

Introduction

In the spring of 1934, Gilbert Seldes, a feature writer for the Hearst newspaper syndicate, was forced to detour through the Central Pennsylvania coal mining town of Nanty Glo (previously called Nanty-glo). He wrote about what he saw in an article published in the *New York Evening Journal* and reprinted with an outraged response in the *Nanty-Glo Journal*.

I wish that every congressman and every writer on economics and every supporter and every enemy of the New Deal or Old, would go to Nanty-glo and stay there a few days. I came upon it myself, by accident; a detour sent me through it. I have seen nothing more hideous. The center of town has a movie house and the usual red brick stores—perhaps two city blocks or three all together. The rest is given over to houses for people to live in, to call Home—houses to which young men bring young wives, in which they raise children—long rows of low gray wooden shacks, jammed one against the other, dilapidated, violently ugly—the whole thing a scene out of some half-lunatic painter’s imagination, unspeakably desolate. There are houses of a better class. Instead of gray clapboard they seem at a distance to be either of yellow brick, through which some fungus has eaten its way, or of wood painted and scaled off. They are, however, bigger than the others, and their front porches stand right over long trains of coal cars proceeding into the mine. . . . I know also that coal companies, like all others, were made for profit, and that if a company could put up a row of cheap houses it was not only doing well for itself but quite possibly was giving the miners a better habitation than the huts they might build for

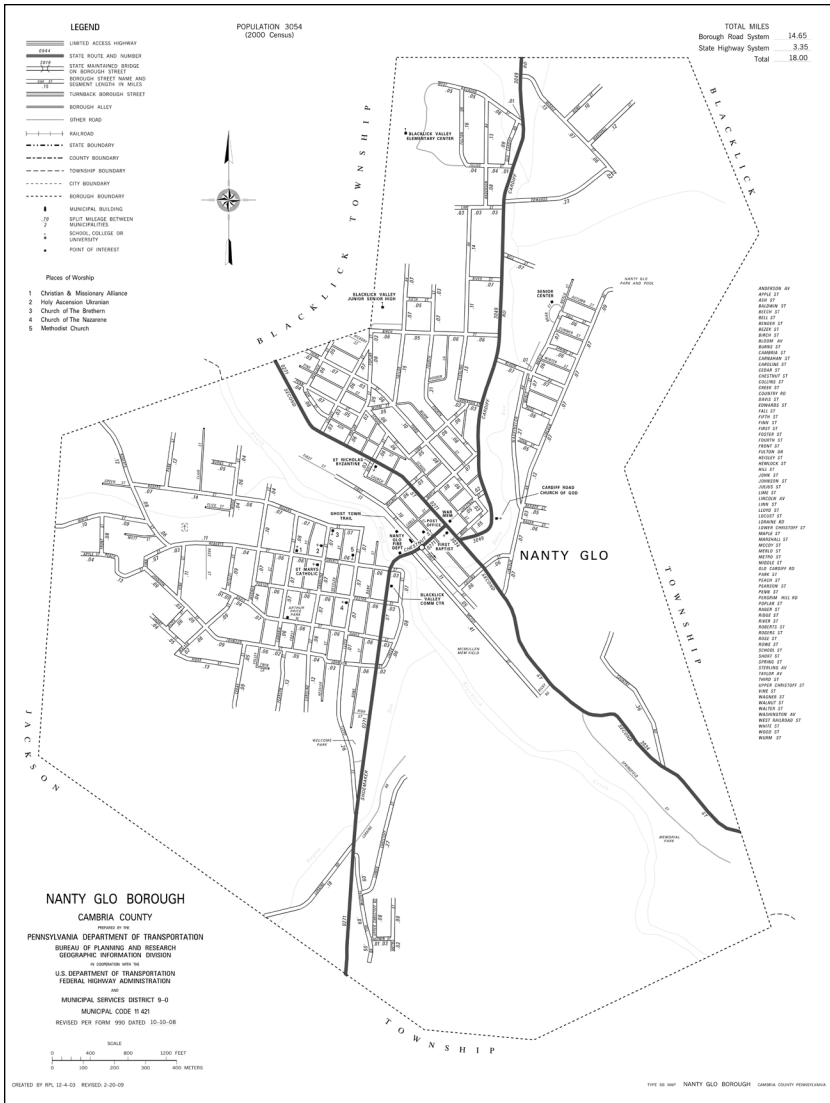
themselves. Granting all that, I still do not believe that human beings ought to live in houses such as these, in an ugliness which they themselves may soon forget but which must have some effect upon them. . . . My feeling is that it is not a good thing for America that any Americans should live in houses not equal to a good pigpen. . . . And the houses of Nanty-glo were not (meant for human beings to live in). They were meant for slow death. (Seldes, May 17, 1934: 5)

The *Nanty-Glo Journal* editorial claimed that the town had been done a grave injustice by Seldes and argued that Nanty Glo was not as bad as the slums of New York City. However, it did recommend that since the bituminous coal mines were only working a couple of days a week, and since others saw Nanty Glo this way, community residents should volunteer to beautify the borough (Eldridge, May 17, 1934: 4).

Nanty Glo, Pennsylvania received national media attention again in 1943, when *Life* magazine featured interviews with Nanty Glo mine workers and pictures of the borough in an article on the United States government's wartime takeover of the bituminous coal industry. According to the article, "LIFE sent photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt to Nanty Glo, a typical drab little coal town" to document the "dangerous . . . dirty and depressing" life of the coal miner. One photograph caption described how the "coal dust . . . seeps into everything . . . Miners' bleak, box-like houses are soot-covered, and the washed clothes are soon smudged" (*Life*, 1943a: 26–29). In addition, the *New York Times* intermittently covered Nanty Glo miners from May 1943 through April 1945, as they launched work stoppages in violation of federal wartime no-strike policies and against the official union leadership.

In 1920, Nanty Glo, which means "streams of coal" in Welsh, was a bituminous coal mining town of over 5,000 people located in the Blacklick Valley of Cambria County in Central Pennsylvania—approximately twelve miles northeast of Johnstown and sixty miles east of Pittsburgh. The history of Nanty Glo, Pennsylvania, its geographic circumstances, demographic patterns, and the presence of a nucleus of bituminous coal miners willing to explore new and often radical ideas, all contributed to the development of a sense of class-conscious community during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s.

There are four major grades of coal mined in the United States. Anthracite, also known as hard coal, has a limited geographic range, primarily



Map I.1. Nanty Glo Borough. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, "Nanty Glo Borough," February 20, 2009. https://gis.penndot.gov/BPR_pdf_files/Maps/Type5/11421.pdf.

in northeastern Pennsylvania. It was the most widely used home-heating fuel in northeastern American cities from the late nineteenth century until after World War II. Bituminous, or soft coal, deposits are extensive in the northern and southern Appalachian basin, including Central Pennsylvania, and westward to the Mississippi River. It was the primary fuel used by American industry in factories, for steam-powered railroads and ships, and in electrical power plants. Anthracite and bituminous coal were both traditionally mined in underground shafts and anthracite and bituminous coal miners were members of the UMWA; however, they were different industries serving different markets. Subbituminous and lignite are considered lower-grade coal. They are more prevalent in the American south and west and were not widely mined or used in the United States until the second half of the twentieth century. Seams tend to be close to the surface and are accessed by stripping away top layers of soil and rock using earth-moving machinery (Schweinfurth, 2003; Henderson & Kleiner, 1976).

In this study of bituminous coal miners, class-consciousness is defined by worker understanding and action as they respond to the conditions they face at work and in their communities. Working-class consciousness is a collective identity that includes recognition that improvement in an individual's social and economic position is dependent on improvements and empowerment for the group as a whole. From this perspective, working-class consciousness is fluid rather than something to be achieved and a permanent condition. There is no false consciousness, a concept debated by Marxist theorists, especially in the post-World War I period, only levels of class identity and action. Requisites for the emergence of a class-conscious working-class movement in Central Pennsylvania included the conditions faced by workers and their families, the immediate circumstances that generated the movement, a set of ideas people could identify with, leadership committed to more radical solutions, and the existence of organizations to support militant activism (Miliband, 1971; 1977; Eyerman, 1981: 43–56).

This conception of class-consciousness rejects arguments for American exceptionalism forwarded by Selig Perlman in *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (1928). Perlman believed American workers possessed a “trade union mentality” or job consciousness and rejected social ownership and control of industry, an ideology he attributed to “social and economic conservatism, bred in the American Community.” According to Perlman, attempts to infuse a more radical ideology into the labor movement reflected efforts by intellectuals to dominate unions and he anticipated that a mature labor movement in a democratic free enterprise system would reject

both revolutionary changes and even significant social reform. This study contradicts the Perlman thesis and demonstrates that the class consciousness, militant unionism, and political action of Central Pennsylvania bituminous coal miners was not imposed from the outside by radical intellectuals but resulted from the nature of their work and their experience combating the 1920s open-shop drive (Perlman, 1928).

The class consciousness of the Nanty Glo and other Central Pennsylvania miners was forged out of conflict and a spirited contentiousness; class conflict with the region's coal corporations and steel and railroad barons; political conflict with agents of the coal companies and local merchants for control over the municipal government and police force; ideological conflict with the national leadership of the United Mine Workers of America over the direction of the union; and internal conflicts over ethnic and religious differences. Even when John Brophy, a longtime Nanty Glo resident, was president of UMWA District 2 (Central Pennsylvania) from 1917 until 1927, there was periodic conflict between Nanty Glo miners and the District office. During World War I, Nanty Glo Local 1386 protested the unwillingness or inability of both the District and UMWA international leadership to effectively challenge unpaid manual car-pushing forced on miners because of narrow coal seams in the region. These were some of the underlying conditions that led to the emergence of the class-conscious movement. Brophy and other District 2 officers provided an ideological framework, the leadership, and organization structure necessary to sustain a class-conscious movement. They were often joined by activists and organizers affiliated with socialist groups and the Workers (Communist) Party, groups that supported, but did not control the miners' movement (Singer, 1988a; 1988b; Singer, 1991).

This class-conscious working-class movement emerged among bituminous coal miners after World War I (1919–1928). Despite, or perhaps because of, intense anti-union campaigns in the 1920s and the Great Depression of the 1930s, they were among the most militant workers in the United States during World War II. Their class consciousness had roots in the traditional values and experiences of American bituminous coal miners. In the 1920s it was articulated as the “Miners’ Program,” which included organization of unorganized miners into a national union; creation of a labor political party; nationalization of the bituminous coal industry; and promotion of rank-and-file democracy in the UMWA. The program went beyond traditional American Federation of Labor “bread-and-butter” trade unionism as it drew from more radical socialist proposals. A labor party would defend the civil liberties of the working class and challenge domination of the country by

what they viewed as business controlled political parties. A nationalized coal industry would be operated in the public interest while protecting the lives and livelihood of coal miners (Gutman, 1976; Goodrich, 1925).

The leadership of this class-conscious movement came from two groups. The first consisted of lifelong miners and union officials who turned toward militancy and leftist alternatives, convinced that none of the existing political options offered coal miners a chance for a better life. The second included communists and independent left-wing progressives from outside the mine workers' union who shared similar goals and provided philosophical direction, organizational skills, and financial assistance to the miners. Both groups viewed participation in the bituminous coal miners' struggle as a vehicle for affecting broader change in the American labor movement and the United States (Singer, 1991: 132–57).

Between 1922 and 1928, the leaders of this movement struggled to wrest control of the UMWA from John L. Lewis and a business-unionist faction committed to cooperation between labor, management, and government to maintain a stable and profitable industry while defending the position of the UMWA in unionized fields. This faction's power rested on the ability of the international office to negotiate a uniform labor contract encompassing the main bituminous coal producing fields, known as the Central Competitive Field (CCF). The business-unionist program included three basic points. First, the CCF agreement would serve as a national standard for industrial relations in the industry. Second, contracts would be enforced against both recalcitrant operators and insurgent miners. Finally, an effort would be made to commit the federal government to a plan to cartelize the industry and reduce the amount of coal produced as well as the number of miners. During the period Lewis and other union officials testified before federal investigating bodies and endorsed legislation that would have exempted the bituminous coal industry from antitrust regulations. Lewis also attempted to involve Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover in plans to encourage cooperation between bituminous coal operators' associations and the UMWA. District 2 Central Pennsylvania was considered an outlying district not party to the CCF agreement because of narrow coal seams, although the district's contracts with coal companies followed the CCF agreement (Laslett, 1996: 104–50).

By the 1920s, after a quarter century of internecine struggle between international officers and the union's powerful semi-autonomous districts, the former became dominant in the UMWA. During this struggle the international officers developed an effective machine to ensure control over

the districts. They used appointed international organizers to circumvent hostile district officials, and exploited control over the union's newspaper, the *UMWA Journal*. They also created interim district offices staffed with officers loyal to the International faction in newly organized fields and bankrupt or besieged established districts.

Between 1908 and 1920, opposition to the international faction came from a diverse and fluctuating coalition committed to district autonomy and democratic unionism, which included greater rank-and-file participation in union decision-making. From the 1908 retirement of John Mitchell as union president through John L. Lewis' election over Robert Harlin for the union presidency in 1920, the coalition vied for control of the union's international machinery. Its leaders included local and district business unionists politically opposed to the international faction; trade union socialists, at least nominally committed to the broader program for the union; and rank-and-file militants who rejected the international's enforcement of contract provisions against the union's membership. This group believed the international office was undermining effective struggle against operators who were violating union contracts and was trying to preserve the CCF agreement at the expense of the outlying and unorganized fields. The ability of the International officials to secure CCF contracts during and after World War I, the increasingly national scope of the industry, and the growth of a militant rank-and-file opposition, broke up the early district autonomy-based coalition by the 1920s. The coalition's factions then either drifted into the international camp or joined the developing class-conscious movement (Singer, 1982: 3–4).

While it was successful in maintaining control over the UMWA machinery, the international faction was unable to counter the sustained opposition of the coal industry and American industrial capital during the 1920s. The ability of nonunion fields to provide a large percentage of the nation's coal needs and a coordinated and well financed open-shop drive in the union fields brought massive long-term underemployment and unemployment to the unionized areas. From a high of nearly 400,000 members in 1921, the union's membership in the bituminous coal industry declined to under 100,000 members in 1929, mostly concentrated in Illinois.

During the 1920s, the coal operators, with the support of American industrial and finance capital, sought to rationalize and mechanize bituminous coal production in a union-free industry. They used ethnic and racial tensions to undermine the miners' sense of group solidarity and challenged the miner's craft skills and work-related values, which were supported by traditional work patterns and active pit committees. The open-shop drive

was spearheaded by the major producing groups in the bituminous coal fields and was supported by the leading forces of corporate and finance capital in the country, including U.S. Steel, the automobile industry, and the Mellon, Morgan, and Rockefeller empires (Laslett, 1996).

The open-shop drive had its most devastating effect on the rank-and-file miners. The operators concluded that the strength of the union rested on the skilled miner's control over production at the mine face. The miners' skill, in addition to traditional patterns of labor and community, contributed to the development within the miners of an ideological conception of themselves as independent artisans with the right to make work judgments, production decisions, and defend their standard of living through militant locals. During the open-shop drive operators used the weakening of the international union to mechanize production and make traditional skills obsolete, reorganize established work patterns, and systematically emasculate pit committees (Goodrich, 1925).

The international machine strengthened its grip on the union structure at the same time that union membership was declining and the miners' way of life was under siege. After 1922, the union was unable to conduct a nationwide strike, and miners in the CCF became more dependent on the negotiating ability of the international officers to secure a contract. After 1924, the opposition was unable to mount an effective challenge at machine-dominated union conventions. By 1926, the machine's control over union institutions was complete. The remnants of the rank-and-file movement organized the Save the Union Committee and supported District 2 President John Brophy in a campaign to unseat Lewis, but Brophy was defeated in a disputed election where tens of thousands of blatantly falsified ballots were cast for Lewis. Following the election, Lewis banned Brophy and his supporters from the UMWA as dual unionists. The Save the Union Committee worked to rebuild the rank-and-file movement and the union until 1928. At that time, the remaining active leadership of the committee had dwindled and now consisted mainly of Workers' (Communist) Party members. It ceased struggling within the skeletal remains of the Lewis controlled UMWA and unsuccessfully attempted to organize a new union in areas the UMWA abandoned. The decision to form a new union isolated the remnants of the movement from the main body of American labor. Generally, only blacklisted miners, or locals hopelessly engaged in strikes against operators not dependent on the production of the struck mines, joined the National Miners' Union. Ultimately, this decision meant the end

of the miners' program in the UMWA and the bituminous coal industry (Laslett, 1996; Brophy, 1964).

The same industrial conditions that spurred rank-and-file militancy and promoted class-consciousness, overcapacity, underemployment, and an operator open-shop drive supported by the federal government, ultimately overwhelmed bituminous coalminers and virtually destroyed the UMWA, exposing the folly of the business unionist strategy of collaboration with hostile corporate management to rationalize coal production.

By 1930, UMWA membership had precipitously declined and Lewis had successfully expelled most of his remaining opponents from the union. Starting in 1933 a more militant Lewis, but one still committed to labor as a junior partner with industry and union leaders as managers of labor, helped launch American Federation of Labor organizing drives and the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. At that point, many 1920s radicals became key organizers in the push for industrial unionism (Bernstein, 1971; Dubofsky & Van Tine, 1977: 155–279).

Deindustrialization in the United States and the continued shift from bituminous coal to other fossil fuels as sources of energy in the post–World War II era, led to a collapse of both the industry and the United Mine Workers union. Nanty Glo and other coal towns were devastated. Class consciousness lingered, but it was dissipated, especially across generations. The change in circumstance produced a change in political consciousness. By the first decades of the twenty-first century, Central Pennsylvania had become a bastion of political conservatism.

Class-Conscious Coal Miners is organized into five parts. In part 1, “Bituminous Coal Industry,” chapters 1 through 4 look at the industry and conditions faced by bituminous coal miners. They lay the basis for understanding the development of a class-conscious miners’ movement in the 1920s. Chapter 1 examines the early history of the UMWA, its organizational structure, and the tension between more radical union districts and an international office generally committed to a cooperative form of business unionism. This tension created space for local opposition movements to emerge in the union. Chapter 1 also introduces the concept of the “Miner’s Freedom,” the way the organization of work and artisanal traditions in the bituminous coal industry supported the development of working-class consciousness. A key source for understanding the ideas of the workers and communities examined in this chapter is the folk music of the bituminous coal miner.

Chapter 2 focuses on the irrationality of production in the bituminous coal industry, its impact on the UMWA and bituminous coal miners, and efforts by the international office to stabilize conditions in the industry through cooperation with bituminous coal companies. Chapter 3 discusses ethnic division in the coalfields and the ways coal companies manipulated their workforces in efforts to undermine worker solidarity. Chapter 4 introduces the importance of community in isolated coalfields to support worker struggles and the crucial roles played by women in building and sustaining community during intense labor conflict.

Part 2, “Rank-and-File Miners,” chapters 5 through 7, examines the growing rank-and-file bituminous coal miners’ movement in the 1920s that fought a two-front battle, challenging the business unionists in control of the UMWA international office and an anti-union open-shop drive by coal companies. Chapter 5 documents the rank-and-file rebellion in a number of the UMWA Districts that started with opposition to a World War I wage freeze and a no-strike pledge agreed to by the international office and included efforts to prevent the consolidation of power by John L. Lewis as the autocratic leader of the business unionists and president of the UMWA. Chapter 6 offers a closer look at the emerging opposition to Lewis centered in UMWA Central Pennsylvania District 2 and Pittsburgh area UMWA District 5. District 2 President John Brophy championed the “Miners’ Program” as a way to stabilize the industry and protect the rights of workers. The program included support for strikes in nonunion coalfields to force operators to sign fair contracts. In District 5, radical miners allied with communist organizers tried to build a broad opposition movement to challenge Lewis and business unionist control over the UMWA international office. Chapter 7 details how rank-and-file bituminous coal miners fought against an open shop drive initiated by major corporations and supported at the highest levels of the federal government. This battle included fights on the floor of the UMWA annual conventions where representatives of rank-and-file miners tried, unsuccessfully, to change the direction of the union and make it less accommodating to mine operators.

Part 3, “Nanty Glo,” chapters 8 and 9, looks at the battle to sustain the UMWA in one Central Pennsylvania coal mining community, Nanty Glo, the home base of John Brophy in UMWA District 2. Chapter 8 focuses on the history and demographics of Nanty Glo. Chapter 9, based on interviews with retired miners and their family members, details the struggle by Nanty Glo miners to defeat the open-shop drive, including combating

Ku Klux Klan activity that was supported by coal operators to undermine local union organization.

Part 4, “Save the Union,” chapters 10 and 11, examines the struggle by opposition forces to gain control over the UMWA international office. Chapter 10 examines the 1926 UMWA Presidential campaign where John Brophy, running on the Miners’ Program with support from left-wing groups inside and outside the union and the labor movement, challenged John L. Lewis. Lewis was declared reelected and retained control over the union in a highly questionable vote outcome. Chapter 11 describes the Save the Union Committee led by Brophy and miners aligned with the Workers (Communist) Party following the disputed election. The campaign faltered and Brophy and his closest supporters withdrew, unwilling to participate in what they saw as dual unionism.

In part 5, “Revival and Collapse,” chapters 12 and 13 examine the impact of the Great Depression, World War II, the postwar collapse of the bituminous coal industry, and the steep contraction in UMWA membership, on the class consciousness of bituminous coal miners. Chapter 12 examines the labor resurgence, as John L. Lewis takes advantage of the political climate during the New Deal to rebuild the UMWA and found the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and looks at tension between the leadership of the UMWA and the federal government and decisions by miners to go on strike in violation of federal policy and the international office’s no-strike pledge. Chapter 13 analyzes the impact of the postwar collapse of the bituminous coal industry on Central Pennsylvania mining communities, the loss of working-class class consciousness, and the growing conservatism of voters in the area as work and the miners’ union no longer shaped their political views.