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Mark Hoffhines

Pittsburg State University

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SOCIALISM IN THE MINES:
HOW LABOR ORGANIZATIONS LED TO THE SPREAD OF
SOCIALISM IN SOUTHEAST KANSAS

Mark Hoffhines
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In the first 30 years of the twentieth century, southeast Kansas stood out from the rest of the state. People commonly look at the immigration to the area during this time, and the idea that Kansas is the "Little Balkans" of the state.¹ This is a reference to the Balkans area of central, Europe where many immigrants to the area came from, and is used to show how much ethnic diversity is present in this area. What really brought all of these immigrants to the area was the opportunity for employment in the coal mines in Cherokee and Crawford counties. These counties were part of a large coal field that encompassed the four-state area, and was the most productive coal-producing area in the state. As the mines grew and mining administrators began to abuse their power, unions were established to fight on behalf of the miners.

These labor organizations believed in a certain set of principles, which were comparable to the ideals that were the basis of socialism. The beliefs they shared included the idea of government ownership of all industries, a form of industrial unionism instead of craft unionism, and a tie between economics and politics in the working class.² Ties to socialism were controversial at the time, as the nation was going through what was known as the "Red Scare," a wave of radical political movements including socialism and populism that went against the ideas of a democratic capitalist America.

These labor organizations and unions, along with pro-socialism publications such the *Coming Nation* and the *Appeal to Reason*, led to the rise of a worker's party mentality among the miners. They advocated socialist ideals to the miners, and eventually tied themselves to the Socialist Party. This trickled down into the local level of politics, and southeast Kansas elected many Socialist officials. In addition, these local, national, and international unions, along with

¹ William E. Powell, "European Settlement in the Cherokee-Crawford Coal Field of Southeastern Kansas," *The Kansas Historic Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (summer 1975): 150-165.

² J.L. Engdahl, "Pointing the Way," *The Coming Nation*, February 17, 1912

pro-Socialist newspapers and pamphlets, allowed for Socialists around the country to connect and to have a way to communicate with one another. This extended the worker's party mentality out of the mines, and into every sector of the economy. Finally, groups not officially tied to the Socialist Party, including the "Amazons Armies" around the world, worked passionately for the rights of all workers, coal miners included, and made a significant impact. All of this fits into the idea of a "Red Scare," and connected Crawford and Cherokee counties to a political reform movement taking place on a global scale that ended up defining the politics of the early 1900s.

Socialism did not just spontaneously appear in America and in southeast Kansas. Immigration lent a heavy hand in the beginnings of this radical political movement in the United States. Immigrants "imported" some Marxist aspects of socialism into the American political landscape. Following the Panic of 1873, a handful of German immigrants began to try and "Americanize" the socialist movement by establishing the Socialist Labor Party. This party had ties to the Social Democratic Party in Germany.³ While many other parties rose and fell during the late 1800s, the Socialist Labor Party had an ideological structure that encompassed all of the ideas of these upstart parties, and allowed them to persevere through these transitional periods. This party paved the way for socialist organizations that focused more on politics, such as the American Federation of Labor and the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance.⁴

As the socialist movement gained ground following the establishment of the Socialist Labor Party and these national labor organizations, pro-socialist publications became more and more common. Two of the most widely read socialist newspapers were *The Coming Nation* and the *Appeal to Reason*, both edited by J.A. Wayland. The *Appeal* ended up being his lasting

³ Charles L. Scott, "Appeal to Reason: A Study of the 'Largest Political Newspaper in the World'" (Master's thesis, Kansas State Teachers College, 1952), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

legacy, as it became one of the most influential socialist newspapers in American history, and helped to popularize the movement. He established the *Appeal* in Kansas City, and eventually moved his operations down to Girard, here in the southeast part of the state. His reasons for moving to Girard included the fact that the populist movement of the 1800s had generated interest in this little town.⁵ The *Appeal*, at one point, was the largest circulated newspaper in the country.⁶ This widespread readership included those working in the mines in Cherokee and Crawford counties, and the ideas expressed in Wayland's publications really appealed to these laborers. Socialists and populists in this area recognized it as the catalyst for bringing them together. After uniting, this group began to put socialist ideas into action. One example of this was that community-owned industries became more common in Girard, including an electric light company and a coal-belt railway. Miners in other parts of the nation read Wayland's *Appeal* as well. Miners from all corners of the nation began to connect to each other and other Socialists across the nation, regardless of occupation. It also allowed the *Appeal* to push for socialist reforms, such as wage-and-hour laws, workers' compensation, pure food and drug regulation, and abolition of child labor. As the lines between different industries began to disappear, a group mentality began to form, and socialist ideas spread to the unions in all sorts of crafts, including mining.

Many unions and labor groups, ranging from the local level to the national level, were affected by the spread of socialism. The union most critical to the miners on a national and local level was the United Mine Workers of America, or the UMWA. Crawford and Cherokee

⁵ John Egerton, "When 'Reason' Reigned in Kansas," *The Progressive* 52, no. 10 (October 1998): 30-31

⁶ Dr. Sharon Neet, "J.A. Wayland and the Appeal to Reason" (lecture, Hotel Stilwell, Pittsburg, KS, October 10, 2012).

counties were in District 14 of the UMWA.⁷ The point at which the UMWA officially tied themselves with socialist ideals was at their twenty-third annual convention in Indianapolis in 1912. At this convention, the delegates sent to represent the local districts decided that this union must fight for the miners' rights on both the industrial and political level in order to get what was best for their constituents. This thinking matched up with a rising tide of change in the American working class, tying economic movements with political movements. An example of these two types of reform connecting was that as the mining convention was taking place, the Indiana Socialist party was holding its convention at the same time and in close proximity to the UMWA's meeting.⁸ While these two parts of society were becoming more and more connected, socialism was not an idea that just spontaneously popped up at the miners' convention. It had been building over the years, and was widely accepted by the delegates. Many delegates were heard saying something along the lines of "We might just as well adjourn as the miners' convention and reconvene as the National Socialist Convention."⁹ In fact, the international vice president of the UMWA was a registered Socialist.

The UMWA delegates at this convention made significant decisions that had a basis in socialist ideals. The delegates moved in favor of industrial unionism instead of craft unionism, increasing the group mentality idea present among Socialists in American working class. American delegates were not the only ones that supported this idea. International officials of the UMWA were present at this convention, and were told to vote in favor of industrial unionism. These international delegates were instructed to go to as many conventions of international

⁷ New York Times, April 10, 1921

⁸ J.L. Engdahl, "Pointing the Way," *Coming Nation*, February 17, 1912.

⁹ *Ibid.*

unions, including this one, as they could and press for the idea of industrial unionism. In fact, international officials were present from other organizations besides the UMWA. The Western Federation of Miners, the head labor organization for metal miners on the American continent, attended this meeting and believed that they would soon turn over their charter to the UMWA, creating one large miners union combining metal miners and coal miners. The two organizations were already united under a mining department in the American Federation of Labor, so this move made sense. Other ideas besides industrial unionism were supported at this convention. Government ownership of all industries was endorsed by a “practically unanimous vote.”¹⁰ The group’s affiliation with the World Mining Congress was renewed, and two Socialists were elected to go to that group’s next meeting. Issues such as child labor laws and suffrage were touched upon, as the miners advocated for the prohibition of any boys sixteen or older entering the mines. Women’s suffrage was endorsed by a unanimous vote. Probably the most critical decision made at this convention was the striking down of a declaration that the miners’ union could not side with a particular political party.¹¹ This opened the door for socialism to be officially adopted by the UMWA, and allowed the socialist movements to reach into a new sector of the economy.

While all of this seems to be happening at the national level, there was plenty of action at the local level. The UMWA had a figure in District 14 that was not afraid of controversy, and seemed to welcome it in some cases. This person was Alexander Howat. Originally from Glasgow, Scotland, Howat migrated to America with his parents and ended up settling in Crawford County. He became an internationally recognized figure within the labor movement.

¹⁰ J.L. Engdahl, “Pointing the Way,” *Coming Nation*, February 17, 1912.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

He began working in the mines at age 10, working up through the mines and gaining respect. After becoming president of District 14, he worked tirelessly to unite his workers, and at one point had membership in his union at almost 100 percent.¹² Howat presided over strikes in 1919 and 1921. During this second strike, he had his first brush with controversy. The main cause of the 1921 strike was the passing of the Industrial Code Act in 1920 by the Kansas legislature.¹³ It gave the courts the power to decide conflicts between labor and management. Section Five of this code included the clause that no person or labor organization could call for a strike just “for the purpose of willfully hindering, delaying, or suspending the Act.” To see how the law would be handled and to gauge the government’s reaction, Howat supported a strike in 1921. The Kansas Attorney General soon filed for an injunction in opposition to Howat. Howat refused to recognize this injunction, and was arrested and placed in jail along with the vice president of District 14.¹⁴ The April 10 edition of the New York Times stated that Howat was arrested because of his refusal to appear in front of the Court of Industrial Relations after being summoned.¹⁵ They also correctly predicted that his jailing would lead to a “sympathy strike” from his constituents. On April 11th, it was reported that 4600 workers in 20 different mines sat idle and refused to work. This made up about half of the mines in District 14, but less than half the men.¹⁶ Howat escalated the situation the next day, by speaking from the balcony of the jail where he was placed, calling Kansas Governor Henry J. Allen a “skunk of a governor.” On that

¹² Steven K. Baden, “D.J. ‘Joe’ Saia: The Padrone of Crawford County Politics” (master’s thesis, Kansas State College of Pittsburg), 14-17.

¹³ Steven K. Baden, “D.J. ‘Joe’ Saia: The Padrone of Crawford County Politics” (master’s thesis, Kansas State College of Pittsburg), 15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵ *New York Times*, April 10, 1921.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, April 11, 1921.

day, April 12, 1921, 90 percent of the coal miners in the state of Kansas were idle and still participating in this sympathy strike.¹⁷ This strike continued for a while after this, and was highlighted by the marches of the “Amazon Armies.” It eventually came to an end, after Governor Allen brought in troops to restore order. The ultimate outcome of this strike was the end of Howat’s career in the U.M.W.A., but his historical impact on that organization, this area, and the labor movement can not be ignored.

One group that was influential before, during, and after this strike and greatly impacted the labor movement was the “Amazon Armies.” These were groups of women that marched on the mines and demanded better rights for the workers, on behalf of their husbands. This was an international movement, and had many ties to the socialist movement. As men and women were supposed to be equal under socialist ideals, it surprised many people that it took women so long to gain recognition as legitimate activists for the socialist movement. But as soon as they were, they made a definite impact. Between 1902 and 1912, a feminine perspective was brought to the forefront of the Socialist International, which was a worldwide organization made up of labor and socialist parties.¹⁸ Leading figures from this organization and this movement as a whole came from a variety of nations. Klara Zetkin, who was from Degeloch, Germany, was considered the “mother” of the German “Red Movement”. She accomplished a great deal, including being the editor of one of the largest women’s newspapers in Germany, the *Gleichheit*, and her nomination as the executive of the German Social Democratic Party.¹⁹ She was a huge advocate for women’s suffrage, a key socialist belief that gained support because of these Amazon

¹⁷ New York Times, April 12, 1921.

¹⁸ Shaw Desmond, “The Amazons of the Red Army,” *Coming Nation*, January 20, 1912, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Armies. She believed that denying women the right to vote dehumanized them, and along with 140,000 women that were part of the German Trade Unions, pushed for women to obtain this right. A woman whose career somewhat mirrored Zetkin's was Rosa Luxemborg. Like Zetkin, she was on the executive board of the German Social Democratic party and was the editor of a paper. She was the first woman elected to the International Bureau, which was the supreme control for Socialist International. Another woman who made an impact through being involved in newspapers was Marie Rygler, who was an editor of an Italian socialist newspaper named "Rompe de File." This newspaper was considered to be a predecessor to the *Coming Nation* and the *Appeal to Reason*.²⁰ Woman outside of central/western Europe also contributed to the international rise of socialism. Three Russian women made a definite impact on this movement. Catherine Breschkowski was considered to be the "Grandmother of the Russian Revolution." She left her family to spread socialism, and was eventually condemned to a life sentence after an accusation of being part of the group who assassinated Alexander I of Russia.²¹ Alexandra Kollontay was the leader of the Russian Textile Workers union, and spoke at the first "Women's Congress" in St. Petersburg, Russia.²² She snuck past the police to speak at this meeting and to advocate socialist ideas, and then escaped before they could catch her. Finally, there was Maria Sporidonova, who shot General Lorzenhovsky, the Governor of Tambroff, in 1906. She claimed that this was revenge for his treatment of the Russian peasants, and this event was a significant event in the Russian socialist movement. Finally, there was Eleanor Marx Aveling, who came out of the British Revolution. She was the daughter of Karl Marx, and inspired the Great Dock

²⁰ Shaw Desmond, "The Amazons of the Red Army," *Coming Nation*, January 20, 1912, 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

Strikes of the 1880s. All of these women throughout Europe, Russia, and the British Isles inspired women worldwide to stand up for what they believed in, and to push for workers' rights and, in turn, socialism. These women and events were considered heroes to the start-up Amazon Armies here in Crawford and Cherokee counties.

The Amazon Army movement in the Crawford/Cherokee coal fields took a different approach than these women, but their goal was the same: obtain what they believed were the proper rights for the working class. In this case, the focus was on the coal miners. These women were compelled, in most cases, by strikes and/or labor disputes that threatened to cut off the source of income for their families. This uprising connected the home life of the family to the workplace. While women had not significantly entered the workplace in Crawford and Cherokee counties at this point, this movement really made women a force to be reckoned with in the labor movement. As women were confined to "domestic" duties at home during this point, they didn't have a way to help to provide for their families, and their husband's income from working in the mine was often the sole source of income for the family. Many coal miners earned, if receiving the average union wage in 1921, between \$1800 and \$2000 annually. By the standards set by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, this did not even provide for the minimum requirements necessary for "health and decency."²³ The main issues that these women were concerned with were survivors' benefits and workmen's compensation, along with other worker's rights. While not all of these women identified themselves as Socialists, there were some female socialist advocates in southeast Kansas, and they definitely had an impact on this strike. Luella Roberts Krehbiel of Coffeyville popularized socialism and spread information about it by holding "parlor propaganda meetings." Mary Skubitz, from Ringo, led a women's march in 1921. These women, along with

²³ Ann Schofield, "An 'Army of Amazons': The Language of Protest in a Kansas Mining Community, 1921-1922," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 5 (Winter 1985): 688.

Socialist politicians elected to various positions in Crawford and Cherokee counties, began bringing parts of the “Red Scare” to southeast Kansas.²⁴

When one thinks of women taking care of the “domestic” duties at home during this time, an image of a mild-mannered, non-violent woman usually comes to mind. This however was definitely not the case among these women. They were not afraid to stand for what they believed in, and were not above getting violent to get their point across. The coverage in state and local newspapers usually described this situation as if it were a military conflict, and some tactics that were used definitely contributed to this picture. There were reports, brought to Richard J. Hopkins, attorney general of Kansas, which stated that women had stopped witness of their strike and had beaten them during their march on the coal mines on December 13th.²⁵ Accounts of incidents like this differed between different news outlets. The “labor press” conveyed these riots as peaceful, but most mainstream media, believing that these women were not fitting into their gender roles and bucking the system, painted them as a group of wild, violent women. One specific incident that was reported to a paper accused two women, identified as Mrs. Nick Bossetti and Mrs. Walter Carbaugh, of dragging Walter Madden out of the mine office at Central Mine #49, beating him up, and taking off his clothes.²⁶ One of the most well-known displays of mass violence by these women, however, took place on December 12, 1921. The previous day, five hundred women, associated with workers at different mines, gathered in Franklin and decided to take a stand. By the 12th, their “army” included several thousand women. They marched to the mine, blocked the entrances, threw pepper in the eyes of some of the workers,

²⁴ Ann Schofield, “An ‘Army of Amazons’: The Language of Protest in a Kansas Mining Community, 1921-1922,” *American Quarterly* 37, no. 5 (Winter 1985): 688.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 695.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 696.

and beat several “strikebreakers” who were going against the lockout that their husbands were participating in. After this, Pittsburg’s sheriff called for a “deputized force” of one thousand men, including veterans to control the women. Three Kansas National Guard troops were also called in on December 15th to try and keep the peace. These “reinforcements” effectively ended the marches in 1921 and 1922, as forty-nine women were charged with unlawful assembly, assault, and disturbing the peace, and were reprimanded with fines.²⁷ While Amazon Armies did start to fade away in southeast Kansas after this, these groups definitely had a significant effect on the labor movement, inspiring many others regardless of gender to fight for their rights as a laborer, by using whatever means necessary. Their impact can not be ignored.

As you can see, many different factors led to a popularization of socialism in southeast Kansas, and more specifically, in the coal fields of Crawford and Cherokee counties. Labor unions, both at the national and international level, worked for the miners in the economic and political sectors of American society, and these unions were often tied to the Socialist party. Many advocated for rights that were associated with socialist principles, such as government ownership of industries, industrial unionism, and women’s suffrage, just to name a few. These unions were influential at the local level, as well. The U.M.W.A.’s District 14 in Kansas was particularly influential in the labor movement and had a globally recognized labor leader in Alexander Howat. This was a man who was not afraid to be controversial in order to get what he thought was right for those he was representing, and was willing to go to prison in order to make his point. Labor organizations were not the only contributing factor to the spread of socialism in southeast Kansas. Socialist publications, such as the *Coming Nation* and the *Appeal to Reason*, spoke to the workers. As the *Appeal* and its editor, J.A. Wayland, were based out of Girard for a

²⁷ Ann Schofield, “An ‘Army of Amazons’: The Language of Protest in a Kansas Mining Community, 1921-1922,” *American Quarterly* 37, no. 5 (Winter 1985): 686.

substantial amount of time, this newspaper really “hit home” for the workers, and dealt with issues that the local miners were going through. These publications were not just popular in this area, however. Both of these newspapers had readers nationwide, and were effective as a way to spread socialist ideas and the Socialist Party platform to the masses. Finally, groups that were not official unions or labor organizations contributed a great deal to the labor movement, and often had socialist ideas as a foundation. One of the most important groups to be a part of the push for workers’ rights in southeast Kansas was the Amazon Armies of the Crawford and Cherokee coal fields. The Amazon Army movement was a worldwide phenomenon, and placed women at the forefront of the labor movement. Many European leaders of this movement had ties to socialism, including some serving on executive boards of Socialist organizations. Leaders of the movement in southeast Kansas did not have as strong of official connections to legitimate Socialist organization, but socialism still served as a basis for the Amazon Army women in this area. These women were willing to “play dirty,” and were not above using violence in order to obtain proper rights for their coal-mining husbands. Overall, socialism was a constant theme in labor disputes during the 1910s and 1920s, and influenced many individuals and groups to take a stand. The happenings in the Crawford/Cherokee county coal fields and the labor disputes in this area definitely fit into the idea of a “Red Scare” taking place all across the country. These political radicals may not have been the majority in the United States, but their impact on workers’ rights on local, national, and international levels changed the relationship between laborers and administration in all sectors of the economy, and led to many of the working rights we take for granted today. Today’s workers should be appreciative of the work that took place in the early 1900s, and should realize that some of this would not be possible without the influence of socialism.

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This article showed some international figures in the "Amazon Army" movement, concentrating mostly on European women.

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New York Times, April 10-13, 1921.

These articles covered the arrest of Alexander Howat's arrest, and the sympathy strike and other events that followed.

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Egerton, John. "When 'Reason' Reigned in Kansas" *The Progressive* 52, no. 10 (October 1998): 30-31.

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