

BLACK LABOR AND BLACK DIAMONDS

The great soft coal strike is on. Over 200,000 organized miners in the Central Competitive Field of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and Western Pennsylvania have dropped their tools and left their accustomed places in the bowels of the earth. It promises to be a rather long struggle and whichever side wins, the result is likely to be somewhat disastrous in that it will destroy much of the business of the operators and may seriously cripple the miners' organization. Yet there was no other alternative. Flushed with profits, the operators have decided to crush the workers' organization for all time by their well known methods, viz., the open shop, hired gunmen, injunction-serving judges and starvation. The miners' union could do nothing less than to fight bitterly for the standard of wages and conditions of work so laboriously attained throughout the years. In this great struggle black and white union miners are marching side by side.

As in the great steel strike of 1919, the dominant factor in this struggle is the recently arrived Negro migrant who constitutes the backbone of the industry in the non-union soft coal fields. Thousands of them have been brought into the great soft coal fields of West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee, herded into company houses, handed out company paternalism and paid from two to three dollars less per day than union men. For some years there has been a struggle on the surface between the operators in the Southern and the Northern fields. Under the surface, however, there was no struggle at all, since through interlocking directorates the larger companies in both fields are controlled by the same people. Great efforts have been made by the operators to develop the Southern field because it is non-union and because there is a ready supply there of black and white workers, ignorant of their best interests and how to protect them. The United States Bureau of Mines estimates that from 25 per cent of the nation's output of soft coal, the production in the non-union Southern field has leaped to over 65 per cent. Thus the Southern field grows in importance while the Northern field declines, yet it is the Northern field and its militant, organized miners with their higher wages and better working conditions that sets the standard for the Southern. If the union miner did not get six dollars a day, the non-union miner would not get four, so on all along the scales of wages and conditions of work.

As the situation stands today, the black worker can make or break either the operators or the miners' union. The future of the soft coal industry rests in the hands of the Negro. With the cessation of work in the Northern field, production will naturally increase in the Southern field. From 65 per cent of the total soft coal output, the production in this field may increase easily to 80 or 90 per cent. This means that if the underpaid non-union Negro workers in the West Virginia-Kentucky-Tennessee field, along with their "scabbing" white fellow workers, do not make common cause with the organized black and white workers to the North, the unions are doomed to defeat. And let it not be forgotten that in defeating the unions, the non-union miners are delivering themselves a body blow since their scale of wages is based on that of the organized men.

One of the tragedies of this conflict is the fact that its significance is practically lost to the average so-called educated Negro in the Southern coal field. Or when its significance is realized, this Negro, by and large, is too mendacious or cowardly to give the obviously proper advice. Those that are not owned body and soul by the operators, remain silent for economic reason. Here is a momentous struggle in which organized laborers are fighting grimly for decent wages, and proper protection on the job—both black and white unionists, if you please. A victory for the union means increased membership, greater prestige, and a nearer approach to the American standard of living for all miners. A victory for the operators means an extension of industrial feudalism, the further spread of the open shop, the lowering of wages and the general decline of living standards. The black miners in the non-union field will decide the issue.