



The rise and fall of the Butte Miners Union 1878-1914  
by Norma Smith

A THESIS Submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Applied Science  
Montana State University  
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Abstract:

The Butte Miners Union, founded in 1878, was once one of the oldest and largest local unions in the United State. It was violently destroyed in 1914 by the clash of several forces fighting for control. Its growth, the concurrent development of those forces, and its consequent destruction are the themes of this paper.

The Butte Union was for more than twenty-five years a unified employee organisation in a mining camp of rival employers fighting for political and financial advantage. Such a situation-allowed the union to grow unhampered but also established a pattern of company domination and union corruption, When the Anaconda Copper Mining Company finally bought out its rivals it was able to exploit this weakness in the union. In the meantime, however, the union became the founder of many other labor groups, in particular the Western Federation of Miners, in which the Butte Union became Local No. 1. In turn the W.F.M. founded the Industrial Workers of the World. But when the I.W.W. was captured by syndicalists the W.F.M. withdre from it; extreme hostility developed between the two. The Socialist Party was also a factor; for a time it controlled both Butte and the union, but lost the union offices to a conservative group accused by many of being controlled by the Anaconda Company. The W.F.M. leadership, because of enmity to the I.W.W. (which also attacked the conservatives), was forced into a position of supporting union officers and thus appearing to be pro-Company, an attitude unpopular in Butte. In the meantime, while the union was in turmoil because of conflict among these forces—the Company, the W.F.M., the I.W.W. and the Socialist Party--notting was done for the individual miner. The average miner, therefore, became apathetic to the union.

When an insurgent group, led by socialists and I.W.W. sympathizers, tried to wrest control from the conservatives, violence resulted. The miners deserted both the local and the W.F.M.

A new union was formed, but violence, espionage, and unemployment brought about martial law and the crushing of the new union as well as the death of the old.

PERMANENT RECORD

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BUTTE MINERS' UNION,  
1878-1914

by

NORMA SMITH

A THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

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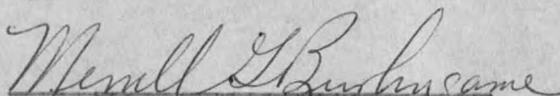
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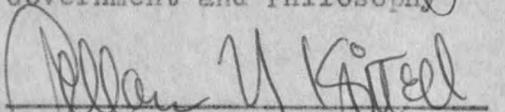
Master of Science in Applied Science

at

Montana State College

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June, 1961

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When an insurgent group, led by socialists and I.W.W. sympathizers, tried to wrest control from the conservatives, violence resulted. The miners deserted both the local and the W.F.M. A new union was formed, but violence, espionage, and unemployment brought about martial law and the crushing of the new union as well as the death of the old.

I  
INTRODUCTION

The original Butte Miners' Union, founded in 1878, developed in a more advantageous environment than did most labor unions of the time. It grew to such size and importance that it became a battleground for many forces seeking control. In 1914 the clash of these forces violently destroyed it.

The union derived significance from the size and wealth of the Butte copper mines: "the richest hill on earth," according to a local saying. Between 1878 and 1914 Butte and environs (Silver Bow County) grew from a population of about 3000 to 60,000. Butte is situated in western Montana just a few miles west of the continental divide; it was in those days the metropolis of the northern Rocky Mountains. To find larger cities one had to go 400 miles south to Salt Lake City, 1000 miles east to Minneapolis, or 500 west to Seattle. Until about 1910 even Spokane was smaller than Butte.

Butte's overwhelming size in relation to the rest of Montana gave the city a prominent political role: its population was roughly one-sixth that of the state. Montana itself was still frontier territory; memories of Indian wars (Chief Joseph's war in 1877 and the Custer massacre in 1876) were still fresh when the Butte Miners' Union was organized. There were a few stock ranches and scattered farms, but agriculture did not become prominent until about the turn of the century; Montana in those days was primarily

mining country.

The Miners' Union was perhaps the oldest organized group in the state. Indeed, contemporary writers believed it to be one of the oldest, and possibly the largest, local unions in the United States. It grew from an initial membership of 261 to perhaps 8000 in 1910, its best year; it probably always numbered more than one-tenth the population of Butte. In the Western Federation of Miners, which it helped found, it was by far the largest, as well as oldest, local. The Butte local, in fact, comprised from one-fourth to one-third the W.F.M. membership.

For more than thirty years the Butte Miners' Union had a peaceful life; in this it differed from the rest of the American labor movement. The depression of the 1870's nearly wiped out organized labor; in the next decade, however, the labor movement began to grow rapidly; by 1914 it involved more than 2,000,000 men. This growth was accompanied by a great deal of struggle. People were killed at Haymarket and Homestead, in the Pennsylvania anthracite strike, and elsewhere. Nearer home, the W.F.M. fought bitter and losing struggles in Idaho, Colorado, South Dakota, Michigan, and Utah. Yet the Butte Miners' Union never had a strike.

The Butte Union differed also in that, for most of the period, Butte labor was English-speaking. The Butte immigrants were mainly Irish and Cornish; however much they disliked each other because of old world political and religious differences, they at least spoke

















































































































































































































