

Reflections on Work - December 1946

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Summary: Reports on the hard life and work of the coal miners of Western Pennsylvania and the strike demands of John L. Lewis. "We want to change man's work; we want to make people question their work; is it on the way to heaven or hell?" Emphasizes the holiness of work and the sacramental quality of property. (DDLW #229).

A long time ago I read a Russian story about a mother and daughter who earned their living by sewing. They sat by a window and rested their eyes by lifting them from their work now and then to survey the scene outside. Then someone came and built a house right next to their window which rose like a massive wall and shut out the light and sun and air. They worked in sorrow for many years. Then the wall was demolished, and when it was gone, they grieved for it. They had come to enjoy being shut in the tenement next door! I remember how extraordinary this gloomy story seemed to me. Yet it pointed to the moral that we not only get used to our ugliness and hardships but we can actually come to love them.

Once a migratory worker said to me fervently, "There's nothing I like better than getting out in that hot field and chopping cotton." He meant it, too, with the hot sun on his back and the vast field all around, and silent men, women and children working down the long rows around him, a long, endless, stupefying work that identifies the man with the field he works in.

Unique Misery

Down in Derry, Pennsylvania, in the soft coal regions, almost worked out now, a soft coal miner told me after we had talked together for several days:

"Miners don't want to do anything else. They don't want to be farmers. Many of them that leave their work and try something else go back to it again." And I suppose it is true. The entire industrial world has so little to offer what with its cannibalism, its competition, that the men go back to their black holes and their nine hours a day underground, six days a week (it is still that, though they get much more pay), and begin to take pride in its hazards, its own unique misery.

On a three-day visit through western Pennsylvania, we drove through a number of mining towns with their company houses, company stores, their bleak slag heaps, their mud roads, their meager gardens, backyard toilets, and in every town there were taverns, but only in a few there were churches.

Iselin

In Iselin, a town of five hundred families, one of the sodality girls told us that most of the men did not go to church though half the families were Catholics, Slovaks, Poles, Italians, all of whom should be Catholic.

The company houses, with no furnaces, no plumbing, had just been offered to the miners, so that they could buy them, rather than put the mine operator to the expense of repairing and modernizing them, and the prices asked was \$600! They were good-sized houses, too, and better than most that we saw. How well built they were can be judged by the price asked. Most of the families were afraid that this generosity on the part of the owners meant that the mines were played out and they were reluctant to buy.

There are gardens there; many of the miners keep chickens and pigs, but in that town there is nothing but one company store, and two churches, one Catholic and one Protestant.

Darkness

The miner said: "It's black down there. No light but what you carry on your hat. Occasional lights at the sections. But it is very black."

How can men love darkness rather than the light? How can men choose such an occupation, except that they are forced to it? We have told in previous issues how they have had to draft the men and 14-year-old boys for the mines in England. Families are trying to keep their children out of the mines, and the press and the pulpit, the school and the mine owner, all are recruiting workers for this most hazardous occupation.

It is not so many hundred years ago that the only way they could get miners was to make bondsmen of them. Technically they were not slaves but they were bonded over to the owners of the mines, men, women and children, and if they tried to escape they were beaten back to work.

In 1770 there was a production of only six million tons. Yet now the whole transportation system, the whole factory system, is bound up with coal. It is the basic industry. Radio commentators say that strikes and lack of workers may mean a great impetus to the study of atomic energy for fuel and power these days.

Inhuman

How much do men meditate on coal and its uses? There is a limited amount of it in the earth; many of the mines in Pennsylvania are worked out now, leaving ghost towns. The forests are cut down, so soon we will have neither wood nor coal, looking at things from the long view. Yet it is not with any knowledge of organic gardening, the necessity for tree-planting, the use of other forms of energy, that miners, families in the Ruhr and in England, yes, and here in America, too, despite the fact that men go back into the mines after trying other things, revolt against this form of labor. It is because it is inhuman, it demands too much of a man,

and they do not leave it for other work because that other work, too, whether it is farming for profit, or working in factories, is inhuman and “takes it all out of a man.”

Shorter Hours

People want to know what this present coal strike is about. It is about shorter hours for one thing, because the men work fifty-four hours a week despite a thirty-five hour week and time and a half pay for overtime. This pay rate means higher wages, of course, but what use are those higher wages when men are so exhausted they end up in the saloon and gamble and drink away a good part of their pay. Drink is one of the greatest problems of the workers, according to the priests, and we tell them, “When work is inhuman, recreation is going to be inhuman, too. It all goes back to work.”

Welfare Fund

The strike is also about the welfare fund. Up to this time there have been no pensions, no recreation, no education, no adequate medical service.

John L. Lewis put forward six reasons for his demand for this fund.

1. To furnish adequate and modern medical service to miners and their dependent families with a choice of physicians which, in many areas, particularly in the south, they do not now have. We plan to replace the present company doctor scourge.
2. To provide adequate hospitalization under proper standards.
3. To provide insurance, and health insurance for the miners, which they cannot provide. Life insurance now costs the miner about 277 per cent of what it costs people in sedentary occupations. This fund can provide insurance on a mass basis much more cheaply than the individual can buy it himself.
4. Men who are injured and disabled in the mines through loss of limbs, blindness, or other major physical injuries, need rehabilitation. There are no facilities available to the mine workers now and there are probably living 50,000 men who have been incapacitated from further mining who have received no assistance in rehabilitation or training for other employment.
5. Economic aid in distress or hardship cases. Families become impoverished because they have not received compensation provided by the states due to the manipulation of the company doctor system and by reason of the testimony of the company doctor, which is the only medical testimony available because no other doctor is permitted to attend the victim.
6. If any money is left in the fund, we propose to use it for cultural and educational work among the mine workers.

Need For Fund

The need of such a fund is evidenced by these figures: Every year some 1,500 miners are killed; some 60,000 to 70,000 are injured, many of them so badly they are thrown on the scrap heap. Most of these accidents occur because the mine operators do not comply with government recommendations for safety. Pennsylvania state laws are the best in the country, but it has been up to the state to formulate a code, and to get inspectors to enforce it. Most operators, working for banks, utilities and railroads, who are the real owners, know nothing about and care nothing about conditions. Richard Mellon is president of the Pittsburgh Coal Company, one of the largest, and we heard of the annual hunt put on by the Mellon family, which is attended by thousands of spectators. Thanksgiving day, when we were leaving the mining district, we drove through Ligonier, on our way to the super highway and passed many a hunter, dressed in a bright red coat, with high silk hat, beautifully mounted, cantering along through the early morning sunshine on his way to the meeting place. The contrast, which contrast we were not looking for and which was forced upon us of great wealth and poverty was a terrible one. We were reminded of an article in the Catholic Digest, written by Fr. Miller the Redemptorist, pointing out the report of the Dept. of Commerce showing that American corporations have accumulated during the war \$52 billion dollars in profits after payment of taxes!

When we can read figures like this, when we read of the inhuman suffering of the workers, when we remember the blood that is on our coal, we know what the Holy Father means when he says that the world has lost a sense of sin. Not personal sin, but **social sin**. When priests do not cry out for the workers, try to share with the workers their poverty, then surely this is what the Holy Father means when he speaks of the devitalization of the Church. They are dead branches indeed.

Church and Work

This is not meant to be a news article. It is part of the series, the Church and Work. I do not presume to go for three days to the mining regions and write authoritatively on coal and mining. I am writing on work and the Church.

Ten years ago when I visited Arkansas I heard of mines worked by Germans and Italians long before the United Mine Workers came to organize them. The priests aided in the formation of associations of workers, there were credit unions and cooperatives in the parish. The farmers were also sometimes miners. Msgr. Ligutti's great project at Granger, Iowa, is made of miners who have their own schools, recreation halls, little farms, and in the schools the children have a rural education, not just an urban one which brings the worst features of the city to the land.

Stories

These are stories the priests in these mining towns could tell to their parishioners both in Sunday sermons and daily homilies, and when they are on strike, and when they are laid off.

Stories of what has been done in other parts of the world to emphasize the dignity of the worker, and the dignity of many kinds of work. They could give to the worker a philosophy of work right from the altar, day after day, and do their part in changing the face of the earth.

Part of Heaven

“All the way to heaven is heaven, because Christ said, I am the way.” And work should be part of heaven, not part of hell. In the black underground caverns where the miners labor for month after month, from early fall till late spring, all light of day, there is a glimpse of “everlasting night where no order is and everlasting horror dwelleth.”

There is one more aspect of this “work” which I wish to bring out, and that is this. The attitude toward property.

The Holy Father says we must deproletarize the worker. That is, we must get him out of the wage slave class and into the owner class. One very good reason is that a man loves what is his, and has a sense of responsibility for it, almost a sacramental sense in regard to his house, his land, and his work on them. We want to change man’s work; we want to make people question their work; is it on the way to heaven or hell?

Bread and Wine

Man gains his bread by his work. It is his bread and wine. It is his life. We cannot emphasize the importance of it enough. We must emphasize the holiness of *work*, and we must emphasize the sacramental quality of *property* too. That means the property of the poor. They have very little of it. We know that it is dangerous, it corrupts, it is almost a testing ground in this life of attachment and detachment. We must love it as a sample of God’s providence and goodness and we must be ready always to give it up.

No Respect for Property

When we talk about property we do not think of stocks and bonds, shares in coal mines, the property of the hunters in their red coats whom we saw prancing by that Thanksgiving morning. They have no respect for property. For instance, the farmers around Pennsylvania only own the ground plough-deep. They do not know this until they begin to object to the mining operators which undermine their homes and cause them to settle in the cave ins that are prevalent throughout Pennsylvania. When the operators finish taking out all the coal in a given place, they start to retreat, taking out pillars of wood and pillars of coal. The roof falls in, and the ground above settles. This goes on all through that region, and the farmer who objects is told he can pay for all the coal which the miners would have been able to mine from his acres, at the current rate. Since the operators know how deep the seams are, and how extensive, they can calculate to the ton how much coal there is in a given area, and how long it will last.

Depends On War

There is no respect for property here. So why do we talk of fighting communism, which we are supposed to oppose because it does away with private property. We have done that very well ourselves in this country. Or because it denies the existence of God? We do not see Christ in our brothers the miners, in our brother John L. Lewis. We deny Christ here. And what about that other argument about the use of force? We live in an age of war, and the turning of the wheels of industry, the very working of the mines depends on our wars.

Louis Budenz

We heard Louis Budenz speak at the Harrisburg forum as we passed through on our way to the mining sections, and one of his messages to Catholics was this warning: that the communists would try to foment anti-clericalism and divide the people from the hierarchy.

There is really no need of their doing it. It is already an accomplished fact. Pope Pius XI himself said, "The workers of the world are lost to the Church."

Our good readers absolve us from any charges of anti-clericalism as they read these rather severe articles on the Church and work. They know that the wish of our heart is to bring closer together the priest and the people. There is a great division between the two and one of the very reasons of the Catholic Worker's existence is to bridge this gap.