

Volume 87

GEORGE B. COTKIN

Strikebreakers, Evictions and Violence:

Industrial Conflict in the

Hocking Valley, 1884-1885

In 1904 Boston trade unionist Frank K. Foster called the strikebreaker an "industrial excrement . . . the Iscariot of the industrial world." That same year novelist Jack London coined his famous definition of the "scab." A strikebreaker, wrote London, "is a two-legged animal with a corkscrew soul, a water-logged brain, and a combination backbone made of jelly and glue. Where others have hearts he carries a tumor of rotten principles." So damnatory was London that he thought strikers had the moral right to kill those who took their jobs and broke their struggle.<sup>1</sup>

Like most trade unionists and radicals of his time, London assumed that strikebreakers and violence went hand in hand. Labor historians have also shared this view. In a recent survey of industrial violence, H. M. Gitelman contends that the introduction of strikebreakers invariably produced sharp conflict. "Most worker-initiated strike violence," wrote Gitelman, "took the form of physical assaults upon strikebreakers and upon fellow employees who attempted to cross picket lines."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Philip Taft and Philip Ross believed that strikers responded "to strikebreakers with anger. Many violent outbreaks followed efforts of strikers to restrain the entry of strikebreakers and raw materials into the plant." In their wide-ranging survey of industrial violence, Taft and Ross found strikebreakers physically attacked in the Anthracite Strike of 1902, the Westmoreland County coal strike of 1909-1912 and a host of other labor disputes.<sup>3</sup> Additionally,

George Cotkin will receive his Ph.D. in History from The Ohio State University in June 1978.

1. Frank K. Foster, "Reply to President Eliot," *The Papers of Charles W. Eliot*, Harvard University; Jack London, "The Scab," (1904) as quoted in Leonard Abbott, ed., *London's Essays of Revolt* (New York, 1928), 65.

2. H. M. Gitelman, "Perspectives on American Industrial Violence," *Business History Review*, XLVII (Spring 1973), 11, 15.

3. Philip Taft and Philip Ross, "American Labor Violence: Its Causes, Character,

Gitelman, Taft and Ross argue that the presence of armed guards, particularly in coal mining communities, usually led to armed and violent confrontations.<sup>4</sup>

If workers shared Foster's and London's instinctive aversion to the strikebreakers and if industrial violence is commonly provoked by the introduction of strikebreakers, then one would expect to find in the Hocking Valley coal strike of 1884-1885 a perfect case study to prove the strikebreaker-industrial violence thesis. The main conditions for violence were present: coal operators brought immigrant strikebreakers into a predominately native-American mining community and insured their work by posting armed guards at their properties. However, violence directed against the strikebreakers was rare, and when violence actually flared, and it did, it was directed against the property of the coal companies, especially those structures necessary for the continued production of coal during the strike.

Tensions between Hocking Valley coal miners and coal mine operators certainly antedated the start of the Hocking Valley coal strike of 1884-1885. Miners complained about the high prices charged by the company store, unfair work rules and the lack of steady work. They thought nothing good could come of the increasing monopolization of the valley's mines. With the decline in the local ownership of the mines, operators joined together in the spring of 1883 and consolidated their holdings under one company, the Columbus and Hocking Coal and Iron Co., derisively called "the Syndicate" by the miners. At roughly the same time, operators created the Ohio Coal Exchange to handle their labor relations in a centralized manner. Corporate offices in Cleveland now dictated labor policies in the Valley.<sup>5</sup> Miners thought the Syndicate out to rob them of their traditional rights. Local miner Andrew Brown believed that the Syndicate wished to break the "American miner down to the level of the pauperized miner of Europ [sic]."<sup>6</sup> Christopher Evans, President of District One of the Ohio Miners

and Outcome," *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr (New York, 1969), 301, 381-82. Taft presents the same conclusions in briefer form in "Violence in American Labor Disputes," *American Academy of Political and Social Science Annals*, CCCLXIV (March 1966), 127-40. In a recent article on the Hocking Valley coal strike of 1884-1885, Frank Levstik connects the introduction of strikebreakers with the beginnings of violence. "The Hocking Valley Miners' Strike, 1884-1885: A Search for Order," *The Old Northwest*, II (March 1976), 55-56.

4. Taft and Ross, "American Labor Violence," 301-02; Gitelman, "Perspectives," 15.

5. John W. Lozier, "The Hocking Valley Coal Miners' Strike, 1884-1885" (M. A. thesis, The Ohio State University, 1963), 36-37.

6. Andrew Brown to Governor George Hoadly, September 18, 1884, The Papers of George Hoadly, The Ohio Historical Society (hereafter cited as Hoadly Papers).

Amalgamated Association, considered the Syndicate a gigantic monopoly "bent upon crushing poor humanity."<sup>7</sup>

Sharp and unilaterally imposed wage reductions precipitated the Hocking Valley coal strike of 1884-1885. In March 1884 operators slashed the rates for coal mined from 80 cents to 70 cents per ton. Given the soft demand for coal and the increasing competition from out-of-state fields miners reluctantly accepted the pay cut. One month later the operators asked the miners to accept another reduction, this time down to 50 cents per ton. The miners refused to agree this time, and they continued mining coal at the old wage rate until late June. The operators then decided to unilaterally cut the rate to 60 cents per ton and on Friday evening, June 20, they posted the new tonnage rates at the mines. On Monday, June 23, the miners stayed home. According to Christopher Evans, three thousand miners and one thousand helpers struck, closing down forty-six mines in the valley.<sup>8</sup>

It was a long and grueling strike, "the bitterest strike in the entire mining industry of America," wrote economist Edward Bemis in 1888.<sup>9</sup> Lasting for over nine months, the strike ended in total defeat for the miners when on March 18, 1885, the last strikers announced in New Straitsville that they accepted the operators' terms. The work stoppage lasted so long because of intransigence on the part of both the operators and the miners. Under heavy competition from other coal fields, especially those in the Pittsburgh area, southern Ohio coal operators used the strike to win a more favorable market position by breaking the miners' union and reducing their wage bill. In sharp contrast, the miners sought to maintain their old wage rates and conditions of work and prevent the operators from forcing them to become "voluntary serfs and miserable menials."<sup>10</sup>

In its general outlines, then, the Hocking Valley coal strike of 1884-1885 resembled many labor disputes of the Gilded Age and closely followed the pattern of the big Hocking Valley coal strike of 1873-1874.<sup>11</sup> In that conflict the operators had successfully used strike-breakers to end the strike, and in 1884 they again recruited strike-breakers to keep their mines in production and thereby break the economic power of the miners' union. On July 14, a few weeks after

7. Testimony of Christopher Evans, *Proceedings of the Hocking Valley Investigation*

*Committee* (Columbus, 1885), 31-32 (hereafter cited as *Proceedings*).

8. Levstik, "Miners' Strike," 56.

9. E. W. Bemis, "Mine Labor in the Hocking Valley," *Publications of the American Economic Association*, VIII (July 1888), 27.

10. Testimony of John McBride, *Proceedings*, 308.

11. For a complete account of the 1873-1874 strike see Herbert G. Gutman, "Reconstruction in Ohio: Negroes in the Hocking Valley Coal Mines in 1873 and 1874," *Labor*

*History*, III (Fall 1962), 243-64. Also see Lozier, "Coal Miners' Strike," 40-43.

the miners refused to work for lower wages, the first group of strikebreakers accompanied by one hundred Pinkerton Guards entered the Valley. The operators had initially tried to hire skilled coal miners as strikebreakers, but they were unsuccessful, and most of the first group of three hundred strikebreakers were unskilled Italians. "All members of our Order," the Knights of Labor declared, "will stay away . . . until the difficulty is settled." The operators were forced to rely upon unskilled laborers, mainly Italians, Germans, Poles, Hungarians, Swedes and some Virginia Negroes to fill their labor needs.<sup>12</sup>

The arrival of strikebreakers and their armed guardians caused little trouble. The pro-labor Hocking *Sentinel* considered the new laborers a "social ulcer in our midst," but most Valley miners also agreed with the paper's advice to "keep cool, be peaceable, orderly and respect all offices and conduct themselves according to law." The reception accorded the strikebreakers was so mild that the operators sent the Pinkertons away on July 26. As the strike entered its second month the strikebreakers appeared safe and unmolested.<sup>13</sup>

12. Gutman, "Reconstruction," 256-257. *Journal of United Labor*, August 25, 1884;

Testimony of J. A. Donley, *Proceedings*, 81; Testimony of Christopher Evans, *Ibid.*,

46; New Lexington *Herald*, December 18, 1884; Hocking *Sentinel*, August 14, 1884.

13. Lozier, "Coal Miners' Strike," 60-64; Levstik, "Miners' Strike," 57-58.

Valley miners did not believe the strikebreakers "menacing and terrible" as Jack London would later describe them.<sup>14</sup> Instead, local miners viewed the strikebreakers as misguided and uninformed, but morally innocent. The operators used "disreputable methods" and misrepresented the conditions in the Valley to lure foreign-born strikebreakers into the mines, stated union leader John McBride.<sup>15</sup> Not only were the strikebreakers deceived, but they were thought by Hocking Valley strikers to be the epitome of exploited and servile labor. Miner J. A. Donley sympathized openly with their plight. "They don't lead a very happy life," he stated, "they are starving about half the time . . . and when a man is hungry, I don't think his life is very happy."<sup>16</sup>

Two other perceptions held by miners tended to lessen antipathy toward the strikebreakers. First, proud Hocking Valley coal miners refused to believe that unskilled foreign laborers could take their places, despite the fact that the operators had imported the latest machinery to aid the unskilled strikebreakers. One newspaper report stated, "the general opinion among older miners is that the Italians will prove a failure."<sup>17</sup> The miners, perhaps blinded by craft pride, refused to believe themselves replaceable.

Another factor worked against reprisals upon the strikebreakers. The miners believed that their strike was being fought for basic human rights as well as wage increases. The miners were engaged "in a decisive battle between monopoly on the one hand and organized labor on the other."<sup>18</sup> Miner R. H. Miller characterized his profession and the Syndicate's greed more poignantly. Miller accepted physical injury and degradation as part of the price that miners paid for defying nature's laws. Nature punished miners for taking her precious minerals by making them "humpbacked, undersized, and bowlegged." But Miller was repelled by the Syndicate's attempts to humiliate further the poor and physically degraded miners by refusing to pay them a decent wage.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the miners perceived the strikebreakers not as machines or villains but as pitiable men robbed of their basic human dignity. Striking miners uncovered in the slavish strikebreakers the human misery that they themselves sought to avoid.

Their empathy toward the immigrant strikebreaker increased with reports that the newcomers were voluntarily leaving the mines or rebel-

14. Abbott, ed., *London's Essays of Revolt*, 65.

15. Testimony of John McBride, *Proceedings*, 308.

16. Testimony of J. A. Donley, *Ibid.*, 87.

17. Athens *Messenger*, July 17, 1884; Hocking *Sentinel*, July 17, August 14, 1884.

18. *Ibid.*, July 31, 1884.

19. Testimony of R. H. Miller, *Proceedings*, 118.

## Volume 87

ling against the operators. At the end of July the *Athens Messenger* reported that "lately imported Italian miners are abandoning work . . . in a body." The former strikebreakers, the story continued, were then taken "in hand by the strikers" and given breakfast and the assurance of transportation out of the valley.<sup>20</sup> The Hocking *Sentinel* devoted considerable space to the shooting of an Italian strikebreaker by a Pinkerton guard. Apparently, the strikebreaker had become noisy after heavy drinking. Unable to quiet the Italian down, the angry Pinkerton shot him to death. After this incident many enraged Italian miners left their new jobs. The newspaper account characterized the strikebreakers' "job action" in terms that must have elated striking miners. "The uprising of the Italians in defense of an injury to one of them," the paper stated, "shows conclusively that they will be as vigorous in their demands for justice as have been those who labored in the mines before them."<sup>21</sup>

Convinced that the strikebreakers were capable of noble sentiments, the strikers pursued a peaceful policy toward these new men. Immediately upon entering the Valley the strikebreakers were greeted by strikers' verbal appeals that they return home. The initial confrontation between striker and strikebreaker was peaceful. A man identified as a leading Nelsonville striker told the *Athens Messenger* that the strikers would use persuasion and not force to convince strikebreakers to leave the mines.<sup>22</sup> Thus the newspaper reported that while foreign laborers "continue to arrive in this valley by squads, they are not here long before being induced by the strikers to abandon work."<sup>23</sup>

The striking miners believed their "persuasive eloquence" would work, and remarkably, this strategy succeeded for a time in convincing many strikebreakers to leave. But such a tactic was doomed to failure, because for every handful of strikebreakers who left, hundreds more arrived to take their jobs in the mines.<sup>24</sup> By November 1884 over 1,500 strikebreakers were at work in fifteen Hocking Valley mines.<sup>25</sup> Perplexed by the failure of their arguments to convince more strikebreakers to leave, some miners resorted to psychological intimidation of the newcomers. In January 1885 strikers were reported to be arming themselves. According to an observer, the miners intended the guns for show and hoped that the strikebreakers in the Nelsonville area

20. *Athens Messenger*, July 31, 1884.

21. *Hocking Sentinel*, September 18, 25, 1884.

22. *Athens Messenger*, July 17, 1884.

23. *Ibid.*, July 31, 1884.

24. *Ibid.*, August 7, 1884.

25. Lozier, "Coal Miners' Strike," 61.

would be frightened into leaving their jobs. Such incidents remained few and they usually failed, however.<sup>26</sup>

The introduction of strikebreakers into the Valley had failed to provoke a violent confrontation either with the operators, their hired Pinkertons or with the replacement labor force itself. When violence did start it came from another quarter. Many miners lived in housing owned by the Syndicate and at the end of July the news quickly spread that the operators would soon begin evictions of those still on strike. Local observers were convinced that such action was designed to inflame the miners. The Hocking *Sentinel* believed that the purpose of the evictions

is to provoke men whose wives and children are driven into the storm to a breach of the peace . . . so that the state authorities can be called to aid in forcing the outrage which the lousy Italians and the armed Pinkertons failed to accomplish. Eviction is dangerous in downtrodden Ireland. It is not an

American system and had best not be enforced.<sup>27</sup>

26. Wm. Dalrymple to Governor George Hoadly, January 26, 1885, Hoadly Papers.

Lozier, "Coal Miners' Strike," 60-62; Athens *Messenger*, August 7, 1884.

27. Hocking *Sentinel*, July 31, 1884. Levstik, "Miners' Strike," 57.

## Volume 87

The miners vowed to resist forcefully evictions and the Syndicate's "total disregard of the rights of others." Operators were warned that their property would be destroyed if they evicted miners from company housing.<sup>28</sup>

Despite these warnings, the operators on July 31, 1884, evicted some miners and sued in court to remove all strikers from company-owned housing. By August 2, violence flared as miners assaulted mine guards and fired at a Hocking Valley train.<sup>29</sup> Sporadic violence continued for a few days, but then subsided. Most miners and their families ignored their eviction notices, and, faced with widespread civil disobedience, the operators feared to act. The evictees also had their day in court before Judge Elias Boudinot, a man openly sympathetic to their cause. Boudinot ruled that the rental agreement signed by the operators with the miners was not voided by a strike. To rub salt on the operators' wounds, Boudinot forced the plaintiff, a Syndicate-affiliated coal mine owner, to pay all of the court's costs.<sup>30</sup>

The question of the operators' right to evict strikers from company-owned housing remained the key to violence in the Valley. After another court on August 25 allowed the operators to evict strikers, close to four hundred miners rioted in Buchtel.<sup>31</sup> Still another court ruled on August 28 against the miners' right to remain in company-owned houses during a strike. When miners are discharged, the court ruled, the house rental contracts cease to be in effect. Immediately after this decision was rendered, one observer predicted that "trouble may be expected." The evictions of the final days of August and the early part of September coincided with widespread conflict and disruption. A number of strikers attacked the camps of strikebreakers at Lonstreth, Snake Hollow and Straitsville. In the attack some two or three hundred shots were fired. Later, near Straitsville, strikers set the hopper of Mine Number Seven on fire.<sup>32</sup>

The *New York Times* contended that the bloodshed and destruction resulted from miners being "goaded to madness" after having been

28. M. P. Finegard to Governor George Hoadly, n.d., Hoadly Papers: Testimony of John McBride, *Proceedings*, 307.

29. Lozier, "Coal Miners' Strike," 72; *Athens Messenger*, August 7, 1884.

30. *Ibid.*; Lozier, "Coal Miners' Strike," 71-72. In a letter to Governor Hoadly prior to the trial, Boudinot accused company guards of keeping "by force and violence . . . free citizens from Public Highway," and argued against the need for Pinkertons in the valley. Elias Boudinot to Governor George Hoadly, July 15, 1884; Telegram to Governor George Hoadly, n.d., Hoadly Papers.

31. Levstik, "Miners' Strike," 58.

32. Lozier, "Coal Miners' Strike," 71-72; G. R. Carr to Col. Dill, September 4, 1884, Hoadly Papers; Levstik, "Miners' Strike," 58.

driven from their homes.<sup>33</sup> The strikers' violent acts forced local law enforcement officials to declare life and property in imminent danger. Hocking County Sheriff J. J. McCarthy wired Ohio Governor George Hoadly, "I am worn out . . . All means in my power are exhausted to repress disorder and protect life and property. Please send militia immediately and save further bloodshed."<sup>34</sup>

The Governor dispatched the militia, and he made a personal visit to the Valley as well. In Nelsonville strikers demanded of the governor "What's to become of the people turned out of houses?" "I will send them tents," replied Hoadly.<sup>35</sup> The violence abated with the moral and physical presence of the militia, the easy acquisition of tents and the willingness of home-owning miners to take in evictees. With calm apparently restored, Hoadly withdrew the bulk of the militia in mid-September.<sup>36</sup> Occasional violence continued over the next few months. Significantly, much of it was directed against the company housing once inhabited by strikers. A number of company homes were burned to the ground in mid-November, including a new boarding house built to house strikebreakers near Straitsville.<sup>37</sup>

If violence to prevent evictions represented a "defensive" effort by strikers, violence against company property was a more "aggressive" tactic designed to help win the actual strike. On the offensive, union miners attacked poorly guarded mine buildings, tools, hoppers, shutes and bridges that were key links in the movement of coal already mined. Some actual coal mines were set on fire but since such conflagrations could burn for years this practice was soon discontinued when it became clear that such tactics permanently destroyed the miners' means of livelihood.<sup>38</sup>

These skillful attacks greatly panicked the operators and their allies. A railroad president wrote to the governor of Ohio that strikers have burned coal hoppers, set fires to the mines several of which are still

33. *New York Times*, September 2, 1884.

34. W. E. Hamblin to J. J. McCarthy, September 10, 1884; J. J. McCarthy to Governor George Hoadly, September 10, 1884; John Brashears to Governor George Hoadly, August 31, 1884, Hoadly Papers.

35. Hocking *Sentinel*, September 4, 18, 1884; *New Lexington Herald*, September 11, 1884.

36. T. T. Dill to Governor George Hoadly, September 8, 1884, Hoadly Papers. E. B.

Finley to Governor George Hoadly, September 11, 1884, The Papers of the Adjutant General, The Ohio Historical Society, Series 154 (hereafter cited as Adjutant General Papers); Andrew Brown to Governor George Hoadly, September 18, 1884, Hoadly Papers; Lozier, "Coal Miners' Strike," 72.

37. *Athens Messenger*, November 13, 27, 1884.

38. President of the Pittsburgh, Cincinnati and St. Louis Railroad to Governor George Hoadly, n.d., Hoadly Papers; *Athens Messenger*, October 16, 1884.

## Volume 87

burning. Last night all our wires were cut, we learn through messengers that a serious attack . . . burned three of our bridges on Monday Creek and Sand Run branches. Are the operators and our railroad Company to be left at the mercy of such men or can we have the protection of the state so that the operators can work their properties & the railroad be open.<sup>39</sup>

Each actual fire brought forth a torrent of rumored arson plots. The operators and their supporters thrived on rumors of anticipated violence, hopeful that they might bring large numbers of state militiamen back into the Valley. When stationed there, the militia protected the operators' property and investments at a cost substantially lower than that of an army of Pinkertons.<sup>40</sup>

The operators, as well as other observers, correctly analyzed the relationship between actual acts of sabotage and the miners' goal of preventing strikebreakers from mining coal. The burning of the Central Coal Company's shutes at New Straitsville just one day prior to the arrival of strikebreakers at that mine highlighted such incidents of directed violence. One newspaper concluded that the destruction of the shutes ended any need for strikebreakers in the area.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, in January 1885, it was reported that

the sending of imported Negro miners to work near New Straitsville is supposed to be the cause for firing the tunnel at Bristol, as in that manner, transportation is checked, and so would be the work of the imported colored men.

The tactic of directed violence failed also. As the winter dragged on many miners were either forced to return to work or to seek jobs in other fields. Efforts by local business and civic leaders to mediate the dispute were rejected by Syndicate operators confident of their ability to maintain production with a corps of imported strikebreakers. In March defeated miners returned to work on the operators' terms. Wages in Syndicate mines started at forty cents per ton, while fifty cents was paid in other parts of the Valley.

Strike violence in the Hocking Valley coal strike followed the pattern uncovered by George Rude and other new social historians in their studies of pre-industrial violence. When conflict occurred during a food riot or strike, Rude found that it was directed against private property

39. President of the Pittsburgh, Cincinnati and St. Louis Railroad to Governor George Hoadly, n.d., Hoadly Papers.

40. Governor George Hoadly to Col. T. Dill, September 3, 1884; Col. T. Dill to Gov-

ernor George Hoadly, September 3, 1884, Adjutant General Papers; M. M. Greene to Governor George Hoadly, September 1, 1884, Hoadly Papers.

41. New Lexington *Herald*, September 4, 1884.

42. *Ibid.*, January 8, 1885.

and not against individuals.<sup>43</sup> Despite their frustration in fighting a losing battle, Hocking Valley miners conducted themselves in an essentially disciplined and humane manner. While painfully aware that the mines must be kept closed, the strikers refused to attack the strikebreakers because they saw them as fellow victims of a harsh economic system. Instead, the miners vented their anger and violence in an essentially pre-industrial mode.

Because they were perceived as unknowing pawns of the operators, strikebreakers escaped the violence that later marked mine strikes in the twentieth century. Perhaps this change in perception and action resulted from twenty years of additional labor strife; perhaps it resulted from the breakdown of community solidarity between the working class and the middle class and within the working class itself. Whatever the reason for this transformation, in the Hocking Valley coal strike of 1884-1885 the strikers imposed clear limitations upon the forms of violence they employed and the objects toward which their violence was directed.

43. George Rude. *The Crowd in History, 1730-1848*