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*A Labor Leader of Today*

*John Mitchell and What He Stands For*

IT is convenient to group all labor leaders under one head and call them demagogues; it is convenient and stupid. In the beginning they all were orators. Now there are businessmen among them. When labor knew only its emotions, when the workingmen only felt that something—they knew not what—was wrong, the expression of that feeling carried the natural reward of leadership. Eloquence, in competition with eloquence, aroused passions which begot violence. The orators could not control the force they set in motion. Hence public opinion, which decides strikes, was outraged by riots and bloodshed; capital would not treat seriously with men who had no knowledge, power, or tact; labor itself became disgusted with leaders who could not win. Thus it came about that the workingmen turned from the orators to men who talked little and worked hard; who commanded them, and knew how to compromise with their employers.

Such a leader John Mitchell, the young president of the United Mine Workers, is trying to prove himself. He is a small, spare man, with black eyes steady in a white, smooth face, which, with his habitual clerical garb and sober mien, gives him the appearance of a priest. The breaker boys find him kind; their elders approach him easily, but only on business, which they talk while he listens coldly, giving answers that are soft but short, cast in the form of advice or a direction, with the reason for it. He is never dictatorial, only patient and reasonable. He has no vanity, no fear for his dignity. It is said he is brave. Once during a strike in Pana, Illinois, his men set out to attack some nonunion men at work behind a stockade with guards who shot to kill. The strikers seized two of their employers, and putting them in front, made them lead the attack. Mitchell heard of it, and running to the scene, rescued the “bosses.” His men turned on him in wrath, but he explained, and led off the captives from the furious crowd.

But it is no one trait, however conspicuous, that will win success for Mitchell, if he wins (and that is a question which may be answered before this article is printed). At present he stands not quite midway between Wall Street and the mines. He has the personal respect of both. When President McKinley was shot, and the news spread to the coal region, the workmen gathered into a mob, crying, “Who shot our president?” They dispersed when they learned that it wasn't President Mitchell who was shot. When Mitchell went to New York in 1900 to see J. P. Morgan, the financial head of the coal business, he was not received. This year an associate of Mr. Morgan happened to meet him socially; and when he reported what manner of labor leader Mitchell was, Mr. Morgan received him at his downtown office.

For Mitchell knows his business; he handles it like a business; and businessmen and miners alike respect in him the conservative manager of large affairs. Best of all, however, he stands for something definite and intelligent. Where the old-fashioned leader had theories to

dazzle ignorance and disgust common sense, this small man in black and white has a policy, which the employers understand much better than their employees.

Labor is a commodity. It can be traded in like gold, or wheat, or coal. The success of the labor union, like that of the trust, depends largely upon the completeness of its control of the output. Unlike a trust, however, a labor organization is not incorporated and has no property. Its promises to deliver cannot be enforced. Contracts with labor organizations rest upon honor; they have no demonstrated legal validity.

Right or wrong, win or lose, the policy which Mitchell represents is so to conduct the business of organized labor that its leaders will have credit with any businessman and their contracts a certain value. In other words, he would put himself in a position to sell mining labor just as Mr. Rockefeller would sell oil, Mr. Havemeyer sugar, or a political boss public franchises or legislative privileges.

Now capital, which has found it advantageous to buy everything else wholesale, fights for the retail trade in labor. Mitchell, however, in something less than six years, has won over the bituminous coal mine owners to his system; they meet with him and his committee each year, fix rates and conditions of labor, and sign contracts. The soft coal operators express themselves well satisfied so far with the results. But they trust John Mitchell, not the union. The hard coal operators are skeptical and shy. Mitchell entered that field only a year and a half ago. The hard-coalers also are respectful of Mitchell, but they distrust the scheme, and they doubt his control. They did “confer” with him in 1900, and settled with him the strike of that year. They refused to meet him this year to renew the agreement. All things considered, however, for the time he has been at them, his progress with the operators has been great.

With the workers his achievement is not so clear. The hardest fight of a conservative labor leader is always within the union, and Mitchell’s finest work has been done there. The passions and the ignorance of the men, who are mostly foreigners from the backlands of Europe; the vanity and the envy of the orators, and the cunning politics of his associates in the councils of the organization—all working for immediate results, higher pay, shorter hours, and their leader’s place—these try the soul of the leader. But Mitchell keeps still, meets plot with openness, passion with reason, eloquence with dry statements of hard facts, and against impulse he plants a patience which is wonderful to see. “A little at a time,” he says. “Anything is better than nothing. And the big thing is the main thing—honor. That is all a union has.”

For that he has made many a secret stand, both within and without his organization. When the great steel strike was on, and the issue seemed to depend upon the decision of the men of the South Chicago mills to join the strike or stand to their machines, Mitchell went to Theo. J. Shaffer, an old-fashioned leader, ex-clergyman, and orator, who had called out some steel workers who were under contract.

“Put them back, Shaffer,” said Mitchell. “Your organization can’t afford to violate its contracts. If you break your agreement, the cause of organized labor will be put back farther than any victory you may gain will advance it.”

Shaffer would not listen to Mitchell. He kept out the contract breakers, and tried to force out the South Chicago men, who had learned the idea of the honor involved in a labor contract, and had refused to obey Shaffer’s call. They were jeered at and threatened; their women wept with shame for them; their children hung their heads, and they themselves groaned under the taunts flung at them by the strikers. But they gritted their teeth and worked. The steel strike was lost, but men like Mitchell count it a victory. And it was. At this writing (June 21st) Mitchell is fighting the same battle himself. The anthracite coal strike is at its height. The beginning of it

was a defeat for the leader. He did not want a strike then. His reasoning was that the hard coal miners' organization was new, and that it was composed largely of men who were foreigners and had not yet learned their lesson of self-restraint and sound principles. They had, indeed, won the strike of 1900, but only under exceptional circumstances (the intercession of a political influence to save the election of a President). This was luck, and the men had profited in wages, and the union (though unrecognized) in prestige. To ask more so soon was to teach the mine owners that concessions would cause only endless discontent among their employees and extravagant demands. But the men did not heed him; they listened to the orators and went out. Mitchell, the leader, had to lead them or give way to the politicians, eager for his place.

Beaten at the beginning, he was beaten at the middle, too. The strike was slow. The operators were firm, and the workers impatient. The organization had in reserve a force which the strikers clamored to have it apply—a general strike. The United Mine Workers is made up of two great divisions, the hard-coalers and the soft. It was the hard-coalers who had struck; the soft-coalers were contented, and remained at work. Mitchell, the leader of all, had in his pocket a call for a convention to consider the question of making common cause of the anthracite demands. That surely would settle the difficulty one way or another. Business could go on without hard coal; the railroads and factories unable to get anthracite could use bituminous. If all the mines were closed, industry would stop.

But most of the soft coal workers were under contract. Therefore Mitchell, who had told Shaffer it was better to lose a strike than to break a business contract, kept that convention call six weeks in his pocket. The constitution of the organization, however, required him to issue it upon the demand of six district unions. These came, and Mitchell had to yield. But he fixed the date of the convention one month ahead, on July 17th.

His hope, of course, was that a settlement could be negotiated in the interval. If that failed, then—well, then the great question of the inviolability of a union contract for the labor of coal miners could be answered in the open with all the world to see. Mitchell says it all is a matter of honor. Wall Street says it is a matter of his control over his organization. If Mitchell, appealing, as I think he will, privately or publicly, to the men's sense of honor, can keep them from voting to repudiate the soft coal unions' contracts, then he will have triumphed the greater for his defeats and his patience, and organized labor the world over will have scored a most conspicuous victory. This whether the coal strike of 1902 is won or lost. Or, should the men leave it all to Mitchell, as they well may, and he can resist the temptation to play the demagogue in order to keep his place and his power, then he will have proved that he is what he has seemed, a sound, conservative manager of labor. The temptation to surrender his principles will be almost irresistible. But whether he wins or loses this victory over himself he already has pointed the way for unionism and union leadership.