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#### Recommended Citation

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In the Name of the King:  
Alexander Howat and His Loyal Followers

Ryan Yanez  
History Theory and Practice  
December 6, 2012

Coal operators and the union leaders that attempted to resist them were in a constant struggle during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This iconic struggle between workers and company would come to illustrate the perfect example of an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object. Trapped between these battling titans stood the United Mine Workers of America, and the fearless leader of Local District 14, Alexander Howat, ready to do battle with both of the giants if deemed necessary, all for the sake of gaining what little ground they could at the time. Despite the almost non-existent fiscal reward for their effort, the mineworkers achieved great strides for the labor movement in the United States and subsequently the world. Although these miners suffered greatly during their epic struggle, they maintained faith and loyalty in Alexander Howat, whose influence and inspiration was essential to the success of the labor movement spearheaded by the United Mine Workers of America. Howat's leadership was the single most important factor leading up to the success of the labor movement in the United States, and his lasting inspiration and influence would carry on and support labor movements around the world.

Crawford and Cherokee counties are located in the Southeast corner of the state of Kansas in the United States of America. This region first began to see Caucasian settlers in the mid-1830s and maintained a relatively low population into the 1850s.<sup>1</sup> It was not until the demand for coal began to rise in the late 1850s and 1860s that these counties began to see serious pioneer activity. Until that point in time, the settlers of the region had simply used surface coal to supplement their lumber supplies during the winter months and had refrained from any serious

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<sup>1</sup> William E. Powell, "The Cherokee-Crawford Coal Field of Southeast Kansas: A Study in Sequent Occupance," *The Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought* 22, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 114.

mining operations.<sup>2</sup> However, the increased population that developed in the mid-1860s subsequently increased the demand for coal and soon full mining operations were underway.<sup>3</sup> These early operations were generally located near creek beds or other naturally occurring strip pits that allowed the miners, with their limited tools, to easily access the surface coal in the counties. The first operational shaft mine appeared in 1874 and officially signaled the start of the coal boom for the area.<sup>4</sup> In the decades that followed several hundred other shaft mines developed and big coal companies began to work their way into the region. With the arrival of the coal companies many immigrant coal miners began seeking employment through these outfits. The vast majority of these new miners were immigrants from Europe that primarily consisted of Italians, Austrians, Germans, Yugoslavs, English, Welsh, French, Bulgarians, and Scots-Irish.<sup>5</sup> Among the Scottish immigrants were John and Mary Howat who brought with them a bouncing baby boy by the name of Alexander.

Alexander Howat was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1876. His parents immigrated to the United States in 1879, first arriving at Troy, New York and later moving to Braidwood, Illinois before finally settling down in Crawford County.<sup>6</sup> Alexander soon became involved in the coal business, first entering the mines at the age of ten and not leaving them until his death.<sup>7</sup> In 1902,

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>6</sup> *Pittsburg Morning Headlight*, December 10, 1945.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas L. Monninger, "The Fight of Alexander Howat for the Right to Strike." (Master's Thesis, Kansas State Teacher's College. August, 1946).

Howat won election to the board of the United Mine Workers of America Local District 14. District 14 encompassed the Cherokee and Crawford County coalfield and the surrounding area. Howat very quickly climbed his way up the ranks and was promoted during each subsequent election he was on the ballot for. In 1904, he achieved the rank of vice-president and became president of district 14 in 1906.<sup>8</sup> Howat held this position strongly and efficiently until 1914 when he refused to run for re-election under the cloud of an accusation of bribery. The claim was proven false however and Howat returned to his office during the election of 1916. During his two-year absence from office, Howat was anything but absent from the coalmines. True to his nature Alexander led by example and related to the miners he felt it was his sole obligation and duty to represent and protect. He proved to them his dedication by spending his two-year leave as a digger in the mines where he continued to influence and inspire the men around him.<sup>9</sup> Howat had a powerful demeanor about him and an even more powerful voice. It was said by those that knew him that if Alexander Howat was attempting to keep a hushed conversation he could still be heard two floors away.<sup>10</sup> Though imposing, intimidating, and “honest to the point of being too honest” Howat had a softer side to him.<sup>11</sup> In 1916, the year he was re-elected to president, Alexander Howat married Miss Agnes Bayden. However, the couple never had any children themselves Howat was known and loved by all the children of his neighborhood and he would often give presents to the kids.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Pittsburg Morning Headlight*, December 10, 1945

<sup>9</sup> Monnigner, “Right to Strike”.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Alexander Howat was both President of the United Mine Workers of America District 14 and unofficial figurehead of all the coal miners of the state of Kansas. His true strength as the latter did not come into full fruition until his reinstatement to the union in 1916. During World War I Howat was responsible for spearheading several small scale strikes throughout his district and quickly established his union as a “powerful and aggressive” threat to the coal operators he stood against.<sup>13</sup> In 1908, Howat was elected to the International Convention of United Mine Workers and chosen to represent his country to the world labor organizations in Vienna, Austria. During his lifetime, Howat made a total of five trips to Europe and met a multitude of foreign labor and political leaders. Some of the people he met, and likely influenced given his robust personality, included Ramsey McDonald, Lloyd George, Arthur Henderson, Bonar Law, Alexander Kerensky, Leon Trotsky, Joseph Stalin, and Georges Clemenceau.<sup>14</sup> Howat’s travels took him to twenty-eight different countries and to such cities as Glasgow, London, Liverpool, Rome, Milan, Genoa, Venice, and Paris.<sup>15</sup>

Despite District 14’s reputation, the coal operators in the area remained firm in their wages and refused to give in to the demands made by Howat and his workers in the year 1919. Despite Howat’s threats to order a general strike in the state of Kansas the operators persisted. Howat had hopes that the imminent threat of a general strike would be enough to gain the demands his workers desired.<sup>16</sup> Howat’s hopes went unanswered though and he was forced to call a general strike. In response to the complete shutdown of all coal operations in the state of

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<sup>13</sup> Randy Roberts, "Alexander Howat, the Industrial Court Law, and the 'Amazon Army.' City of Franklin, Kansas, <http://www.franklinkansas.com/amazonarmyarticles/alexanderhowat.html> [accessed November 10, 2012].

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *The Pittsburg Morning Headlight*, Oct. 16, 1919.

Kansas, Governor Henry Allen pleaded with the mineworkers of District 14 to return to work. In order to try to deal with the sudden loss of 400,000 workers the state supreme court sent an order to Howat that the UMWA should cease the strike.<sup>17</sup> These reactions only spurred the workers on and began to influence further strikes in the rest of the nation including Illinois.<sup>18</sup>

The coal operators of the time claimed they could not meet the demands of the miners, demands that included a 30-hour workweek and a pay increase of 60%, to which Howat ordered that no miner was to return to work until the Union made a settlement.<sup>19</sup> Lost wages were not the only burden that mineworkers faced. Throughout the state and in District 14 especially, a large percentage of the mineworkers were immigrants from Europe. In hopes of pressing the workers to defy their leader the government ordered a halt to all naturalization processes until the strike ended.<sup>20</sup> This personal attack at the miners would only strengthen their resolve in Howat and hope was further strengthened by the first counter-proposal offered by the coal operators. While the pay raise was drastically lower than what the workers were demanding, a mere 15% increase, it was a start.<sup>21</sup> Governor Allen's interference did not stop with the naturalization suspension. Even though the strike had been officially called off on November 18, 1919 by the International Board of the United Mine Workers of America the local and District presidents kept the fight going.<sup>22</sup> Governor Allen, in response to the quickly approaching winter, took action by posting the following in the November 27, 1919 issue of the Pittsburg Morning Headlight:

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, Nov 8, 1919.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Nov 13, 1919.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Nov 14, 1919.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Nov 17, 1919.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Nov 20, 1919.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Nov, 18, 1919

Wanted— one thousand able bodied men to dig coal to keep home fires burning in Kansas. Experience unnecessary. Hardy, young men, able to take care of themselves and able to wield a pickaxe and shovel preferred. Travel expenses and at least five dollars a day guaranteed by the state of Kansas. Also forty-five engineers to run steam shovels in Kansas strip mines, with an equal number of firemen. Can use also a limited number of men accustomed to the use of dynamite. Apply in person, by telegraph, telephone, or by mail to Governor Henry J. Allen, State House, Topeka.<sup>23</sup>

Governor Allen was desperate and needed to provide for his people. Although Howat understood Allen's position and knew his miners would suffer alongside the rest of the state Howat could not afford to back down. The Great War was over and nearly sixty thousand servicemen had returned to find almost no work. Within two days, Governor Allen's plea had brought in eleven thousand volunteers, most of them veterans, all chomping at the bit for a chance to gain employment. These strikebreakers, or "scabs" as they were called derogatively by those on strike, were the first of many brought in to counter Alexander Howat and his miners' attempts to gain ground against the big coal companies. Although these new workers were not wanted they did not suffer direct violence like many "scabs" endured during this time. Howat understood their purpose and empathized with the role these miners served. This sense of understanding would not be carried over by Howat in the very near future.

Offers and retorts passed back and forth among the union leaders and coal operators with little progress being made. Old, bitter rivalries and general stubbornness took precedence over the needs and wants of the workers involved. Eventually the strike was brought to an end on December 10, 1919 when Howat and the coal operators agreed to accept President Woodrow Wilson's plan to end the strike. Wilson's plan allotted for a mere 14% pay hike that was actually less than what was offered by the coal operators in the first place.<sup>24</sup> However, Wilson's plan did

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, Nov 27, 1919.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec 10, 1919.



call for a formal tribunal to determine a fair wage for the coal miners, which was a major step in favor of the miners.

The United States was in a chaotic state before, during, and after the general strike. The veterans that had begun to flood back into the states were hoping to find the nation a better place. They were gravely mistaken. Instead of the unity the war was expected to bring, the United States was wrought with intolerance and turmoil. Strikes, lockouts, bombings, riots, mobs, raids, the Ku Klux Klan, Henry Ford's anti-Jewish campaign, anti-red campaigns, the expulsion of socialists from congress, bootleggers, racketeers, evolution controversy, and lack of work all compounded to create a very desperate situation.<sup>25</sup> Despite the chaos, Alexander Howat was able to keep his District 14 at near 100% organized.<sup>26</sup> His character was more than enough to bring his miners together despite the intolerance and corruption around them. Alexander Howat was able to bring the United Mine Workers something the United States government was not even capable of doing, unity.

The general strike, combined with the many issued at individual mines throughout the state of Kansas in 1919, cost the members of the UMWA a total of \$3,866,780.34 in lost wages.<sup>27</sup> The total amount of monetary gain, for the entire state of Kansas, after these strikes amounted to a mere \$852.83, of which, \$765 was merely a financial adjustment for the cost of fuses and dynamite. All these considered the entire monetary gain by the UMWA during 1919 was a mere \$87.83 divided among nearly 400,000 union members.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, the cost of

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<sup>25</sup> Monnigner, "Right to Strike".

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Allen, Party of the Third Part, 49.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

union dues for the members of District 14 amounted to nearly \$157,000 for that year which only compounded the already strained financial situation of the miners.<sup>29</sup> These gains seem so insignificant one is left to wonder why the miners even bothered unionizing in the first place. The answer is simple and disturbing. Unionization was mandatory and any miner that violated the rules and regulations of the union was dealt with extreme severity.<sup>30</sup> The miners also faced a massive risk of being labeled an outcast by not joining the union. However, the lack of fiscal advancement meant little to the miners. They had Howat and what little they gained was a momentous achievement compared to what they would have received without the will power and steadfastness of their fearless leader. Governor Allen had witnessed what one man was capable of doing to an entire state and how his influence could echo out into the rest of the nation and knew he had to ensure the power of Howat was limited, if not completely eliminated, before he could call a strike again.

To further injure the miners the strike of 1919 caused the state legislature to enact the Kansas Industrial Relations Act in 1920. This act banned strikes as a form of protest and would be seen as a model for dealing with industrial relations throughout the country.<sup>31</sup> Governor Allen, who had witnessed the true power a strike could have and how a single influential man could alter the fate of an entire country, was a chief proponent of the legislature. In his speech supporting the act Governor Allen made the following points as to what goals he hoped to achieve through the Industrial Court.

To make strikes, lockouts, boycotts, and black lists unnecessary and impossible by giving labor as well as capital [operators] an able and just tribunal in which to litigate all

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

controversies. To insure to the people of this state at all times, an adequate supply of those products which are absolutely necessary to the sustaining of the life of civilized people. That by stabilizing production of those necessities we will also, to a great extent stabilize the price to the producer as well as the consumer. That we will insure to labor steady employment, at a fairer wage, under better working conditions. That we will prevent the colossal economic waste which always attends industrial disturbances. That we will make the law respected, and discourage and ultimately abolish intimidation and violence as a means for the settlement of industrial disputes.<sup>32</sup>

Howat was a bitter opponent of this new Industrial Court System and in response to it once again called a strike in 1921. Along with his call Howat responded to Allen by calling him a “traitor to labor” and issued his own ultimatum to his miners.<sup>33</sup> In the first annual report of the court of industrial relations Howat declared,

Any member, pit committee or local officer being a party to referring cases to the Industrial Court, over the heads of the district official, shall be fined in the sum of \$50 for each offense, . . . That any district officer of the Mine Workers of District 14 who is party to referring any grievance to the Industrial Court of Kansas will be fined in the sum of \$5,000, . . .<sup>34</sup>

This resolution passed without a single dissenting vote and Howat’s district unanimously pledged full strike support to him. This time Howat faced internal opposition as well as external in the form of the UMWA International President John L. Lewis. Howat was arrested and jailed multiple times for his participation in the strikes against the industrial court and when ordered by the international executive board to cease the strikes Howat’s refusal resulted in his removal from office.<sup>35</sup> Howat’s actions also cost several other members of the executive board of District 14 to lose their office and additionally resulted in the revocation of 83 Kansas local charters that

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<sup>32</sup> Monnigner, “Right to Strike”.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>35</sup> Allen, *Party of the Third Part*, 50.

supported Howat.<sup>36</sup> Despite all of this, the miners of District 14 remained loyal to Howat and his cause. They continued the strike despite union, company, and government intervention. After his district was dissolved Howat issued a response to John Lewis in the form of a pamphlet. In his writing Howat states the actions performed by Lewis were “the most cowardly and dastardly outrage that has ever been perpetrated against the Labor Movement in the history of the country. Such action by Lewis at this time should brand him as a traitor to the cause of labor.”<sup>37</sup> The pamphlet continues to outline Howat’s desire to have the strike ended and see his miners return to the Dean and Reliance Mines under the previously established working conditions.<sup>38</sup> These mines were in violation of a contract held to the union and were attempting to worsen the working conditions for the miners. Howat refused to allow Governor Allen’s new Industrial Court stop him from protecting his miners and had the men at the Dean and Reliance Mines cease work immediately.

It was during this strike that the “scab” became quite prevalent in Cherokee and Crawford counties and the coal operators used them to great extent and effect. The desperation felt by the miners, many of whom were starving at this point, combined with their contempt for the much-loathed “scab” culminated in the formation of the infamous “Amazon Army” of 1921. The formation of the “army” began on December 11, 1921 and initially consisted of five hundred women from the various mining camps in Cherokee and Crawford counties. Within a day, the number of women had increased to several thousand and they proceeded to march to the camps in the area. Upon reaching the mines these women proceeded to sing songs, prevent “scabs”

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<sup>36</sup> Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States: Volume IX: The TUEL to the End of the Gompers Era*. New York: International Publishers, 1991; 217.

<sup>37</sup> Alexander Howat, Alexander Howat Answers President John L. Lewis.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

from entering the mines, and allegedly threw pepper into the eyes of some of these workers. It is even possible they resolved to beat some of the strikebreakers in hopes of ending the extended strike.<sup>39</sup> Dwindling family incomes, which were now often supplemented through bootlegging, were a primary concern for the women involved in this movement. Their desire to ease the burden placed on their families and alleviate their own suffering resulted in many of them having criminal charges placed on them.<sup>40</sup> Even with Howat removed from office, the miner's membership in the union revoked, these men and their families remained loyal, and true to the will and influence of the man, that was essentially their commander and chief.

Howat followed up his pamphlet by actually confronting President John L. Lewis and the twenty-eighth consecutive and fifth biennial convention of the United Mine Workers of America on February 15, 1922. During the verbal sparring that took place between Howat and Lewis, Howat demanded a trial be held for the disbarment of his local district. Howat declared that Lewis was in direct violation of the Union's constitution and that Howat's district was entitled to an appeal. Lewis countered by stating that Howat, or his subordinates, did not file for an appeal within the time frame allotted in said constitution. Howat declared the appeal had not been filed because he was in prison for his defense of labor.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Anne Schofield. "An 'Army of Amazons': The Language of Protest in a Kansas Mining Community, 1921-22," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 5 (Winter 1985): 686-701.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> United Mine Workers of America International Board Committee. *Minutes of the Reconvened Twenty-eighth Consecutive and Fifth Biennial Convention of The United Mine Workers of America*. Indianapolis, Indiana, February 15, 1922. 2-4.

Despite losing significant **f**inancial investments, suffering from hunger, and even being disbarred from the union they **fought** for, the union workers of District 14 never lost faith or loyalty in Alexander Howat. His **i**nspiration on the miners was unquestionable and his willingness to fight for him immeasurable. "Mother" Mary Harris Jones may have said it best when she addressed the annual **con**vention of the UMWA in 1922, "I have known Alex Howat for twenty years, and while I have **not** always agreed with Alex, I want to make this statement to the audience and to the world: **That** my desire is to have a million Alex Howat's in the nation to fight the battle of the workers. **He** **has** fought for his men and he has fought that damnable law that the governor of Kansas put **on** the statute books to enslave the workers. He fought it nobly and is willing to go to death for it..."<sup>42</sup> It seems abundantly clear that the men that believed in Howat would have happily done **the** same for him.

Howat was never able to **re**gain his status within the United Mine Workers and as such broke away from the union and **took** his loyal district with him. Howat's influence carried over into Russia during the Revolution **and** his district openly and actively supported other labor leaders around the globe that were **i**nspired by Howat, such as Shaparji Saklatvala, a "champion of the Freedom of India" and a "**re**presentative of militant labor in the parliament of Great Britain."<sup>43</sup> It is apparent that **Alexander** Howat, although only a single man, was able to shape the labor movement in the State **of** Kansas, the United States of America, and even the world.

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<sup>42</sup> Foner, 220.

<sup>43</sup> Tom Wakefield, Hearl **Max**well, Alexander Howat, and Joe Bierbrodt. "We Protest!" Protest flyer. Mulberry, Kansas. 1926. The **Hearl** Maxwell Collection. Pittsburg State University Archives, Pittsburg, Kansas.

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Foner Phillip S. *History of the Labor Movement in the United States: Volume IX: The TUEL to the End of the Gompers Era*. New York: International Publishers, 1991

This book chronicles the labor movement in the United States during the early 1900s. It includes details about the Kansas coal strikes and the role Alexander Howat played in them.

Monninger, Thomas L. "The Fight of Alexander Howat for the Right to Strike." Master's Thesis, Kansas State Teacher's College. August, 1946.

Describes the life and career of Alexander Howat and emphasizes his efforts to dismantle the Kansas Industrial Court system.

Powell, William E. "The Cherokee-Crawford Coal Field of Southeast Kansas: A Study in Sequent Occupance," *The Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought* 22, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 113-37.

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Discusses the Migration of African American coal miners and gives details about their role as strikebreakers during the labor strikes of the early 1900s.

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<http://www.franklinkansas.com/amazonarmyarticles/alexanderhowat.html> [accessed November 10, 2012].

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