

100 Years Later: Michigan's 1913-14 Copper Country Strike

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This week marks the 100-year anniversary of the beginning of the great Michigan Copper Strike, one of the longest and most violent labor conflicts of the early twentieth century. Beginning July 23, 1913 the strike was waged between an inter-ethnic group of thousands of mineworkers and massive mining companies like Calumet & Hecla. The strike was also an opportunity for the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) to consolidate its organizational gains against a group of mine bosses who had successfully resisted the many decades-long efforts by mineworkers to unionize. The strike was fought primarily over such bread-and-butter issues as wage increases; the 8-hour day; and the elimination of the one-man drill, a labor-saving device that workers believed would cost them jobs. But for the Copper Country's mine bosses, a single demand – recognition of the WFM as the mineworkers' union – proved especially obnoxious, representing, as it did, a challenge to employers' control over the workplace.

Like many of the bloody labor conflicts that came before (and after) there were casualties during the 1913-14 Michigan Strike: striking workers Aloiz "Louie" Tijan and Steve Putrich were shot dead by mining company guards and Waddell-Mahon Detective Agency "gun thugs" in August 1913.



Margaret Fazekas,
14-vuotias unkarilainen tyttö, jonka pään läpi pyssy-
hurtat ampuivat revolverin kuulaa "Työn päivän",
syysk. 1 p:n, aamuna Kearsargessa. Tytön luultiin
kuolevan, mutta hän toipui kuitenkin. Ylläolevaa
kuvaa otettaessa kantoi tyttö vielä käärettä päässään.

Margaret Fazekas, a 14-year-old girl shot in the back of the head during a Copper Country Labor Day parade in 1913. Published in *Työmiehen Joulu* 1913.

Less than a month later, fourteen-year-old Margaret Fazekas was shot in the back of the head by Houghton County deputy sheriffs on Labor Day and came within an inch of losing her life. But the strike's most violent incidents came in December 1913 after local employers formed their Citizens' Alliance. Notorious throughout the U.S. for their strikebreaking activities, citizens' alliances, citizens' committees, and other organizations with similar names were little more than employers' vigilante organizations, military arms of local chambers of commerce. Not long after its formation, the Alliance went on an

aggressive campaign to destroy the WFM in the Copper Country. On December 10, with the help of Houghton County sheriff's deputies, the Alliance laid siege to and then raided WFM offices in South Range. Just two days later, on December 12, Charles Lawton, the general manager of the Quincy Mining Company, wrote in a letter to mining company president William Rogers Todd, "They (local 'police') chased the strikers far and wide...quite a number of them were caught, but we thought it was useless to arrest them, and some of them were made fit subjects for the hospital—in fact, they were very roughly treated."

Such "rough treatment" of strikers occurred throughout the month of December, but one event more than any other has come to symbolize the violence of the 1913-14 Copper Country Strike: the Italian Hall tragedy in Calumet, Michigan. Disaster struck at a Christmas Eve party for striking mineworkers' children sponsored by the Calumet local's Women's Auxiliary of the Western Federation of Miners (WFM). During the party, a call of "Fire!" led some 300 to 400 partygoers to make a panicked exodus from the second-floor hall. After the tragic event, a number of witnesses reported that it had been a man wearing a Citizens' Alliance button who yelled "Fire!" into the crowded hall. The rush out of the hall caused some to trip on the way down the stairs, which led to a mass of people being packed into the stairwell. The weight of this human mass crushed the air from people's lungs. Though attempting to remain neutral throughout the strike, the deaths of more than seventy people on Christmas Eve at Italian Hall caused Michigan Governor Woodbridge N. Ferris to write Charles Moyer, WFM President, "I am at your command for rendering all possible assistance to those stricken down in last night's awful disaster. All Michigan is in sorrow." An estimated 73-79 people, including close to 60 children, died at Italian Hall.

While Governor Ferris mourned, Copper Country unionists and socialists reacted with fury at what they believed might have been an act of mass murder orchestrated by the Citizens' Alliance and Waddell-Mahon gun thugs imported by the mining companies during the strike. *Työmies*, a Finnish-language socialist-unionist newspaper published in the strike zone at Hancock, Michigan, printed a rare English-language article in a special edition published on Christmas Day. The beginning of the article read:



Headline from *Työmies* newspaper, December 26, 1913. The newspaper's staff, like many other strikers and socialists, believed the Italian Hall Tragedy was mass murder.

"The most appalling disaster in the history of Michigan occurred last evening at the Italian Hall in Calumet where hundreds of men, women and children had gathered to witness Christmas exercises for the strikers['] children. The program which was quite lengthy had just begun when a strange man ascended the stairway, yelled "fire" and quickly made his escape to the street. Several persons who stood near the entrance where this man appeared, state that he had his cap pulled down over his eyes, and that pinned to the lapel of his coat was a Citizen's [sic] Alliance button. At the cry of fire the great crowd arose as one and made a mad rush for the exit in the front of the building. In the rush down the stairway many fell and being unable to regain their feet were trampled to death, their bodies acting as stumbling blocks for others who followed, until the hallway was entirely blocked by the dead and dying. The fire alarm was soon sounded and those responding were forced to gain entrance to the hall by ladders at the front windows. Firemen entered the

building in this manner and stopped the panic stricken crowd from further crowding into the hallway upon the dead bodies of their friends in a frantic effort to escape. The bodies in the hallway were so tightly packed that they could not be released from below, and firemen were compelled to remove the dead from the top of the stairway carrying the dead and dying back up into the hall before the stairs could be cleared. At the time the cry of fire was sounded in the hall Mrs. Annie Clemenc was making a talk to the little ones present who naturally were crowded as near the stage as possible, their little faces beaming with happiness, their hearts bounding with Christmas cheer. In less than three minutes afterward fifty of their frail little bodies were jammed and crushed in the hallway being used as a roadway over which their companions were vainly endeavoring to escape. The scene was a horrible one, and will never be effaced from the minds of those who witnessed the terrible tragedy.

The bodies of the dead were taken to a temporary morgue established in the town hall as soon as they were removed from the building. As soon as identifications were made, the bodies were removed to their homes. In some homes the mother and all the children lie cold in death, the husband and father crazed with grief. In others the mother being the only one spared has been plunged into despair and sorrow that yet dazes her, the full truth not yet dawning upon her terrified brain."

Written three decades after the tragedy, Woody Guthrie's song "1913 Massacre" gave voice to the many Copper County workers who, as the *Työmies* article suggested, believed the Italian Hall "tragedy" was really more of a "massacre":

Take a trip with me in nineteen thirteen
To Calumet, Michigan, in the copper country
I'll take you to a place called Italian Hall
And the miners are having their big Christmas ball . . .

Such a terrible sight I never did see
We carried our children back up to their tree
The scabs outside still laughed at their spree
And the children that died there was seventy-three

The piano played a slow funeral tune,
And the town was lit up by a cold Christmas moon
The parents, they cried and the men, they moaned,
See what your greed for money has done?



Strike parade through South Range in 1913.
Published in Työmiehen Joulu 1913.

After the horrific events of Italian Hall, Houghton County officials further clamped down on labor actions as strikers fumed regarding events at the Christmas Eve party. Houghton County law enforcement arrested several key WFM organizers after Italian Hall, including Ben Goggin who was one of the most outspoken and fearless of the WFM's local organizers. More egregiously, probable members of the Citizens' Alliance bum-rushed, beat, and shot the WFM's President, Charles Moyer, in a Hancock hotel room just days after events at Italian Hall. Loading the bleeding Moyer onto a train bound for Chicago, the mob threatened Moyer's life if he returned to the Copper Country. Moyer did return, but to a much different strike. The Moyer deportation demonstrated the willingness of Copper

Country employers to use the iron fist against strikers. In fear of further reprisals and as WFM funds to support the strike dried up, labor actions in the Copper Country swiftly declined. A number of strikes and a few shootings colored labor relations into early spring 1914, but essentially the strike was broken.

In mid-April 1914, WFM locals held a vote on whether to continue the strike. Overwhelmingly, the rank-and-file cast ballots to return to work. The great Copper Country upheaval was over. But, while the Michigan copper strike ended in defeat for the WFM, the strike did benefit the Copper Country's mineworkers in some ways. No doubt trying to head off future rumblings of discontent, mine owners implemented an eight-hour day at most of the region's mines. Workers at a smaller number of mines also received wage increases. While there existed no union to secure these gains, the wage increases and reduction of hours did represent real improvements in the lives of the Copper Country mineworkers, improvements that resulted from a long and violent struggle against their employers.

In 2013, as a new generation of employers uses their collective strength to dismantle American unions and earlier gains made by those unions' members, it is an appropriate time to pay tribute to the Michigan copper mineworkers who fought and died to improve their material existence and establish a fighting union capable of protecting those gains.

A number of events commemorating the great strike have already taken place in Michigan's Copper Country. However, Copper Country strike and Italian Hall commemorative events will continue to be held throughout the remainder of 2013 and 2014. Some of the upcoming events and displays are:

Writing Across the Peninsula Conference

October 24 - 26; Michigan Technological University; Houghton, Michigan

Michigan Technological University presents the 2013 Writing Across the Peninsula Conference, which follows the theme "Revolutionary 'Riting: Working-class Perspectives and the 1913-14 Michigan Copper Strike." For more information about the conference, e-mail gakaunon@mtu.edu.

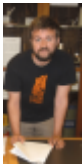
Tumult and Tragedy: Michigan's 1913-1914 Copper Strike, a traveling exhibit about the great strike. For more information on the exhibit, see <http://www.1913strike.mtu.edu/>

1913 Massacre, a film produced and directed by Ken Ross and Louis V. Galdieri, and inspired by the Woody Guthrie song about Italian Hall. For more information on the film,

see: <http://1913massacre.com/>

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