

EARLY LABOR



Workers at the Tower-Soudan Mine, 1890, with ropes used for climbing in and out of the pit

STRIFE

on Minnesota's Mining Frontier, 1882-1906

Arnold R. Alanen

Minnesota's Iron Range, like every mining and industrial area of the United States, has been a locus for conflict between employee and employer, worker and management, labor and capital. The conflicts in the Vermilion, Mesabi, and Cuyuna ore-producing districts of the range were resolved in many ways—some quietly, others violently. Taken together, these events are part of a historical tapestry that includes strikes and walkouts undertaken by laborers and lockouts and blacklists initiated by mining companies. Indeed, the major strikes of 1907 and 1916 are so firmly embedded in the history and lore of the range that they serve as benchmarks in the

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evolution of the labor movement in Minnesota and the entire tri-state Lake Superior region.¹

Although the 1907 and 1916 strikes have received most attention from historians, labor disagreements arose from the time Minnesota's first miners applied their picks and shovels to the red ore of the Vermilion Range in the early 1880s. Many of the earliest disputes were so localized and brief that they received little if any treatment in reports and press accounts. Despite the limited evidence that is available, this article seeks to provide insights into the 50 or so labor disturbances that took place during the earliest period of Iron Range development—from the 1880s to early 1907. These often ephemeral events provided a foundation for the more extensive disruptions that followed.²

THE MINNESOTA Iron Company, the first firm to establish a profitable iron ore enterprise in the northeastern area of the state, was a paternalistic organization that sought to regulate the lives of its employees—both in the workplace and the community. The rules and regulations adopted in March, 1884, to govern employee behavior were almost a word-for-word repetition of those previously published by the Menominee Mining Company, a Milwaukee-based iron ore extraction firm then operating in northern Michigan. They stipulated, for example, that tenants living in company houses were to be charged for any damages to property and that employees were to assume all risks for death or injury while engaged in mining-related work. The company also clearly stated its position about labor unions: "No person belonging to any combination or union to control wages or regulate time or manner of service will be employed; and any employe entering any such combination or union, or endeavoring to control wages, or regulate or interfere with the working of the mines or any part thereof, or to induce any employe to quit work or to interfere with any employe or his work will be discharged promptly and finally, and will forfeit all money earned by him at the time of such discharge."³

To protect its investment in the small but rambunctious crew of men that it brought to the Vermilion beginning in 1882, Minnesota Iron headquartered a physician in the new townsite of Tower and charged employees a fee for access to medical services. "With a doctor and a saloon here there will be no reason why men should ask [for] higher wages than at any other place," wrote one company official in 1883. The strategy backfired, however, when miners began to complain that the company's physician, Robert B. Bell, was both incompetent and unwilling to provide treatment. Noting that laborers were leaving their jobs because of Bell's attitude, mining captain Elisha Morcom wrote to his superiors: "This is no way to talk or act to the men.

They pay their money [for medical services] and expect to be treated right."⁴

The next problem the company faced was a demand for better pay. According to the *Minneapolis Daily Tribune* in early 1886, Minnesota Iron was seeking to avert potential labor troubles by offering laborers and miners pay increases of 7 and 8 percent, respectively. This action was viewed as being "in line with the settled policy of the company which has been to hire only the best men and pay them good wages." In 1887 the *Vermilion Iron Journal* of Tower praised the company's management of its 1,500 workers on the Vermilion. Wages were as high as those to be found at any iron mine, and the men were neither "bothered nor pestered by bosses every few feet." Furthermore, stated the newspaper, workers could buy their provisions and beer in any store or saloon rather than being forced to buy from a company commissary. When the *Industrial Age* of Duluth expressed an opposite view in 1888—describing Minnesota Iron as tyrannical, a cruel monopoly,

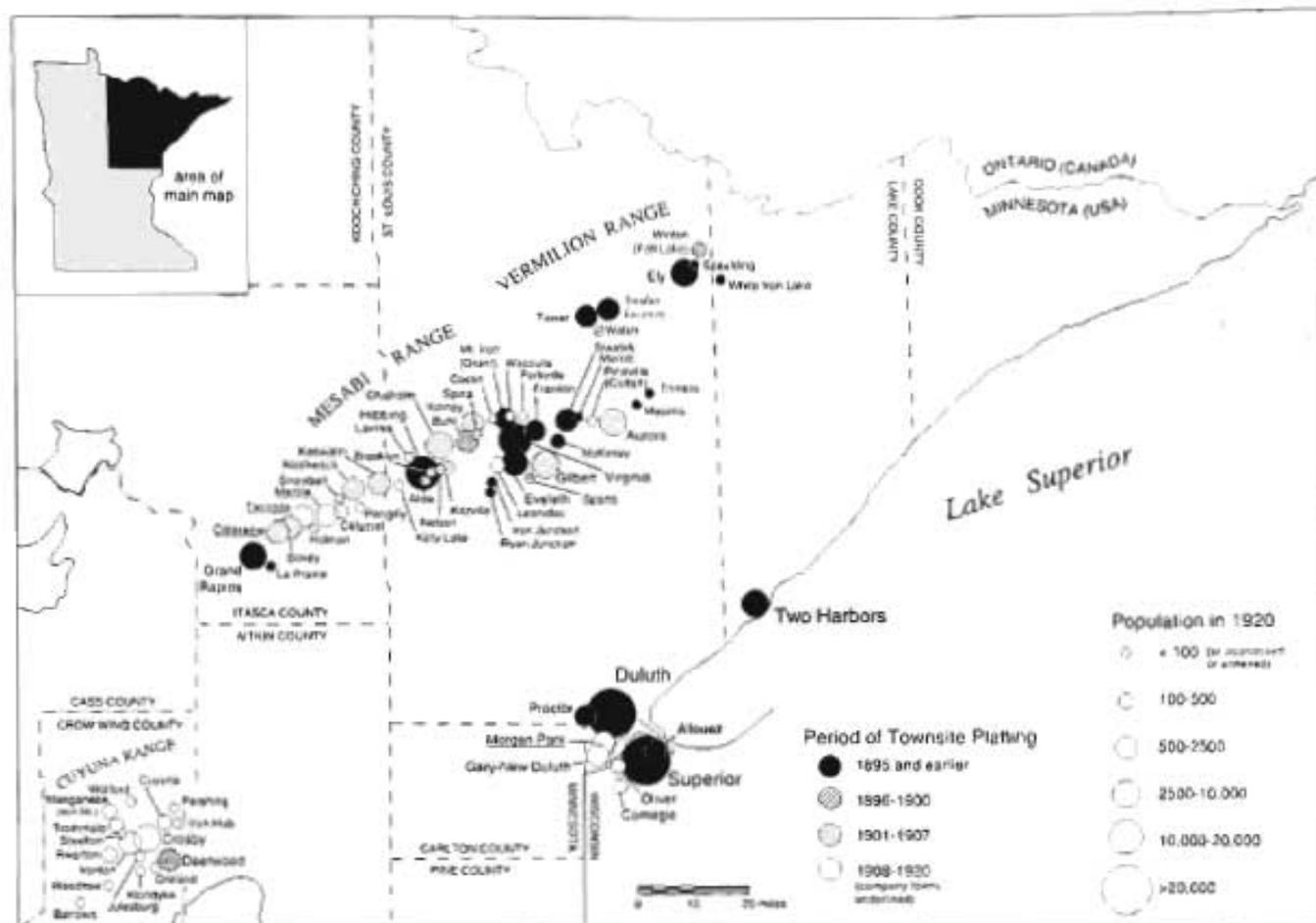
¹For the benchmark strikes, see Neil Betten, "Strike on the Mesabi—1907," *Minnesota History* 40 (Fall, 1967): 340–347, and "Riot, Revolution, Repression in the Iron Range Strike of 1916," *Minnesota History* 41 (Summer, 1968): 82–94; Robert M. Eleff, "The 1916 Minnesota Miners' Strike Against U.S. Steel," *Minnesota History* 51 (Summer, 1988): 63–74; Michael G. Karni, "The Founding of the Finnish Socialist Federation and the Minnesota Strike of 1907," in *For the Common Good: Finnish Immigrants and the Radical Response to Industrial America*, ed. Michael G. Karni and Douglas J. Ollila, Jr. (Superior, Wis.: Työmies Society, 1977), 65–86; Peter Rachleff, "Turning Points in the Labor Movement: Three Key Conflicts," in *Minnesota in a Century of Change: The State and Its People Since 1900*, ed. Clifford E. Clark, Jr. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1989), 196–202; Carl Ross, *The Finn Factor in American Labor, Culture and Society* (New York Mills, Minn.: Parta Printers, 1977), 106–118; Donald G. Sofchak, "Organized Labor and the Iron Ore Miners of Northern Minnesota, 1907–1936," *Labor History* 12 (Spring, 1971): 214–242.

The author is indebted to staff members at the Iron Range Research Center in Chisholm, the Northeast Minnesota Historical Center in Duluth, and the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) in St. Paul for their assistance.

²Because ore was not shipped from the Cuyuna Range until 1911, only the Vermilion and Mesabi ranges are included in this discussion. Records of most early strikes are found in newspapers published on the Iron Range and in Duluth. Since these reports can be inaccurate or include exaggerated claims, every effort has been made to use different accounts in documenting separate incidents.

³George C. Stone, "Minnesota Iron Company: Rules and Regulations," Mar. 7, 1884, Charlemagne Tower, Sr., Papers, microfilm edition, MHS.

⁴James A. Goss to Thomas L. Blood, April 4, 1883, and Morcom to George C. Stone, Aug. 19, 28, 1884—both in Materials Relating to the Oliver Iron Mining Co., 1863–1972, J. S. Steel, comp., MHS.



Townsites associated with iron-ore production, 1880–1920. Except for the Cuyuna, the settlement framework for the Iron Range was in place by 1907.

and an octopus—the *Journal* responded by pointing out the freedom of mining employees to join fraternal societies, the fine hospital and doctors that were available in Tower, and the superior quality of the housing.⁵

On August 6, 1888, thirty brakemen employed by the Duluth and Iron Range Railway at Tower struck for higher wages in the first organized labor protest on the

range. When their demands were refused, the brakemen quietly returned to work the next day. At the Minnesota Mine in July, 1891, stockpile men struck briefly to protest low contract wages. The two more significant strikes that broke out on the Vermilion Range in 1891 and 1892, however, did not involve calls for better wages or improved working conditions; instead, they were rooted in the religious and cultural heritage of two Catholic immigrant groups.⁶

Early in September, 1891, close to 150 Slovenians and a few Italians refused to work on a religious holiday. Minnesota Iron officials quickly ordered the employees to return to their jobs and laid them off when they refused to do so. The *Vermilion Iron Journal* complained that the miners caused “the company annoyance by taking a holiday whenever they choose and in consequence sometimes nearly necessitating the closing down of the mine, or at least working to a disadvantage.” The laid-off workers were soon returned to the payroll after promising to limit their future celebra-

⁵ *Minneapolis Daily Tribune*, Mar. 17, 1886, p. 1; *Vermilion Iron Journal* (Tower), Dec. 15, 1887, p. 1, Oct. 18, 1888, p. 1 (including the comments of the *Industrial Age*).

⁶ Minnesota Commissioner of Labor Statistics, *First Biennial Report* (Thos. A. Clark, 1888), 261; *Ely Iron Home*, July 21, 1891, p. 1. A major strike in Duluth in July, 1889, was the largest labor conflict in northeastern Minnesota up to that time. City workers walked out after the city council fixed their wages at \$1.50 per day. Before hostilities ended, two or three strikers were killed by police officers and sheriff’s deputies. See the *Duluth Daily News*, July 3–14, 1889, and the retrospective view by W. E. McEwen in the *Labor World* (Duluth), Aug. 30, 1919, sec. 2, p. 9.



Railroad workers at the Tower-Soudan Mine, 1890

tions to one November holiday and to other national days typically commemorated throughout America.⁷

Despite this apparent agreement, about 300 of Soudan's Slovenian and Italian workers chose to celebrate Corpus Christi Day on June 16, 1892, again by failing to appear for work. (Elsewhere in the United States the infamous Homestead strike would begin one week later in Pennsylvania, pitting steelworkers against the Carnegie Steel Company, and in another month a major confrontation would erupt between silver miners and company police in Idaho's Coeur d'Alene region.) Some reports stated that the men preferred to attend church on that day rather than work, but one account has suggested that they avoided the Minnesota Mine because of a superstition that it was unlucky to work on Corpus Christi Day. The Tower newspaper, in an opinion that would be echoed by the Minnesota Iron Co., saw the action as "an attempt of rioters to dictate not only to their employers but to three times as many contented laborers, who refused to participate with them." As before, mining company officials removed the men from the payroll, this time for 14 days. The company also pointed out the opposition of the Finnish, Swedish, and Cornish immigrants to the actions of their Slovenian and Italian co-workers.⁸

When nonstriking members on the night shift appeared at the mines that evening, they were met by a

group of laid-off men "who declared themselves strikers and refused to permit any one to go to work," according to the *Vermilion Iron Journal*. Armed with rocks, clubs, and pieces of pipe, the self-proclaimed strikers then paraded throughout the streets of Soudan during the nighttime hours. On Saturday morning, those men who were participating in the walkout demanded that they be paid for work performed in May. Although Minnesota Iron originally had intended to meet its payroll at this time, company officials decided that the welfare of the community and the safety of local property would be protected by delaying the payday—"it being anything but advisable to furnish the

⁷*Vermilion Iron Journal*, Sept. 10, 1891, p. 5; *Ely Iron Home*, Sept. 15, 1891, p. 1.

⁸Here and below, see anonymous letters to H. H. Porter, June 18, 1892, Materials Relating to the Oliver Iron Mining Co.; Sidney Lens, *The Labor Wars: From the Molly Maguires to the Sitdowns* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974), 78–88, 129–133; *Vermilion Iron Journal*, June 23, 1892, p. 1. The possibility that working on Corpus Christi Day was regarded with suspicion is from June D. Holmquist, Joseph Stipanovich, and Kenneth B. Moss in "The South Slavs: Bulgarians, Croatians, Montenegrins, Serbs, and Slovenes," in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups*, ed. June Drenning Holmquist (St. Paul: MHS, 1981), 386.

already half drunken mob the wherewith to purchase more intoxicants." Later that day, St. Louis County Sheriff Paul Sharvy and a posse of some 40 deputies arrived on the scene to guard the approach to the mine entrance.⁹

Concluding that "the loss which we sustain from our men observing holidays that are not observed in this country has become too burdensome to be longer allowed," the mining company asked Governor William R. Merriam to send troops to the Vermilion for the purpose of maintaining order. Three companies of up to 130 men—members of the Third Regiment of Minnesota's state militia under the command of Adjutant General John H. Mullen—were quickly dispatched to Soudan, arriving on Sunday morning. Their arrival marked the first of several occasions when armed troops and deputies would be called on to quell Iron Range disturbances over the next quarter century.¹⁰

The militia guarded the hills around Soudan and began searching for individuals who were identified by company timekeepers as "ringleaders" of the disturbance. Close to 30 people were arrested, some as they left the local Catholic church, a few when they sought to escape on the rail line, and others as they wandered the streets of the mining location; most, however, were apprehended in the houses that formed the small Slovenian and Italian neighborhoods of Soudan. Another three or four men who had gone to Ely, reportedly to sow dissent among the laborers of that city, were said to have been "captured . . . in an outhouse." Although the strikers threatened to fight any action Minnesota Iron took to resume mining, President D. H. Bacon announced on the morning of June 20 that the militia had started the mining engines and that 1,000 men were back at work.¹¹

Violence could have erupted at any time, but apparently the only altercations that took place were verbal. A Duluth newspaper observer reported that one recalcitrant was arrested and handcuffed in Soudan "amid a tirade of Austrian [Slovenian] oaths that would make a Bowery tough turn green with envy." Likewise,

the reporter credited the heavily armed militia and posse for maintaining order: "There is nothing that these rioters fear so much as the bayonets and bullets of armed men," claimed the reporter, "and the arrival of the militia cooled their lawless dispositions very suddenly." Sheriff Sharvy also was praised for not allowing his deputies to fire their weapons; many lives were saved, the newspaper said, because of the lawman's prudent actions.

A special train was dispatched from Soudan to Duluth with five Italian and 15 Slovenian strikers on board. (Apparently eight more men were shipped to Duluth later.) The *Duluth Evening Herald* proclaimed the 20 prisoners who arrived there at five o'clock in the morning to be "the dirtiest, most villainous set of men ever assembled in confinement in St. Louis county." All 28 men were held in prison until a preliminary hearing was convened on July 5 in the Duluth council chambers, where the trial was moved when the municipal courtroom proved to be too small. Over the ensuing days witnesses described the violence and identified prisoners whom they claimed had participated in the riot. An enginehouse operator offered the most damning testimony when he pointed to three men who allegedly had shown him a revolver that they claimed would be used to kill the mining captain at Soudan. Following the hearing, charges against four men were dropped while the remaining 24 were held on \$250 bond each and bound over for a grand jury trial (only two men could raise the amount). In late July and early August, up to 17 of the prisoners left prison when their bail was reduced to \$25.¹²

The grand jury convened on September 8; shortly thereafter all 24 of the men pleaded not guilty to the indictments brought against them, but 12 individuals were allowed to forfeit their bail. Of the 12 who remained to face trial, three were quickly found guilty of rioting, while lesser charges were levied against the remaining nine. In October a district court judge sentenced the three men who faced the most serious charges to one year of hard labor in the Minnesota state penitentiary in Stillwater, although their actual time of servitude was reduced to eight months because of the time they had already spent in the Duluth jail. The bail or fine for three men identified as ringleaders was set at \$200, and the other individuals were assessed \$25 fines. With these actions, an end was brought to the first of many labor-related legal actions that would occur on the Iron Range.¹³

THE MESABI saw its first labor conflicts in the summer of 1893, less than a year after ore began to be shipped from this mightiest of Minnesota's ranges. Hereafter the Mesabi, with its massive work force of

⁹Here and below, see *Duluth Daily Tribune*, June 20, 1892, p. 1; *Vermilion Iron Journal*, June 23, p. 1, July 7, p. 5—both 1892.

¹⁰Anonymous letters to H. H. Porter, June 18, 20, 1892, Materials Relating to the Oliver Iron Mining Co.

¹¹Here and below, see *Duluth Evening Herald*, June 20, p. 5, June 21, p. 4—both 1892.

¹²*Duluth Evening Herald*, June 20, 1892, p. 5; *Duluth Daily Tribune*, July 6, p. 4, July 8, p. 5—both 1892; *Vermilion Iron Journal*, June 30, p. 5, July 7, p. 1, July 28, p. 5, Aug. 4, p. 5—all 1892.

¹³*Duluth Daily Tribune*, Sept. 9, p. 1, Sept. 23, p. 1, Sept. 24, p. 1—all 1892; *Vermilion Iron Journal*, Sept. 15, p. 5, Sept. 22, p. 5, Oct. 6, p. 5, Oct. 13, p. 7—all 1892.



The Fayal Mine at Eveleth, 1902

unskilled immigrant workers, would serve as the arena for most of the labor strife on the entire Iron Range, and Finns would emerge as the most militant of the region's nationality groups.

Apparently the earliest Mesabi incident was a strike in August, 1893, of 75 to 100 Finnish laborers working on an extension of the Duluth, Missabe and Northern Railroad in the Virginia area. The men allegedly forced 200 to 300 men in a nearby mining operation to join them, "using sticks and stones to emphasize their arguments." Sheriff's deputies arrested six of the leaders, who were charged with simple assault and quickly judged to be guilty. Three were sentenced to 60 days and three to 30 days in the St. Louis County jail in Duluth. About 100 Finns followed the six prisoners when deputies took them to the Virginia train depot for transfer to Duluth, but the crowd did not cause any disturbance. After the train left, according to a Duluth newspaper, the remaining employees "were gladly returning to work." Another strike action in 1893 hit the Minnewas Mine by Virginia when about 240 men who had not been paid in three months quit their jobs because of the poor food being served in a company boardinghouse. The walkout ended a week later after company officials promised the men that provisions would improve.¹⁴

The year 1894 was pivotal in the early evolution of Iron Range labor history, but it is much better known

for the significant number of labor disputes that erupted throughout the nation. The Pullman strike, which began in May in a model industrial village outside of Chicago, matched the paternalistic and heavy-handed labor management practices of sleeping-car magnate George M. Pullman against Eugene V. Debs, president of the American Railway Union. Earlier in the year the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) organized its first strike at Cripple Creek, Colorado; over the next two decades the WFM would move to other parts of the nation, including the Iron Range.¹⁵

But the Pullman and Cripple Creek strikes apparently had little impact upon the labor disputes that

¹⁴*Duluth Weekly Herald*, Aug. 9, 1893, p. 6; *Mesaba Ore and the Hibbing News*, Mar. 24, 1917, p. 1; *Mesaba Range* (Biwabik and Merritt), Aug. 3, 1893, p. 1. See also Hyman Berman, "Education for Work and Labor Solidarity: The Immigrant Miners and Radicalism on the Mesabi Range," 1963, p. 37, typescript in MHS; Edward Marolt, "The Development of Labor Unionism in the Iron Mining Industry of the Virginia-Eveleth District" (Master's thesis, University of Minnesota, 1969), 3.

¹⁵Stanley Buder, *Pullman: An Experiment in Industrial Order and Community Planning, 1880-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 147-201; Lens, *Labor Wars*, 99-121, 132-138. The number of strikes in 1894 was termed "exceptional" by John R. Commons et al. in *History of Labor in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 2:501.



emerged on the Iron Range during the same year. The Mesabi walkout that began in early May resulted in the first strike casualty on the range, a portent of the half dozen or so lives that would be lost in labor disputes over the next 22 years. The strike action erupted at the Franklin Mine by Virginia when laborers refused to return to work after mine operators turned down their demands for higher pay. The *Vermilion Iron Journal* reported that an "ignorant Finn" (later identified as Al Hooper) spoke to 300 Finns and Swedes who then formed a mob in Virginia and proceeded to attract further converts at other mines. The strike soon extended throughout the Mesabi, with over 1,000 men refusing to work. Sheriff Sharvy once again swore in deputy marshals to protect miners who chose not to participate, and Governor Knute Nelson was asked to call out the state militia.¹⁶

¹⁶Here and below, see *Vermilion Iron Journal*, May 3, p. 1, May 10, p. 1—both 1894; *Ely Times*, May 4, 1894, p. 1; *Hibbing Sentinel*, May 12, p. 1, July 7, p. 1—both 1894; *Mesaba Range*, May 3, p. 1, May 10, p. 1—both 1894.

¹⁷*Hibbing Sentinel*, July 14, p. 1, Nov. 17, p. 1—both 1894; *Mesaba Range*, Oct. 4, 1894, p. 1. Ironically, Hooper was killed less than three years later by a dynamite blast at a Brimson railroad camp operated by the Drake and Stratton Co. A coroner's jury ruled that the death of the 54-year-old Finn was caused by his own carelessness. See the *Virginia Enterprise*, Jan. 28, 1898, p. 4.

The arrival of several companies of national guardsmen, in addition to the closing of saloons in the Virginia area, brought a modicum of quiet. (Some local boardinghouse bosses also shut out men who were striking.) Nevertheless, a Finnish striker named Sam Mattson was fatally shot by Al Free, a well-known deputy marshal who claimed that Mattson had first fired at him. When a group of Finns gathered, ostensibly for the purpose of lynching Free, the militia protected the marshal while a hastily called coroner's jury ruled that his action constituted justifiable homicide. Free left for the West shortly thereafter, but he returned to Mountain Iron in July and assumed the position of village marshal. Meanwhile, Finnish strike leader Hooper languished in jail for several weeks. The strike itself ended in about two weeks when the mining company raised wages at the Franklin from 20 to 30 cents for each loaded car of ore. In other 1894 labor disputes, steamshovel operators and their helpers struck for better wages at mines near Virginia, Mountain Iron, and Hibbing, as did laborers employed in stripping operations at the Lone Jack and Ohio mines by Virginia; workers at the Biwabik Mine also walked out when they were not paid in a timely manner.¹⁷

In May, 1895, workers struck again at the Franklin Mine because of low wage rates. When strikers refused to allow other laborers to return to the mine, the ubiquitous Sheriff Sharvy sought to follow his actions of

the previous year by asking Governor Nelson to send militiamen to the scene. Nelson refused, stating that the county itself should first attempt to solve the problem. The trouble ended without incident after 50 deputies were sworn in at Duluth and dispatched by train to Virginia. Minor strikes later broke out in 1895 at the Lone Jack, Minnesota, and Cincinnati mines.¹⁸

Also in 1895, several observers focused on the need to enact meaningful mine inspection legislation in Minnesota. The necessity for such a statute was especially obvious on the Iron Range, claimed Representative Neill McInnis of Tower, since trained miners hesitated to work in northeastern Minnesota because of their reservations about the unsafe conditions they would encounter. "They [the companies] run in gangs of foreigners with little experience in our mines," observed McInnis; "then they have an accident and kill three or four of them, but it does not seem to matter." Ironically, the same February, 1895, issue of the *Hibbing Sentinel* that carried a lengthy discussion on the proposed mine safety legislation also described a fall of ore in the Canton Mine that crushed two Italians "almost into unrecognizable masses." Corporate opposition, however, delayed the passage of safety legislation for another decade.¹⁹

AGENTS FOR the fledgling Northern Mineral Mine Workers' Progressive Union, who were seeking to organize all copper and iron ore miners in the Lake Superior region, began to give increasing attention to northeastern Minnesota by early 1896. This organization was formed after a major iron miners' strike on Michigan's Marquette Range in 1895; within a few months, President Robert Askew of the Progressive Union had organized branches in several Minnesota mining communities. The primary objectives of the union were of concern to miners throughout the region: to receive wages commensurate with the dangers of mining; to require safety measures in the mines and to provide working environments that were free of impure air and water; to establish an eight-hour day; to use arbitration in adjusting differences between workers and employers; to establish biweekly paydays; to secure an employers' liability law; to end the practice of employing company doctors, allowing miners to use the monthly payment of one dollar to choose their own medical services; and to secure appointment of state and county mine inspectors.²⁰

A March, 1896, meeting at Ely's Finnish Temperance Hall to consider the question of labor organization appears to have been carefully orchestrated by the two individuals who served as cochairmen: John Pengilly, superintendent of the Chandler Mine, and P. R. Vail, the city's mayor. Company representatives and their supporters at the meeting claimed that it was union

NOTICE.

To Miners, Mineworkers or Whom it May Concern.

Keep away from the Mesaba and Vermilion Iron Ranges as there are scores of men who cannot find work.

Do not believe employment agencies or other advertisements as they are false.

R. ASKEW,

Pres. N.M.M.W.P.U.

WM. MUDGE,

Sec.-Treas. N.M.M.W.P.U.

W. T. WASLEY,

Pres. Soudan M.W.U.

*Progressive Union notice in Duluth's Labor World,
May 23, 1896*

officers and organizers who benefited most from labor organizations, not workers. The *Ely Miner* summarized the speakers' "unanimous" viewpoint with the observation that "strikes were worse than fire for any town." The *Ely Times* claimed that the town had no need for a labor lodge like those organized in Virginia, Eveleth, Hibbing, Biwabik, and Tower. Giving support to the Ely local, which had been organized just one week earlier, would only lead to trouble, said the *Times* reporter.²¹

The editorial page of the *Mesaba Range* in Biwabik criticized the "selfish view" expressed by the *Times*, stating that if miners in the region would only unite and initiate a bid for increased wages and shorter hours, mineowners could then meet their own workers'

¹⁸*Mesaba Range*, May 16, 1895, p. 1; *Virginian*, Sept. 5, 1895, p. 1; *Ely Times*, Nov. 15, 1895, p. 1; *Ely Miner*, Dec. 4, 1895, p. 1, Jan. 1, 1896, p. 1.

¹⁹*Hibbing Sentinel*, Feb. 2, p. 1, Feb. 16, p. 4—both 1895.

²⁰*Virginian*, Mar. 5, p. 8, April 16, p. 5—both 1896; *Virginia Enterprise*, Feb. 14, 1896, p. 1; *Hibbing Sentinel*, Mar. 7, 1896, p. 1; *Mesaba Range*, Mar. 5, 1896, p. 1.

²¹*Ely Times*, Mar. 20, p. 1, Mar. 27, p. 1—both 1896; *Ely Miner*, Mar. 25, 1896, p. 1.

pay demands simply by asking for higher iron ore prices. "If the mine owners and the miners would but consider the best interests of one another and inaugurate a campaign of mutual helpfulness," wrote the editor optimistically, "the solution . . . would be an easy one." The *Mesaba Range*, nevertheless, was strongly opposed to strikes, insisting that labor had to change its view of capital as a "natural enemy" that could be prodded to increase wages only by shows of force. Similarly, the need for strikes might be eliminated altogether if those employers who considered their workers as "mere machines to be hired at the lowest possible wages" would change their viewpoint.²²

Delegates to the Progressive Union's convention in Ishpeming, Michigan, voted to adopt a conservative approach in pushing their 1896 agenda. After interviewing a union official who worked at the Fayal Mine, an *Eveleth* reporter stated that he was "pleasantly surprised to hear of the apparent contentment that existed among the men." The official said that the organization planned to make no immediate demands because such a "good feeling" existed between the employees and the mine operators. According to the *Hibbing Sentinel*, however, supporters of the Progressive Union were maintaining a low profile because they were concerned that "their chances of employment will be lessened if information gets out before the organization has attained great strength." Accounts were soon circulating that men had been discharged because of their union affiliation.²³

The Minnesota Iron Co. was especially adamant in its opposition to the Progressive Union, making "war upon the union" by posting "notices that no union men would be employed and afterward by discharging from its employ the officers of the union." C. J. Rinn, a Soudan miner who lost his job in 1896 for serving as secretary of the labor group, initiated a suit against Edwin Ball, the superintendent responsible for discharging him. Rinn, who charged Ball with violating an 1895 state statute that prevented such action, managed to have the official arrested by a deputy sheriff.

²²*Mesaba Range*, April 2, 1896, p. 4.

²³*Duluth Weekly Herald* (citing the *Eveleth Star*), May 6, 1896, p. 1; *Hibbing Sentinel*, Mar. 7, p. 1, April 11, p. 8—both 1896.

²⁴*Mesaba Range*, April 2, 1896, p. 1; *Vermilion Iron Journal*, April 2, p. 1, April 16, p. 1, April 30, p. 1—all 1896; *Virginia Enterprise*, April 17, 1896, p. 1; *Labor World*, April 11, p. 15, 17, May 9, p. 6, June 20, p. 15—all 1896. On Minnesota's labor regulations at the time, see Minnesota Bureau of Labor, *Laws, Statutes, etc.* (Minneapolis: Harrison and Smith, 1895), 26.

²⁵*Hibbing Sentinel*, July 14, 1894, p. 1; George O. Virtue, "The Minnesota Iron Ranges," in U.S. Bureau of Labor, *Bulletin* 19 (Sept., 1909): 394.

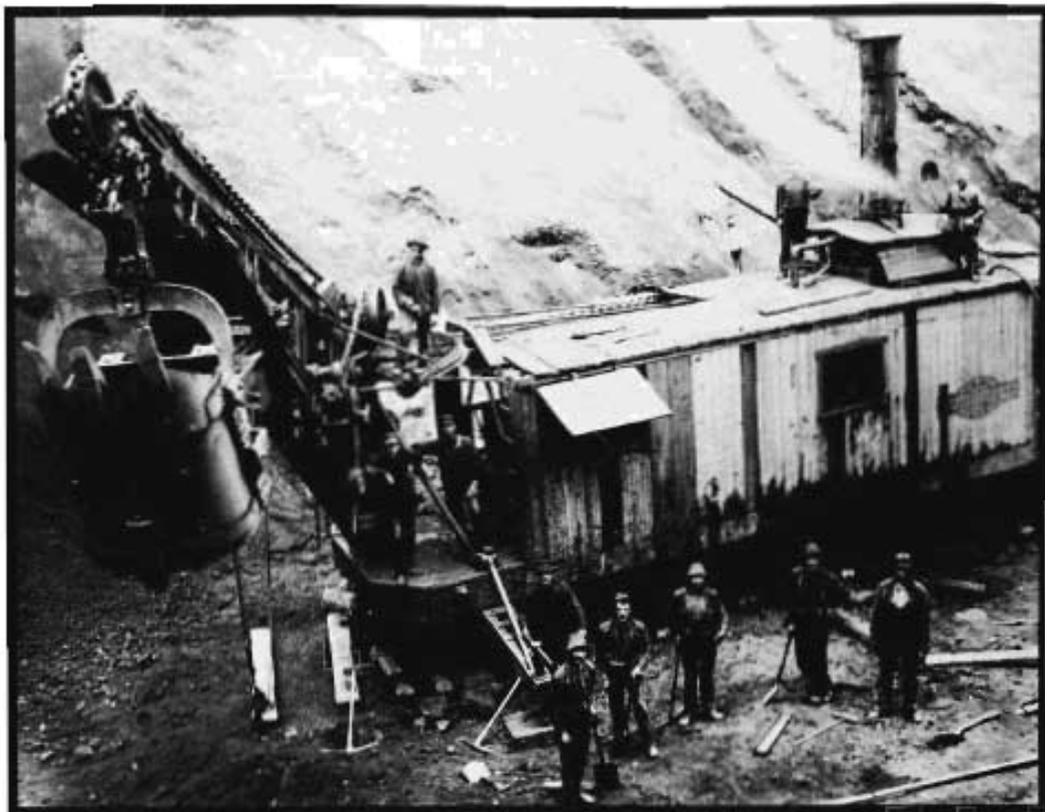


John Pengilly, about 1902

Members of the Duluth Trades Assembly volunteered to assist Rinn in his suit—which both sides apparently viewed as a test case to decide the constitutionality of the law—but the hearing against Ball was dismissed within two weeks for lack of evidence. A month later President Askew of the Progressive Union spoke on the Vermilion Range and compared the situation in Soudan to the notoriously oppressive conditions that had characterized the company town of Pullman, Illinois.²⁴

Another national union, the International Brotherhood of Steam Shovel and Dredge Men, had members on the Mesabi by 1896. A few shovel operators had struck unsuccessfully for better wages two years earlier, but the organization was primarily a trade union that emphasized experience and seniority in the workplace. For example, a member had to serve as a fireman for two years before becoming a crane operator and then had to work in that position for another year before being deemed qualified to serve as an engineer.²⁵

Efforts to pass a mine inspection bill in 1897, this one written by national officers for the Progressive Union, once again failed in the Minnesota legislature. On the range itself the last years of the 19th century saw little organizational activity, with direct labor conflict limited to small incidents at a few mines. The lack of



Steam shovel and crew, Biwabik, 1890

activity is somewhat surprising since low wages continued to plague workers and certain companies still failed to pay their employees on time—as revealed in 1897 by the 100 miners who “very quietly quit work” at the Zenith Mine after waiting months to be reimbursed for back pay; a smaller group of men struck the Sparta Mine when their payroll was delayed. Employers like the Winston Bros. and Dear Company also ignored holiday policies, discharging 20 teamsters who refused to work on July 4, 1896. After a crew of Italians quit the Sparta Mine because of their distaste for a local foreman, they reportedly were paid off immediately and replaced with other Italians willing to work for even less money. Miners employed by the Vega Mining Company near Eveleth also went on strike in 1896 to protest the company’s decision to cut back the search time for the body of a colleague killed in a cave-in.²⁶

The years 1898–99 passed with no more than a few walkouts. The *Hibbing Sentinel* questioned the motives of those workers who did leave their jobs, labeling an incident at the Penobscot Mine as only “something” of a strike, while a two-day hiatus by miners at the nearby Sellers and Hull mines was considered to have been undertaken for no discernible reason. All of the actions that occurred throughout the 1890s, however, were but

a prelude to the more militant events of the early years of the 20th century.²⁷

AS THE NEW century dawned there was a spirit of unbridled optimism about labor conditions on the Iron Range. The isolated strikes that erupted that year at mines near Biwabik and elsewhere were so short-lived that they had little wide-range impact. A work stoppage initiated by 200 Finns at the Malta and Sparta mines by Eveleth once again saw sheriff’s deputies called in to offer protection. Soon, rumors began circulating claiming that the strikers would be replaced by Italians who were to be imported from Duluth. Although it is doubtful that the potential replacements were even contacted, the strike ended quietly shortly thereafter.²⁸

²⁶*Duluth Weekly Herald*, Mar. 10, 1897, p. 1, Sept. 13, 1899, p. 5, Sept. 20, 1899, p. 5; *Hibbing Sentinel*, July 11, 1896, p. 1, Aug. 27, 1898, p. 1, Nov. 11, 1899, p. 1; *Virginian*, April 9, 1896, p. 1; *Ely Times* (citing the *Eveleth Hustler*), April 17, 1896, p. 4.

²⁷*Hibbing Sentinel*, Aug. 27, 1896, p. 1, Aug. 5, 1899, p. 1, Nov. 11, 1899, p. 1; *Duluth Weekly Herald*, Sept. 20, 1899, p. 5.

²⁸*Duluth Weekly Herald*, April 11, 1900, p. 5, April 18, 1900, p. 5, July 2, 1902, p. 8.

A Hibbing newspaper claimed in early 1903 that the Mesabi Range was unique because the district had experienced no labor union activity or major strikes in recent years. Unlike coal miners, who were treated like serfs, workers on the Iron Range were "contented" since they received good pay and enjoyed many privileges. Waldon Fawcett observed in a *Century* article that iron ore miners were much more independent than men who worked in the coalfields because they could "desert the mines temporarily, and go into the harvest-fields in the Northwest, where they may make more money." Nonetheless, during this same period groups continued their efforts to organize the miners of the Iron Range, and Finnish immigrant Socialists emerged as leaders in calling for recognition of workers' rights. In virtually all cases their efforts were denounced by mining company officials and by most business people, newspaper publishers, and mainstream politicians in local communities.²⁹

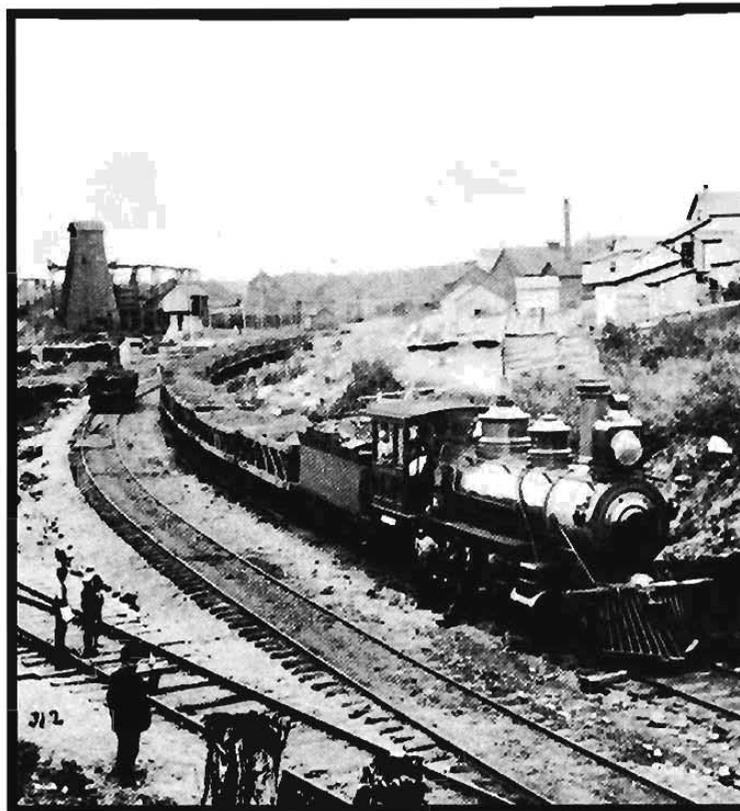
John Pengilly, the Oliver Mining Company captain from Ely, was among the most vigilant opponents of early labor union activists. Commenting on a Hibbing "Finlander" who was seeking to organize his Ely and Soudan compatriots in 1903, Pengilly informed Oliver president Thomas F. Cole that he had been successful in driving the man out of the Vermilion Range. Noting that the Finnish organizer had then retreated to the Mesabi, Pengilly warned Cole to "keep a look out for him and suppress him as soon as possible wherever he should turn up."³⁰

Labor difficulties broke out on the Vermilion in April, 1904, when about 600 men at the Chandler and Pioneer mines went on strike, just three months after Pengilly had resigned as mining captain and been replaced by Charles Trezona. Stating that wages and hours in both mines were satisfactory, the employees struck because they regarded Trezona as a brutal and harsh taskmaster who mistreated the laborers under his supervision. The strikers circulated a resolution stating that Trezona would be lynched if he failed to leave Ely

²⁹*Mesaba Ore and the Hibbing News*, Feb. 21, 1903, p. 4; Waldon Fawcett, "The Mining of Iron Ore," *Century*, March, 1901, p. 717.

³⁰John Pengilly to T. F. Cole, Jan. 20, 1903, Materials Relating to the Oliver Iron Mining Co. Despite Pengilly's antilabor stance and his efforts to flush out Finnish labor organizers, the *Ely Miner* claimed that relations between the mining captain and the men in his charge always had been favorable and that he especially was an admirer of the Finns; Jan. 1, 1904, p. 1.

³¹*Ely Miner*, April 22, p. 1, April 29, p. 1, May 13, p. 1—all 1904; *Eveleth Mining News*, April 22, 1904, p. 1; *Mesaba Ore and the Hibbing News*, April 23, p. 8, April 30, p. 8—both 1904; *Labor World*, April 30, 1904, p. 5; *Tower Weekly News*, April 22, p. 1, May 6, p. 1—both 1904; *Duluth Weekly Herald*, May 4, 1904, p. 9.



Ore-filled railroad cars at the Pioneer Mine near Ely, 1889, with workers' homes at right

within 24 hours. Ely's mayor, concerned that Trezona's life was in danger and that violence might erupt, closed all of the community's saloons. Meanwhile, Trezona fled by train from Ely to Duluth. A week later most of the workers expressed their desire to return to work, and the strikers announced that they would refrain from further hostilities. Company officials announced that the mines probably would not be reopened for a couple of months, however, until the "disturbing element" who initiated the strike could be removed. "As long as the kicking faction remains on the ground," claimed one report, it would not be prudent to resume mining—especially since so much stockpiled ore was already available for shipment. After returning to Ely, Trezona announced that he would be taking a long trip for the purpose of gaining some rest and relaxation.³¹

On the Mesabi, the *Virginia Enterprise* was reporting in early 1904 that pay reductions on the Iron Range were hitting laborers "a blow below the belt" but that the cutbacks had been "accepted with good grace, apparently, and no labor troubles are anticipated." Soon thereafter, however, a series of conflicts emerged that made 1904 stand out for its sheer number of separate strikes—at least 10. Indeed, virtually every week dur-



Charles Trezona, mining captain on the Vermilion Range in 1904

ing most of that summer a labor-related incident occurred somewhere on the range.³²

The focus for much of the labor agitation in 1904 was the Drake and Stratton Company, a firm that specialized in stripping away the topsoil or overburden that covered a large part of the Mesabi's ore deposits. When the company announced in June that wages would be reduced at the Fayal Mine by Eveleth, the laborers immediately stopped working. A clash between strikers and deputies under the charge of St. Louis County Sheriff William W. Butchart injured several strikers and led to the jailing of some participants; shortly thereafter, the company announced that operations at the site probably would not resume until late summer. Within a week the disruption ended after a group of Finns, Swedes, and Swede-Finns met at Eveleth's Finnish Socialist Hall and agreed to return to work if the size of the wage cut was reduced. The men reportedly were implored to seek a compromise after several of Eveleth's citizens claimed that the strike would hurt local businesses.³³

Drake and Stratton officials agreed to the compromise and proceeded to rehire most of the men—except for those whom it regarded as “agitators,” according to

the *Eveleth Mining News*. The company singled out the Finns for their participation and endeavored to reduce the numbers of Finnish immigrants in future employment situations. “In order to avoid the dangers that come from hiring one nationality predominantly,” reported the newspaper, “the management saw to it that the new labor force was mixed as far as that point is concerned.” The editor of Duluth's *Labor World*, pointing out that most newspapers in the region favored mining company policies, proposed an opposing view: “People may blame the poor, ignorant, imported Finlander miner for disregarding the law and turning upon his tyrant, but when they scratch deeper than the surface they will find that primarily their masters are responsible.”³⁴

Despite the seeming agreement that followed the June, 1904, strike, two months later 125 Drake and Stratton employees again left the Fayal Mine. This time the strikers claimed that Richard R. Trezona, superintendent of overall operations at the Fayal and brother of the Oliver Mining Co. supervisor in Ely, was responsible for the low wages that miners and laborers received on the range. Although Trezona protested that his superiors controlled the wage scale, the strikers, just as their colleagues had challenged his brother in Ely several months earlier, threatened him with personal injury if he did not leave Eveleth within two hours. (A Hibbing newspaper account reported that the strikers appeared to be especially “vicious” because of Trezona's overbearing nature.) To protect the superintendent, local officials deputized and armed a number of mining captains. Once passions had cooled, this strike, too, resulted in no changes that would benefit the miners, although an Eveleth newspaper acknowledged that \$1.60 per day was insufficient for men in a region where there was so much seasonal employment and where living costs were high. The *Duluth Weekly Herald* commented that many of the former workers had left for Dakota's wheat fields, thereby providing job openings and “room for a new class of men.”³⁵

Workers struck other Drake and Stratton operations during the summer of 1904. In early July, 50 men walked out at the Yates Mine by Buhl in an effort to increase their wages from \$1.75 to \$2.00 per day. A more serious altercation occurred at the Stevenson Mine west of Hibbing when laborers protested the dis-

³²*Virginia Enterprise*, Jan. 9, 1904, p. 4.

³³Here and below, see *Mesaba Ore and the Hibbing News*, June 4, 1904, p. 1; *Eveleth Mining News*, June 10, 1904, p. 1; *Duluth Weekly Herald*, June 8, 1904, p. 1.

³⁴*Labor World*, June 11, 1904, p. 1.

³⁵*Eveleth Mining News*, Aug. 5, p. 1, Aug. 12, p. 1—both 1904; *Mesaba Ore and the Hibbing News*, Aug. 6, 1904, p. 4; *Duluth Weekly Herald*, Aug. 17, 1904, p. 6.

charge of an Italian foreman. The strikers, most of whom were Italians, Finns, and South Slavs, reportedly harassed the "loyal employees" who wished to continue working. To reduce tensions, officials closed the local saloon and brought the county sheriff and 42 deputies to the scene. The presence of so many armed men supposedly quelled the "enthusiasm" of the strikers, and within a week they were back at work. Other strikes during that year included the brief walkouts at McKinley's La Belle Mine and at the Duluth and Rust mines by Biwabik and Hibbing, respectively. Around Thanksgiving time at the Monroe-Tener and Leonard mines by Chisholm, according to a Duluth newspaper, some Finns had "stirred . . . up" the laborers and encouraged them to quit their jobs until they secured better pay. The mining company did not honor the request, however, and by early December stripping work at both mines was under way once again.³⁸

An increasing number of speakers who preached the gospel of socialism began to appear on the range during the summer of 1904. Anticapitalistic viewpoints did not suddenly appear in northeastern Minnesota at this time, of course: ever since the 1880s labor-rights advocates, intellectuals, and political reformers had been discussing Socialist ideas with increasing frequency throughout America. Eugene Debs had received 96,000 votes as the Socialist candidate for president in 1900 and would garner 402,000 in 1904; America's Socialist party was formed in 1901; the first St. Louis County meeting of that party took place in Duluth in 1902; and Minnesota's Socialists put up their first slate of nominees for state office in early 1904. Furthermore, the Iron Range had already begun to emerge as an important locus for Finnish immigrant Socialists who were disenchanted with the working conditions they encountered throughout the Lake Superior mining region. Martin Hendrickson, a highly visible Finnish agitator, arrived from Seattle in early August to address his immigrant colleagues.³⁷

³⁸*Mesaba Ore and the Hibbing News*, July 2, p. 1, July 9, p. 8, Nov. 26, p. 1, Dec. 3, p. 1—all 1904; *Eveleth Mining News*, Aug. 12, 1904, p. 1; *Duluth Weekly Herald*, Oct. 12, p. 5, Oct. 19, p. 5, Nov. 30, p. 5—all 1904.

³⁷*Duluth Weekly Herald*, Aug. 10, p. 3, Aug. 17, p. 5—both 1904; *Eveleth Mining News*, Nov. 4, 1904, p. 1; *Labor World*, Oct. 25, 1902, p. 1, Jan. 30, 1904, p. 5, Feb. 27, 1904, p. 1; Timo Riippa, "The Finns and Swede-Finns," in *They Chose Minnesota*, ed. Holmquist, 308–311.

³⁶Holmquist et al., "The South Slavs," 387; Berman, "Education for Work and Labor Solidarity," 31–33.

³⁵Here and below, see *Duluth Weekly Herald*, Jan. 11, p. 6, April 26, p. 6, May 10, p. 6, June 28, p. 5—all 1905; Betten, "Strike on the Mesabi," 341; Berman, "Education for Work and Labor Solidarity," 38; Virtue, "Minnesota Iron Ranges," 394–396.

In addition to Finnish activity, a group of "progressive" Slovenians formed the Slovene National Benefit Society (SNPJ) in 1904, a left-of-center political organization that contrasted with the more conservative fraternal lodges formed some years earlier. On a more limited scale, the new Slovenian organization played a similar role to the Socialist clubs then being formed by the Finns. Although the Finns and Slovenians could hardly speak to one another because of the language barrier that separated them, the two groups did cooperate. Finns helped Slovenians to organize Socialist clubs, and the Finnish workers' halls were used by the Slovenians for meetings; the groups also sponsored May Day events together.³⁸

THE IRON Range Socialist movement continued to grow throughout 1905. Victor Kosonen, the editor of *Työmies*, a Finnish-language Socialist newspaper then published in Hancock, Michigan, arrived on the Iron Range in January and held meetings in several communities. Shortly thereafter the Finns asked the Western Federation of Miners to send organizers to the range. By this time, Finnish Socialists and representatives from other immigrant groups had begun to direct their pleas to radical unions like the WFM because they realized that the more conservative, craft-oriented American Federation of Labor was not interested in organizing unskilled ethnic workers. C. G. Kennison, a battle-tested field representative of the WFM from Colorado, arrived in Hibbing during April and immediately began to talk to miners about organizing a local branch of the union. By early May the chapter in Eveleth had 250 members and the one in Buhl had 50.³⁹

The organizers claimed that by July, 1905, they had organized additional chapters in Chisholm, McKinley, Sparta, and Virginia and altogether had signed up some 1,000 members, but this total was still a small portion of a work force that approached 13,000 men. George O. Virtue, who reviewed social and economic conditions in the district before 1909 for the United States Department of Labor, claimed that the WFM's discouraging early results were caused by the language barrier, by laborers' failure to understand union objectives, and by inefficient and even dishonest union officers. Historian Hyman Berman has noted that few Finns and Slavs joined the WFM because its early organizational activities were conducted in English. While many newspapers in the region were ambivalent about these attempts to organize local miners, the *Virginia Enterprise* asserted that several of the federation's objectives were laudable: the use of arbitration to settle labor disputes; the call for a minimum wage of two dollars per day for common laborers; and financial

practices that prevented officials from living off the funds of members."

Labor skirmishes marked the opening of the 1905 shipping season in April, including a tragic incident in the middle of that month when two strikers were killed by gunfire. The altercation started at Hibbing's Hull, Rust, and Sellers mines after common laborers sought to boost their daily wages from \$1.75 to \$2.00 per day. These demands were followed by those of the miners, who wished to increase their pay from 62 to 72 cents for each car of iron ore loaded. Soon after some 200 to 300 men had dropped their tools and left the mines, two of the protesters (a Finn and a Swede-Finn) were shot and killed, probably by sheriff's deputies who were brought in to guard company property and to allow nonstrikers to work. The protesters marched to other sites in the area and succeeded in involving about 1,500 men by shutting down the Agnew, Albany, Burt, and Mahoning mines; operations in Buhl and Chisholm were also affected. In Chisholm about 200 men gathered in the local Finnish hall and then descended upon the Shenango Mine, where they were met by mining superintendent D. C. Peacock and eight armed deputies who reportedly "frightened" them away. The group then marched to the Croxton Mine and tied up operations there, but efforts to close down the nearby Myers Mine were curtailed by sheriff's deputies who had been forewarned about their arrival. Peacock later established a "dead line" at the Shenango, asserting that strikers who crossed over the marker placed their lives in jeopardy.⁴¹

Some local observers believed that the protesters left themselves with little room for negotiation since the mining companies had enough stockpiled ore to satisfy most of their contracts for 1905. Indeed, just over a week after the struggle began, the Hibbing strikers lowered the flag they were flying at the Finnish Temperance Hall and returned to their jobs. Under a headline noting that "the strike is broken," the *Hibbing Tribune* castigated the strikers—especially those Finns who had played a leadership role: "It has been noticeable that the workmen who have been the most willing tools of these trouble breeders are a class of the most ignorant foreigners, mostly Finns, who are not married and have little desire to work at any price, as long as they get their board." The coroner's jury convened to rule on the two deaths decided that unknown persons had killed the men while they were "actively engaged in a riot" where several hundred people had been throwing stones and missiles and firing guns. Individuals who engaged in such activities, sternly warned the *Ely Miner*, placed their lives in their own hands.⁴²

Despite the contentiousness, by early May the newspapers reported that the deputies had departed and the men were back at work. In June a state mining official announced that all labor problems on the range seemed

to have vanished: "The employes as far as can be seen are contented. They are getting good wages, and are not complaining of their condition." WFM organizer Kennison, who claimed the union had no connection with Socialists, concluded that the April strike had been due to "the frenzied movement of an unorganized mob." In late 1905 local leaders for the WFM asserted that no one on the range was even talking about labor disorder and that the membership was opposed to strikes. WFM leaders made plans to publish a semi-monthly newspaper for the Minnesota district, entitled the *Worker*, but it appears to have had no more than a short life at best.⁴³

In spite of the WFM's limited membership at the time, mining company officials kept a watchful eye on its activities. Observing that 12 employees from the Oliver and Chandler mines at Ely had joined the union by August, 1905, Charles Trezona wrote to Thomas Cole to say that he did not know if anything could be done about such actions, but "if you have suggestions . . . I shall be glad to hear from you." By the summer of 1906, according to historian Berman, most WFM units were little more than "paper locals." The lack of meaningful organizational activity was demonstrated by the small number of strikes during the year. Workers briefly walked out of the Miller Mine near Aurora to protest a new company ruling requiring them to remain underground for an entire 12-hour shift rather than being allowed to come up to the surface an hour earlier to change their clothes; the conflict was resolved when the miners were allowed to return to their former practice. At Aurora's Mohawk Mine some miners defied company policy by choosing to blast down ore late in the workday just before returning to the surface. After the mining captain discharged a few of the offenders, they allegedly returned to the operation in a drunken state and tried to drive away the other workers. Two leaders were arrested and given \$25 fines.⁴⁴

⁴¹*Virginia Enterprise*, Oct. 13, 1905, p. 1. Although no figures are available for the number of employees on the Iron Range in 1905, the June, 1906, count approached 13,000 men (Minnesota Bureau of Labor, *Tenth Biennial Report* [Minneapolis: Harrison and Smith, 1907], 454).

⁴²*Mesaba Ore and the Hibbing News*, April 15, p. 1, 8, April 22, p. 1—both 1905; *Duluth Weekly Herald*, April 19, p. 8, April 26, p. 6—both 1905; *Virginia Enterprise*, April 14, p. 1, April 21, p. 1, April 28, p. 1—all 1905.

⁴³*Hibbing Tribune*, April 20, 1905, p. 1; *Mesaba Ore and the Hibbing News*, April 15, p. 8, April 22, p. 1—both 1905; *Ely Miner*, May 12, 1905, p. 1.

⁴⁴*Duluth Weekly Herald*, June 21, p. 7, Dec. 13, p. 5, Dec. 27, p. 6—all 1905; *Labor World*, April 22, 1905, p. 1.

⁴⁵Berman, "Education for Work and Labor Solidarity," 38; Trezona to Cole, Aug. 7, 1905, Materials Relating to the Oliver Iron Mining Co.; *Virginia Enterprise*, Mar. 9, 1906, p. 8; *Duluth Weekly Herald*, Mar. 7, p. 1, Sept. 12, p. 6—both 1906.

No action that transpired during the earliest years of the 20th century would have a more positive impact upon the lives of Iron Range workers than the mine inspection bill that became law on April 13, 1905. It was sponsored by John Saari, whom an Eveleth newspaper described as "a Finn by birth but an American by adoption"; the 27-year-old state representative had been elected to the legislature only a few months earlier. After the bill was enacted and the Minnesota Bureau of Labor began to gather accurate data, the human price that was being paid to mine the state's red ore deposits became starkly evident. For calendar year 1906 alone, the first full year when accurate figures were recorded, 116 workers were killed in the mines of St. Louis County—a horrendous fatality rate of nine men per 1,000 employees. Both figures remain as the highest annual totals ever registered on the Iron Range. Although the numbers improved in subsequent years, the overall fatality rate for Minnesota's mines from 1906 to 1910 was still greater than that for mines in Michigan or in the United States as a whole, as well as for those in Russia, Germany, Japan, Britain, France, and the worldwide average. The mine inspection legislation, when coupled with "Safety First" programs implemented by many companies throughout the nation after 1910, eventually helped to reduce the death toll. Nonetheless, three single Iron Range disasters in 1911, 1918, and 1924 would kill a total of 70 men, and hundreds of other miners died in smaller incidents before



John Saari, about 1915

the Great Depression. After 1930, sharp reductions in iron ore output and employment numbers would contribute to commensurate declines in fatality rates and figures.⁴⁵

Few strikes were conducted in 1906, but two noteworthy events that year set the stage for the major Mesabi conflict that would break out one year later. WFM leaders sent Teofilo Petriella, an Italian immigrant with consummate skills as a labor organizer, to the range. Petriella's efforts were aided, according to historian Douglas J. Ollila, by the groundwork that the Finns had already prepared; Petriella had also demonstrated recent success in organizing many of northern Michigan's Finnish copper miners. In one of his first actions in Minnesota, Petriella replaced the English-speaking leaders of the local unions with immigrants and divided the range into Finnish, Italian, and Slavic sections.⁴⁶

The other major event of 1906 was an early August meeting in Hibbing that led to the formation of the Finnish Socialist Federation or *Suomalainen Sosialistijärjestö* (SSJ). This session represented the culmination of five years of effort by Finnish radical leaders to tap the class-consciousness of their immigrant counterparts and to merge it with America's Socialist party. The Hibbing meeting brought together Finnish delegates

⁴⁵Virginia Enterprise, Mar. 10, 1905, p. 4; Eveleth Mining News, Sept. 2, 1904, p. 1; Larry D. Lankton and Jack K. Martin, "Technological Advance, Organizational Structure, and Underground Fatalities in the Upper Michigan Copper Mines, 1860–1929," *Technology and Culture* 28 (Jan., 1987): 65. Information on mining fatalities has been derived from the biennial reports of the Minnesota Bureau of Labor (1905–20) and of the Industrial Commission of Minnesota (1921–30). The comparison between Minnesota and other areas of the world is found in the *Twelfth Biennial Report* (1909–10), 203, and the fatality rates for Michigan are listed in Virtue, "Minnesota Iron Ranges," 371. Data in the first 17 years of reports on Minnesota's mining fatalities were given by fiscal year (July 1–June 30). The author has reorganized the specific listings of individual deaths to derive the calendar-year figures.

⁴⁶Here and below, see Douglas J. Ollila, Jr., "From Socialism to Industrial Unionism (IWW): Social Factors in the Emergence of Left-Labor Radicalism among Finnish Workers on the Mesabi, 1911–19," in *The Finnish Experience in the Western Great Lakes Region: New Perspectives*, ed. Michael G. Karni, Matti E. Kaups, and Douglas J. Ollila, Jr. (Turku, Finland: Institute for Migration, 1975), 156–158; Michael G. Karni, "Finnish Immigrant Leftists in America: The Golden Years, 1900–1918," in *Struggle a Hard Battle: Essays on Working-Class Immigrants*, ed. Dirk Hoerder (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), 207–210; Betten, "Strike on the Mesabi," 341; Riiippa, "Finns and Swede-Finns," 308.

from throughout the country, including agitators, intellectual radicals, and representatives from local clubs, newspapers, and various regional and national groups. With the formation of the SSJ, Finnish radical leaders believed that immigrant Socialists could play a major role in changing the political structure of America so as to secure favorable concessions for laborers. The Finns were the first foreign-language chapter to join the American Socialist party, and they soon became its largest immigrant group.

IN 1906, the year that Socialist C. G. Rothfuss was elected to the mayor's position in the Lake Superior port city of Two Harbors, Hibbing's Socialist party mayoral candidate G. F. Peterson received 71 votes in a losing cause. By early 1907 the Hibbing organization felt strong enough to place eight nominees—three Finns, three Americans, one Italian, and one South Slav—on the Hibbing village ballot, with Petriella as the candidate for mayor. Primarily because of their strong stand against vice, the Socialist party chapter in Hibbing was joined by Finnish Socialists, the village's two Finnish temperance societies, the local WFM chapter, the steam-shovel men, and members of the

Two Harbors' Socialist mayor C. G. Rothfuss



Sons of Columbus. Although the *Duluth News Tribune* correctly concluded that the Socialists would not win the election, it predicted that they would "make trouble for all other candidates." The Socialists did go down to defeat, but in just six years a non-Socialist candidate named Victor Power would claim victory in the mayor's race by advocating a similar progressive platform.⁴⁵

By early 1907 the WFM had close to 2,500 members on the range. The union continued to sponsor speakers, including executive board member Frank Smelzner, who called for the emancipation of labor by promoting greater unity within the working class. Although 14 local chapters were in place by June, a sudden strike of non-WFM dock workers in Duluth and Superior on July 16 curtailed further efforts to expand the membership. Because this strike threatened to draw attention away from the Mesabi, WFM leaders hastily called a miners' strike on July 19—even though the organization was not ready to engage in such a massive endeavor. The Mesabi strikers demanded an eight-hour workday, the termination of petty bribes and kickbacks to foremen who decided which laborers would mine the high-grade ores, and a small increase in the minimum wage (open-pit laborers to receive \$2.50 per day, underground miners and firemen \$3.00, and engineers \$5.00).⁴⁶

Despite the major impact that the shutdown had upon the entire Iron Range, the strikers ultimately failed. Moreover, the Oliver Mining Co. and other firms took actions after the strike that would change the political and social climate of the range for years to come. Many Finns who had served as radical and active strike participants were blacklisted, and significant numbers moved from the mining communities to the backwoods of the Lake Superior region where they established farming enclaves. Although Finnish immigrants would continue to form a large part of the Iron Range labor force after 1907, sociologist Paul H. Landis noted three decades later that the strike had served to "erect a barrier of animosity between Finns and the mining companies."⁴⁷

WORKERS on Minnesota's Iron Range conducted at least 50 separate strikes and walkouts before 1907, but all were limited in magnitude and duration. While these incidents are relatively little known and poorly documented, they provided the context for later events

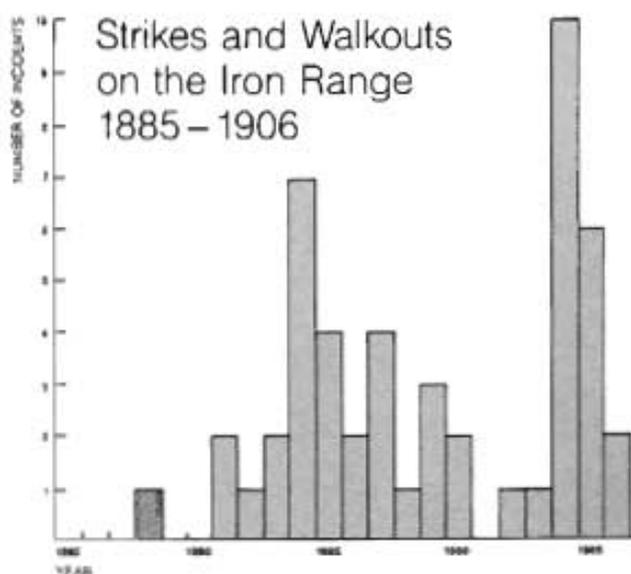
⁴⁵Berman, "Education for Work and Labor Solidarity," 33-34; *Duluth News Tribune*, Mar. 14, 1906, p. 4, Feb. 14, 1907, p. 3, Feb. 24, 1907, p. 6, Feb. 27, 1907, p. 3.

⁴⁶*Duluth Weekly Herald*, Mar. 20, 1907, p. 6; Karni, "Finnish Socialist Federation," 74-75; Betten, "Strike on the Mesabi," 342.

⁴⁷Landis, *Three Iron Mining Towns: A Study in Cultural Change* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Edwards Brothers, 1938), 110.

and strategies that would occur and be used on the range. Immigrant miners and laborers, as they became increasingly class conscious in their new homeland, familiarized themselves with the basic outlines of political and social organization and even realized some Progressive era reforms; iron mining company executives discovered that by making small concessions to laborers, their primary concern—the prospect of independent unions and collective bargaining agreements—could be delayed for years; and county and state officials tested the limits of armed force, sometimes with tragic results, as they intervened during labor altercations. On the whole, however, northeastern Minnesota never experienced the beatings, lynchings, and large-scale loss of life that so often accompanied strikes in the coalfields of Appalachia and especially in the hard-rock mining districts of the Rocky Mountains. Likewise, there is no single tragedy to compare to the deaths of 73 children and women at Calumet, Michigan, in late 1913 during an especially contentious strike between the WFM and several copper mining companies. (The catastrophe resulted when a false fire alarm disrupted a Christmas party that was being held in the community's Italian Hall for the benefit of the strikers' children.)³⁰

Although the labor conflicts on the Iron Range during the late 19th and early 20th centuries may have failed to attract the widespread attention received by strikes elsewhere in the nation, animosity between workers and management continued to fester in northern Minnesota after 1907, bursting forth once again in 1916. After that strike ended with few concessions being granted to employees, the Iron Range was soon caught up in the political extremism of the late World War I years (1917–18), a period that severely limited progress in the labor arena. The nation's worst domestic conflicts during the war took place in Minnesota and Wisconsin and several western and Great Plains states, according to historian John Milton Cooper. The federal Trading with the Enemy Act of 1917 and the Alien and



Sedition acts of 1918 severely restricted radical organizations throughout the nation. In 1917 the state legislature created the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety for the purpose of curtailing labor and agricultural disruptions (by groups like the Industrial Workers of the World and the Nonpartisan League) and eliminating public dissent in areas (like the Iron Range) that were considered to be hotbeds of radical activity. Thereafter, the range would see only minimal labor activism until the late 1930s, when federal New Deal legislation authorized independent unions and collective bargaining.³¹

Current historiography of early labor developments on Minnesota's Iron Range might lead one to believe that all important activities were concentrated around 1907 and 1916. When the situation is viewed within a broader temporal context, however, the two strikes appear as the most noticeable flashpoints in a progression of labor-related developments that began in the late 1880s and ended with World War I. Any interpretation of Iron Range history demands recognition of multiple factors and sufficiently broad time scales—whether one considers the complex phenomena associated with settlement, immigration, economics, politics, or labor issues.

The illustrations on p. 256 and 257 are from the Grace Lee Nute collection, Northeast Minnesota Historical Center; Saari's portrait is from *Men of Minnesota*, 1915. All others are in the MHS collections.

³⁰The most recent interpretation of the northern Michigan copper strike may be found in Arthur W. Thurner, *Rebels on the Range: The Michigan Copper Miner's Strike of 1913-1914* (Lake Linden, Mich.: John H. Forster Press, 1984).

³¹John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Pivotal Decades: The United States, 1900-1920* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 298; Carl H. Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty: The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety during World War I* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991), 60-64; Riippa, "Finns and Swede-Finns," 310.



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