



Strike on the Mesabi: 1907

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*A typical iron range
mine worker of the
early twentieth century*

STRIKE

on the MESABI—1907

NEIL BETTEN

WHEN NEWS CAME in July, 1907, that miners along the length of the Mesabi Range had walked off the job, the state of Minnesota braced itself for all-out labor war. It was the first widespread, organized strike to occur in the iron district, and it was engineered by the Western Federation of Miners, an organization associated in the public mind with names like Coeur d'Alene, Leadville, and Cripple Creek—each the scene of fierce and bloody labor struggles.

In the fifteen years since 1892 the Mesabi Range had been transformed from a wilderness of wooded hills into a mining complex that produced nearly half of the nation's iron ore. The soft red hematite lying in pockets near the surface could be scooped up from great open pits. Into these, and into underground mines as well, had poured whole armies of unskilled workers. Youth, health, and a strong back were all that was called for—not even the language was necessary—and before long the first wave of miners, made up of

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Americans, Cornishmen, French Canadians, Irish, Scandinavians, and some Finns, was replaced by a throng of more recent immigrants. After 1900 these came largely from eastern and southern Europe: Italians, Poles, Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Montenegrins, Bulgarians, Greeks — and more Finns. Mutually suspicious, and speaking a very babel of languages, they crowded into the bleak mining camps of the Mesabi.¹

Like other unskilled workers, the miners were virtually ignored by the American Federation of Labor with its emphasis on unionization along craft lines. Their organization was left instead to the unions of the radical wing who saw industrial society in terms of inevitable class conflict. Among these was the Western Federation of Miners, which had been formed in 1893 as a reaction to a violent strike in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Following a pattern that came to typify labor relations in the western mining states, the Coeur d'Alene strike involved pitched battles between strikers and company guards, intervention of local vigilantes, the use of state militia, and, finally, the importation of federal troops, who broke the strike by interning workers in a virtual concentration camp. Thus reality to the WFM was not the conciliatory world of Samuel Gompers and the

¹ John Sirjamaki, "The People of the Mesabi Range," in *Minnesota History*, 27:204 (September, 1946).

² Quoted in Paul F. Brissenden, *The I.W.W., A Study of American Syndicalism*, 43 (New York, 1957).

³ Though important to both, the association between the WFM and the IWW lasted little more than a year. See Brissenden, *The I.W.W.*, 104, 122, 149–151.

⁴ *Official Proceedings of the Fifteenth Annual Convention of the Western Federation of Miners*, 136–140, 187 (Denver, Colorado, 1907).

⁵ *Labor World* (Duluth), August 31, 1907, p. 6. Unless otherwise noted, all newspaper citations in this article occur on front pages. Union membership on the range was reported as 1,232 on April 1, 1907; on June 3 Petriella claimed 2,500 members. *Official Proceedings . . . of the Western Federation of Miners*, 189. The antiunion *Virginia Enterprise*, July 19, 1907, p. 10, listed membership as five or six thousand; the antiunion *Virginian*, August 23, 1907, estimated nine thousand.

AFL. The preamble to the WFM constitution declared that "the class struggle will continue until the producer is recognized as the sole master of his product; . . . an industrial union and the concerted political action of all wage workers is the only method of attaining this end."² In 1905 the miners' federation played a crucial role in the formation of the "one big union" that hoped to overthrow capitalism—the Industrial Workers of the World.³

That very summer, in response to repeated requests on the part of local Finnish socialists, the WFM sent its first organizers to Minnesota. The invitation, together with an outbreak of scattered strike activity on the iron range earlier in the year, promised favorable results. At first, however, the promise was not fulfilled. By 1906 membership was still insignificant. The American organizers and the appointed American leaders of the locals were not representative of iron range labor; they could speak neither for the workers nor to them.⁴

IN 1906 the WFM changed its approach and sent Teofilo Petriella, an Italian socialist of six years' residence in the United States, to head the organization drive on the range. Petriella at once recruited immigrant miners for positions of leadership. He divided each range local into three sections—Italian, Slavic, and Finnish—and placed a man of corresponding nationality in charge of each group. By June, 1907, a sizable organization had taken shape, with fourteen locals federated in a district union.⁵ No crystal ball was needed to see that a confrontation with the mine owners would soon occur nor to see that the union's leading adversary would be the Oliver Iron Mining Company, a subsidiary of the United States Steel Corporation and the main ore producer on the Mesabi Range.

The approaching conflict was foreshadowed by the exuberance of iron range radicals in the weeks preceding the strike. At a picnic of the Finnish Temperance Society in Mesaba on June 24 a leftist Finn

"launched forth into an anarchistic tirade against government, and continued his abuse all down the line," according to the *Mesaba Ore* of July 6. The same paper reported that in Eveleth on Independence Day an "anarchistic ranter" declared in a street-corner oration that the president of the United States should be shot. Several days later in Virginia the Finnish socialists held a picnic and a parade in which the red flag was conspicuous.⁶ With ill-concealed concern the range newspapers attempted to discount strike rumors. "Talk of a strike this season is entirely without foundation," declared the *Virginia Enterprise* on July 19, "and . . . the men connected with the Western Federation have no idea of instituting trouble of any kind."

The next day the strike was called. The initiative, however, was not with the union. While a strike had been in the planning stage for some time, the immediate cause seems to have been the discharge by Oliver of two hundred union men at its Mountain Iron Mine. The mines had been slowed down and many were closed because of a dock strike at Duluth, which was tying up lake shipping. Thus layoffs had been general

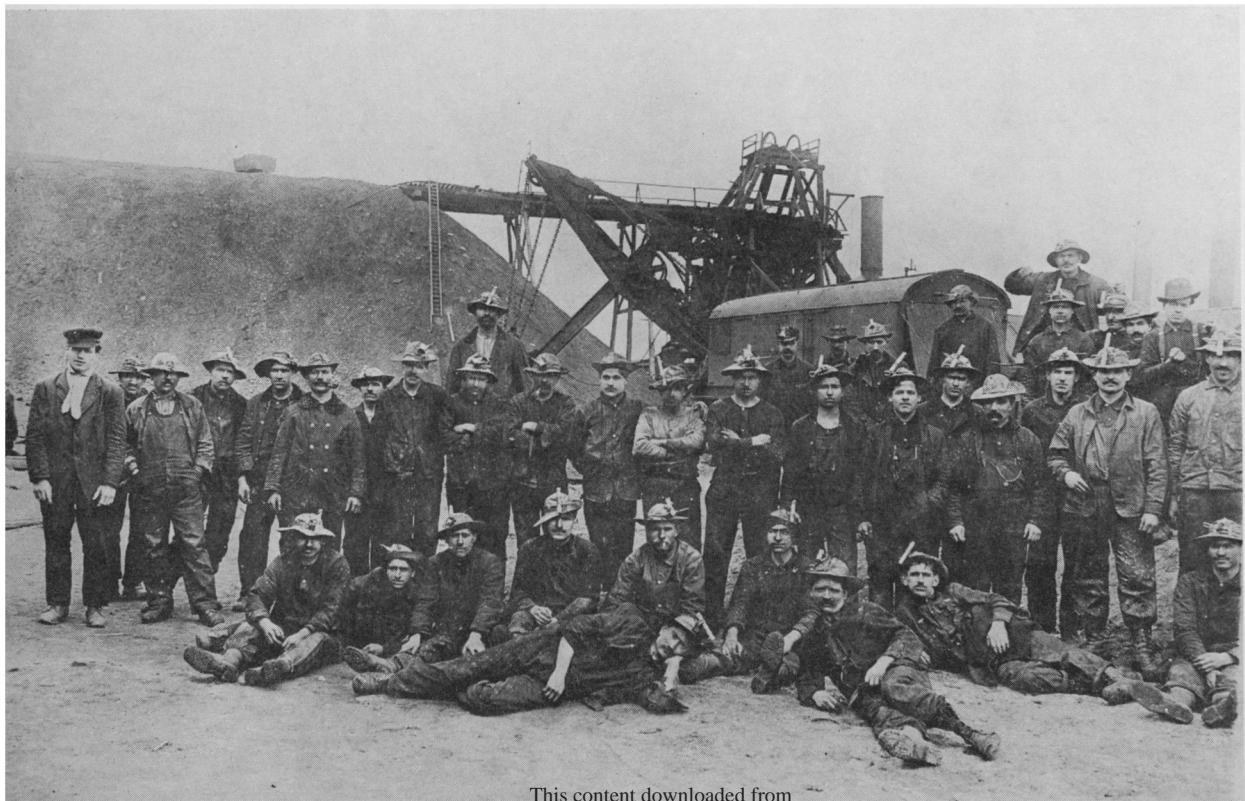
on the range, but when the Mountain Iron Mine discharged only its union men the challenge was clear. The strike was called in self-defense for union recognition — which in this case meant survival.⁷

At Duluth Petriella presented the Oliver officials with a number of additional union demands. These included payment of wages by the day rather than under the prevailing contract system, according to which payment depended on the amount of ore produced. The union also asked small wage increases, an eight-hour day, and the ending of kickbacks to foremen who determined which men would work the seams of high-grade ore. The strike notice, issued on July 20 in the name of the Minnesota district of the Western Federation of Miners read simply, "strike but no violence."

⁶ *Virginian*, July 12, 1907, p. 2.

⁷ *Virginia Enterprise*, July 19, 1907; *Labor World*, August 31, 1907, p. 6; *Duluth News Tribune*, July 18, 20, 1907. The *Duluth News Tribune*, July 18, 1907, p. 3, reported that two hundred Finnish employees of Oliver were dismissed on July 17 because of their "Socialistic tendencies," but the *Virginia Enterprise* on July 19 said that this story was "without foundation." The exact sequence of events remains in doubt, since company and union records are unavailable for study.

A crew of Minnesota underground miners



It was posted on all roads leading to Oliver mines.⁸

The strikers numbered somewhere between ten and sixteen thousand. The exact figure is unknown, because at the same time many men were laid off. In all, some seventeen thousand were out of work.⁹ For the most part these range laborers had little experience with a large-scale strike organized by a stable union. Previous walkouts in the mines had been mainly sporadic and unplanned reactions to local grievances. In most cases, also, the immigrants had little or no background of union activity in Europe. A majority of those striking—as many as three-fourths according to one estimate—were Finns. In the industrial areas of Finland the strike was not a totally alien phenomenon, for although there was legislation outlawing strikes, it was not very effective. Most Finnish immigrants to the United States, however, were from agricultural areas where they had been peasants or farm workers.¹⁰

The non-Finnish strikers were mainly peasants from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Slavic states, and Italy. In Hungary

⁸ The demands included a pay raise from \$2.50 a day for common labor to \$5.00 a day for mechanical workers. According to the *Duluth News Tribune* of July 21, 1907, Petriella had presented these demands to Oliver and had set July 29 as a deadline for meeting them. The union was accused of breaking its word in calling the strike before this date. *Mesaba Ore*, July 20, 27, 1907; *Labor World*, August 31, 1907, p. 6; *Virginia Enterprise*, July 26, 1907; *Eveleth News*, July 20, 1907; C. Whit Pfeiffer, "From Bohunks' to Finns," in *The Survey*, 36:13 (April 1, 1916).

⁹ *Virginian*, August 23, 1907. To further confuse the issue, there was a general exodus from the range "at the rate of several hundred a day" that reached a total of nearly five thousand workers. See *Eveleth News*, July 24, 1907.

¹⁰ *Chisholm Herald*, August 2, 1907, p. 8; Carl E. Knoellinger, *Labor in Finland*, 40–48 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1960); Arne Halonen, "The Role of Finnish-Americans in the Political Labor Movement," 18, unpublished master's thesis, University of Minnesota, 1948, microfilm copy in the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹¹ *Chisholm Herald*, July 26, 1907, p. 8, August 2, 1907, p. 8; Emil Lengyel, *Americans from Hungary*, 108 (Philadelphia, 1948); 61 Congress, 3 session, *Senate Documents*, no. 748, p. 174 (serial 5870).



Teofilo Petriella

a law "Regulating Legal Relations Between Employers and Agricultural Workers," which the peasants called the "Slave Law," declared organizations of farm workers illegal. Even meetings were outlawed, and those who allowed meeting places to be used by the workers could be imprisoned. Italy, on the other hand, had a thriving labor movement, even among its agricultural workers. Strikes there were common; from 1901 to 1904 there were more than three thousand industrial stoppages, involving over 620,000 workers. In the Slavic states individual peasant holdings were the predominant sector of the economy, and strikes were relatively unknown. But despite this general lack of union experience, many of the immigrant miners joined the organization and faithfully attended its daily meetings.¹¹

The strike spread quickly and leaders emerged. Word of the stoppage was carried by bands of workers marching from mine to mine to persuade the men to quit. In one case the strikers, two hundred strong, began a march that covered twenty-five miles; by the time it was over, eight hundred others had joined them. This tactic was not used many times, for the unionists were forbidden by Sheriff William J. Bates of St. Louis County to parade or march around in groups. The order was accepted by both leaders and rank and file.¹²

Leadership at the highest level included national officials of the WFM, but the workers themselves controlled the local unions. In addition to Petriella—described by the *Mesaba Ore* as that “alien Dago anarchist”—the top organizers were John Maki, a Finn, and John McNair, a Scotch-Irish immigrant. Other leaders included: N. Di Stefano, Oscar Luihunen, Aate Heiskanen, A. Takela, Frank Lucas, John

Movern, R. Lundstrom, E. McHale, F. Manarini, and J. Connors. Mary Harris Jones, better known as “Mother Jones,” a colorful organizer for the United Mine Workers, was sent to the range as a representative of the Socialist party. She addressed fund-raising meetings sponsored by the striking miners.¹³

THE SITUATION was potentially explosive. By August 1 the dock strike had been defeated, shipping was restored to normal, and the mines had reopened. Strikebreakers were then recruited, and hundreds of so-called deputies were brought in to protect

¹² *Eveleth News*, July 24, 1907; *Chisholm Herald*, July 26, 1907, p. 8, August 2, 1907, p. 8.

¹³ *Mesaba Ore*, August 17, 1907; *Virginia Enterprise*, July 26, 1907; *Labor World*, August 31, 1907, p. 6; Paul Landis, *Three Iron Mining Towns: A Study in Cultural Change*, 110 (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1939). Personal names used in this article are spelled as given in the source cited. Newspaper spellings vary widely, and few mine laborers were listed in local directories.

Meeting of a Finnish temperance society in northeastern Minnesota, about 1907



them. Tension mounted. The *Eveleth News* reported a run on firearms and ammunition. In some towns the saloons shut their doors, and where they did not, the union itself sought to have them closed.¹⁴

Four days after the strike began an incident occurred when a group of strikebreakers were forced from work by a hail of stones thrown by some thirty strikers. Two days later it was reported that a strikebreaker had been injured by a blow from an ax. In Chisholm on August 10 deputies and strikers clashed, and three strikers were arrested after a scuffle in which a deputy was hurt. On the same day what was widely called a "riot" took place, receiving larger headlines than any other incident during the strike. No one, however, was badly hurt. A crowd of fifty Finnish strikers had gathered around a boarding house that sheltered twenty strikebreakers. Two of the strikers threatened the scabs. Deputies arrived on the scene and a fight broke out. Nineteen of the Finns were arrested and spent a full month in jail before being tried and found not guilty. A week after this incident, a bystander was mistakenly shot in the back by nervous Oliver Mining Company guards in the town of Virginia, and the next day the *Mesaba Ore* reported that an unidentified striker was believed to have been shot when deputies dispersed a group

¹⁴ *Labor World*, August 3, 1907; *Eveleth News*, July 24, 1907; *Virginia Enterprise*, July 26, 1907.

¹⁵ *Eveleth News*, July 24, 1907; *Virginia Enterprise*, July 26, 1907; *Chisholm Herald*, August 16, 1907; *Mesaba Ore*, August 10, 17, 1907; *Labor World*, August 17, September 14, 1907. Professor John Sirjamaki found that unbiased informants interviewed by him were in agreement that such violence as occurred was caused by the strikebreakers. This was true only in the general sense that their presence may have stimulated violence. The strikebreakers themselves were, in fact, usually docile and retreated at the prospect of trouble. See John Syrjamaki, "Mesabi Communities: A Study of Their Development," 217, unpublished doctoral thesis, Yale University, 1940, microfilm copy in the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁶ *Mesaba Ore*, July 6, 27, 1907; *Virginian*, July 26, 1907.

of men. On one occasion deputies were fined fifty dollars apiece for attacking a woman who was "poking fun at them."¹⁵

Despite these minor hostilities, however, the strike remained relatively peaceful throughout — a surprising fact, given the history of violence that had surrounded western mining strikes of the preceding decades. Why was it that the Mesabi Range in 1907 did not erupt in a bloody convulsion such as those seen in the mountain states farther west?

The reason seems to have been three-fold. One factor was the absence in Minnesota's iron range community of an anti-union vigilante group. The native American population was probably too small to support an effective organization of this kind, and apparently it felt no need for one. The middle class on the range was confronted not by established aggressive unions that could be considered a threat to small business interests, but by foreign miners who were only beginning to organize and who existed on a much lower standard of living than anyone else in the area. Finally, United States Steel, the single most powerful influence on the range, made no attempt to encourage the formation of a vigilante group.

This does not mean that the general population was sympathetic to the strike. "The thing to do" raged the *Mesaba Ore* on July 27, ". . . is to suppress the organization [WFM] right now — not wait until it has gained a further foothold; its toenails are deep enough now. And the means to be used in suppressing the red-eyed monster should be those that first present themselves." Petriella was a favorite target of attack by the press and was accused, among other things, of being an opportunist. Nor was disapproval limited to the newspapers. Antistrike mass meetings were held at Hibbing, Eveleth, Tower, Ely, Coleraine, and Bovey, and local merchants, either from economic necessity or from lack of sympathy, refused credit to the striking miners.¹⁶

The union on its part made a concentrated effort to keep the peace. It ordered the men to follow the letter of the law, even after parading — in effect, picketing — was prohibited. Among the speeches that were given almost every day by union officials only one could be called inflammatory, even by the local antiunion press. This was delivered by Petriella on July 31, the day after a strikers' hall in Nashwauk was invaded by deputies. "The moment has arrived," he began, "when we are ready and willing to defend the rights for which we fight with our blood. The moment is here when we must take the law into our own hands as do our opponents." But he went on to caution, "you must let all men go to work who want to. . . . I want you to know that we can win our rights. We need not go on private property. . . . I want you to behave with respect to all men."¹⁷

Petriella threatened to take the law into his own hands only if "justice is still denied us." By this he did not mean economic justice or any other abstract concept. The statement was a direct challenge to Minnesota's governor, John A. Johnson, who had been asked to use the state militia for suppressing the strike. In thus appealing for a fair handling of the workers, Petriella relied on his belief that Johnson, who had campaigned as a liberal, was "a man of honor" even though "elected by a privileged class."¹⁸ In this the union leader was not disappointed.

The impartial role played by the state government was the third major factor in preventing violence on the Mesabi. In response to requests for state troops to police the range, Governor Johnson himself visited Hibbing, Mountain Iron, Eveleth, and Virginia. He conferred with range politicians, police officials, and strike leaders, including Maki, McNair, and Petriella.¹⁹ In a speech in Eveleth the governor assured both sides of protection by the law, and this position he steadily upheld, favoring neither faction.

When appeals for troops continued, Johnson sent representatives to the range with the following instructions: "I want you to go to the scene of the strike and let me know immediately the true situation. The militia will be held in the armory, and if you say troops are needed, they will entrain in fifteen minutes." The troops were never called upon; instead, the governor issued a proclamation which guaranteed the miners the right of peaceable assembly in their halls but prohibited parading, on the grounds that the latter was a disturbance of the peace.²⁰ Thus, while insisting upon the maintenance of order, Johnson did not show himself to be an enemy of what the unionists believed were "the people," and the strike leadership never found itself in a position where it felt forced to act outside the law.

ALTHOUGH NOT BROKEN by the use of martial law or concentration camps, the Mesabi strike was nevertheless doomed to failure. The workers were eventually defeated because strikebreakers were brought to the range in sufficient numbers to take up the slack in production. Most of these were raw immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. At first the union tried persuading them to join its cause. Strikers passed out leaflets in various languages. One of the handbills in English read: "STAY AWAY from the Iron Range in Minnesota and thus assist the Local Unions of the W. F. of M. who are on strike against the Oliver Iron Mining Company, or better known as the Steel Trust, in an effort to abolish the Blacklist System and

¹⁷ Winifred O. Helmes, *John A. Johnson, The People's Governor*, 222 (Minneapolis, 1949); *Virginia Enterprise*, July 26, 1907. Petriella's speech is quoted in the *Chisholm Herald*, August 2, 1907, p. 8.

¹⁸ *Chisholm Herald*, August 2, 1907, p. 8.

¹⁹ Winthrop B. Chamberlain, "A Great Democratic Governor," in *World's Work*, 15:10132 (April, 1908); *Virginia Enterprise*, July 26, 1907; Helmes, *Johnson*, 222-224.

²⁰ Helmes, *Johnson*, 223; C. B. Cheney, "A Labor Crisis and a Governor," in *Outlook*, 89:25 (May 2, 1908).

*An iron mining camp on
the Mesabi Range,
pictured in the early 1900s*



the discrimination in vogue by said Corporation against union labor in this district.”²¹

In general the pamphlets had little effect, but at the end of July two hundred strikebreakers brought in by Oliver refused to work after learning the true situation. The contracts given them by an employment agency stated that there was no strike. Another group of 175 men hired in New York City and also ignorant of the strike became aware of the labor trouble

when people along the tracks shouted “scab” as the train traveled from Duluth to Hibbing. The New Yorkers refused to work and joined the strikers. In return, the union paid their passage farther west.²² These successes in stemming the tide of strikebreakers were few, however. The appearance of whole trainloads became a common sight by the middle of August. One labor agent alone supplied the mining companies with more than 1,100 strikebreakers in a single month. The new workers—Greek, Italian, Slovenian, Croatian, and Montenegrin immigrants—had not yet learned the meaning of labor solidarity.²³

By mid-August most of the smaller mines joined Oliver in opening their gates for employment. After a month or two the strikers began returning to work. The socialist immigrant newspapers of the range branded those who could hold out no longer as traitors to the working class. The *Glas Svobode*, a Slovenian newspaper, and the Finnish paper *Tyomies* published the names of strikebreakers who were to be boycotted. It was all to no avail, however; the strike was broken and even the socialist Finns, who held out longest, eventually went down in defeat.²⁴

²¹ Quoted in Rudolph Pinola, “Labor and Politics on the Iron Range of Northern Minnesota,” 25n., unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1957. Many of the strikebreakers, according to Pinola, “were illegally smuggled over the Canadian border and at first kept in bullpens.” The writer has found nothing to corroborate this statement.

²² Pinola, “Labor and Politics,” 25; *Virginia Enterprise*, August 23, 1907; *Labor World*, August 24, 1907.

²³ Hyman Berman, “Education for Work and Labor Solidarity: The Immigrant Miners and Radicalism on the Mesabi Range,” 42, unpublished manuscript, copy in the Minnesota Historical Society.

²⁴ Berman, “Education for Work and Labor Solidarity,” 43; *Chisholm Herald*, August 23, 1907, p. 8.

THE PICTURES on pages 340 and 347 are from the Library of Congress and those on pages 342 and 344 are from the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. The portrait of Petriella is from the *Duluth News Tribune*, July 26, 1907.