners to walk off the job when occasion demanded, without waiting for a formal strike order from the Executive Board. The Industrial Court has not proceeded against the miners involved in these local strikes. Neither has it attempted to prosecute the miners for the protest strikes which they engaged in each time Howat and the Executive Board members were arrested.

In February an old dispute came to a head at the H&J mines of the Mackie Fuel Company over some back pay amounting to about \$200 which the union claimed to be due a boy named Carl Mishmash. President Howat and the District Executive Board called a strike to compel the com-

pany to make a settlement.

Howat and the other officers of the union were arrested, for calling strikes in violation of the Industrial Court law. All the mine workers went on a protest strike again, and most of them came into Pittsburg [Kansas] to attend the trial.

"I hope Alex tells them to go to hell," said an Italian boy who couldn't get past the steps of the courthouse. The courtroom only held a fraction of the miners who wanted to hear Howat talk to the judge. They packed the hallways and stood in clusters around on the sidewalk and the street corners. They gathered in the poolrooms, restaurants and cigar stores, all talking about the case.

The Attorney General and the county attorney wanted Howat to make "damaging admissions." He made plenty of them without concern. Howat was asked if he didn't think it would be better to take the grievance of young Mishmarsh into the Industrial Court. His answer was emphatic:

"No. I never did see any good for labor come out of courts."

"Will you call off the strike now?" inquired the Attorney General.

"No. We will not call off the strike until the Mackie Fuel Company pays that fatherless boy and his widowed mother the back pay that is due them."

"Do you not intend to obey the law?"

"The Industrial Court Law is unconstitutional."

After a day of argument of attorneys, Howat, Vice President August Dorchy and Executive Board members John Fleming, Willard Titus, James McIlwrath and Hearl Maxwell were sentenced to a year in jail. The miners in the courtroom were silent for a moment. Then one standing in the back of the room cried out:

"Jail one year, no work one year!"

This expression in various forms was repeated throughout the room. Most of the miners waited at the courthouse until the appeal bonds were made

out and the men released.

Soon after the court adjourned I saw Howat, who told me:

"Governor Allen said the Industrial Court Law would stop strikes. We said it wouldn't. And the fact that there is a strike now on in this district proves that it can't stop strikes. The best they can do is to put men in jail. And we are not afraid of that. We know what we are up against. We will stay in jail until we are carried out in boxes before we will yield an inch in this fight. The miners of Kansas cannot fight this battle all alone. But I have confidence that the miners of America and organized labor generally will come to our aid, because we are fighting for them as well as for ourselves."

The bankers and businessmen and most of the professionals are on the side of the state of Kansas. They express themselves freely in private conversation, but few of them will say anything about the fight for publication. Several indiscreet merchants have felt the heavy hand of the union boycott, and their experience has made the others cautious. Pittsburg is a union town. The miners have assisted and inspired the organization of most of the other trades. The jitney drivers, the cooks and waiters, the streetcar men, the office workers, the telephone girls — all have functioning unions. The girls who work in the ten-cent store are organized and they went out with all the other unions in a one-day protest strike when Howat was first arrested. The spirit of the miners strongly influences the other unions of the town. They have learned to act together.

A tea and coffee salesman was delivering a set of dishes as a premium from his company the day of the Howat trial. The woman customer asked him what he thought about it.

"They ought to give him life—"

He didn't finish what he was going to say. At that point the lady raised the dishes and broke them over his head.

During the great coal strike in the fall of 1919 Governor Allen undertook to get the Kansas min-

ers back to work. A court order was secured which placed all the miners under temporary control of three receivers appointed by the court on recommendation of the governor. To make it fair for all concerned, one receiver was selected from the coal operators, one from what is called the public, and one from the miners union—a sort of coalition government of industry. Governor Allen had just returned from Red Cross service in Europe. He learned something over there of the weakness of Socialists for bourgeois cabinets. He appointed Willard Titus, a member of the Mine Workers' District Executive Board and an old-time Socialist, to represent labor on the Board of Receivers.

It was a clever stroke on his part. But Titus is not that kind of a socialist. He sent a short note to the governor, informing him that he could not serve the state of Kansas as a receiver for the reason that such an action on his part might conflict with the constitution and bylaws of the United Mine Workers of America, which was the only body authorized to call off a strike of miners.

This is a point of view that is widely held among the miners of District 14. They have no literature on the subject. It is not stated in their preamble or declaration of principles. But when the union orders a strike and the court orders no strike, the miners are not troubled by a divided loyalty. They lay down their picks and go home until further orders from the union.

This looks like a new philosophy which regards a union as an authority higher than any other institution. It is a philosophy which not only turns gray the hair of Kansas employers, but also shocks the sense of propriety of the national heads of the United Mine Workers of America. The national officers of the UMW were fighting Bolshevism in Kansas many years before Gompers heard of Bolshevism in Russia. They never got along well with Howat and always maintained that he carried things too far in his fights with the operators. Howat brought his ideas with him regularly to the national conventions of the union, and this tended

to introduce class feeling.

Seven years ago the Southwestern Coal Operators' Association involved itself in a civil suit which required that its books be examined in court. A mysterious entry on their books was an item of \$25,000, which they, with apparent hesitation, explained represented a bribe paid to Alexander Howat. John P. White, who was then the International president of the United Mine Workers, was terribly agitated and demanded that Howat resign until he had proved his innocence.

Howat went back to the mines. He stayed there, working as a coal miner for 21 months. The systematic campaign to destroy his influence with the miners began. National organizers were sent into District 14 to undermine him. The national president wrote letters periodically to all the locals denouncing him as a betrayer of the workers. Each time Howat, at his own expense, circularized the locals with his answer. The controversy culminated in a challenge by Howat to debate the issue before mass meetings of the members in his district. White accepted. A series of debates in the different towns of the district was arranged.

The first and only debate took place in the Opera House of Pittsburg, Kansas. The miners still talk about it. Standing room was not available to half of those who wanted to hear it. White spoke and Howat answered him. The miners voted confidence in Howat and demanded that he be provided with his own attorney for a libel suit against the Operators' Association. White agreed. The next debate was scheduled for the following evening at Frankfort, in the heart of the Kansas coal fields. Several thousand miners were waiting, but White did not appear.

Frank Walsh was engaged by Howat, and the case finally came to trial in May 1916 in Kansas City. By tracing the bank checks and vouchers, Walsh accounted for all of the mysterious \$25,000 and proved that Howat had not received a cent of it. Howat was awarded \$7,000 damages by the jury.

But the Kansas miners had not waited for

the verdict of the jury before bringing in their own. Prior to the trial they re-elected him district president by an almost unanimous vote. He has had no serious opposition since.

Howat was a candidate for the International Vice Presidency in the last election. A great deal more of electioneering and ballot-box stuffing than usual was required to beat him. Three hundred national organizers, 26 International board members and 65 traveling auditors campaigned against Howat, the coal digger.

The International officers of the United Mine Workers of America will not lose anything if the Kansas organization is broken up and Howat and the other officers are put in jail. The Illinois miners sent \$100,000 direct to the Kansas miners, but the International treasury has sent them nothing. Unlimited support was promised as one of the considerations of the Kansas miners going back to work during the big general strike, but it was never made good.

“The International is against us,” one of the local leaders in District 14 told me, “and that is the hardest thing we have to contend with. The coal operators and the Industrial Court of the state of Kansas would have given up their fight long ago if they hadn't known that they could depend upon the secret support of the International. Instead of backing us up to the limit like real leaders of the union ought to do, they are always threatening to revoke our charter and looking for a pretext to enable them to do it.”

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