

Copper and Class Struggle

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Jeremy Mouat

Philip J. Mellinger, *Race and Labor in Western Copper: The Fight for Equality, 1896-1918* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press 1995).

Jonathan D. Rosenblum, *Copper Crucible: How the Arizona Miners' Strike of 1983 Recast Labor-Management Relations in America* (Ithaca: ILR Press 1995).

THESE TWO BOOKS examine labour relations in copper mining in the American southwest. That is about the only thing they have in common: they are of very different quality and interest; they look at different periods; and their authors draw different conclusions. As his title suggests, Mellinger's *Race and Labor in Western Copper* looks at ethnicity and workers, while the subtitle of Rosenblum's book indicates his concern with the meaning and significance of the 1983 miners' strike in Arizona. Of the two, Rosenblum's *Copper Crucible* is a good deal more interesting. A fascinating exploration of corporate and union behaviour, his is an exemplary strike study.

Mellinger's book is more problematic. Although it presents much valuable information about ethnicity, the book's lack of structure makes it difficult to know just what to make of all the detail. Mellinger, however, is confident of its meaning. He claims that the book "demonstrates that industrialization *and unionization* catalyzed social action in Mexican and other Hispanic, Greek, Italian, and South Slavic industrial communities across a large part of the early-twentieth-century West The agents of south-western and intermountain working-class social change were activist factional ethnic subgroups which combined and recombined with one another during episodes of labor conflict." (15) Mellinger argues that historians who focus their attention on specific ethnic groups do so at the risk of over-simplification. Such groups were not monolithic and it was smaller factions that were "the real determinants of western working-class social change. ... the relevant building blocks in explaining western working-class history." (16) Although the book's narrative often lacks focus, it does provide considerable evidence

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to support this analysis. Mellinger also emphasises the importance of the workplace, arguing that it was there — rather than in the community — that social change began in the southwest mining regions of the US. The book's conclusion — with a nod to William Kornblum's *Blue Collar Community* — states this unequivocally: "attitudes derived from and related to the workplace helped initiate the process which eventually changed community attitudes on race and ethnicity." (201) This is a more contentious view and is asserted rather than proven. If Mellinger had discussed this point in greater detail and with greater clarity, he would have produced a much more interesting book.

Despite his insistence that the workplace was the site of change, Mellinger is strangely silent about the work of mining and tells the reader very little about the omnipotence of the large mining companies. This neglect of the social relations of production is curious: contemporary trade journals as well as virtually every historical account of the mining industry emphasise the pace of technological change throughout this period, while the power of the mining companies in the American southwest was graphically illustrated by events such as the Ludlow Massacre and the Bisbee Deportation.¹ Mellinger, however, downplays the inequities of social power identifiable in this context. At various points, he seems to imply that labour and management confronted each other as equals, as in the following metaphor: "The two sides [in Bingham Canyon, Utah] were like sparring heavyweights ... probing for the opening that might lead to a knockout." (106) Further, Mellinger's claim about the importance of the workplace remains largely unexplored throughout the text.

The book is a frustrating — at times, infuriating — read. Mellinger is one of the first scholars to explore the mining industry's ethnic divisions with some care, and yet he seems unwilling to draw out his evidence. For example, although he cites much relevant secondary literature on ethnicity, he does not seem to situate his own work in this — or in any other — context. This lack of engagement is unfortunate, since Mellinger's often painstaking research allows for a re-interpretation of the standard narrative. Nor does he seem a particularly generous scholar, summarily dismissing the work of other scholars, particularly social historians interested in studying gender and community. (13-6, 206-9)

Other authors have explored the ways in which ethnicity functioned in North American mining communities. For example, in a recent article on the Cornish miners in North America, Ronald James demonstrates how these workers fre-

¹The most useful descriptions are H. M. Gitelman, *Legacy of the Ludlow Massacre: A Chapter in American Industrial Relations* (Philadelphia 1988), and, for the Bisbee Deportation, James W. Byrkit, *Forging the Copper Collar: Arizona's Labor-Management War of 1901-1921* (Tucson 1982). Gitelman's book describes in some detail Mackenzie King's role in salvaging Rockefeller's reputation after Ludlow.

quently emphasised their ethnic identity.² He argues that such activities were a subtle tactic, intended to remind others of their distinctiveness. After all, superficially at least, very little differentiated the Cornish from other Anglo-American miners. Asserting their "Cornishness" was one way to maintain a collective reputation as skilled miners. Yet many of the workers described by Mellinger were frequently characterised — and almost always were paid — as unskilled labour. Mellinger fails to draw out the reasons why managers were so interested in recruiting these ethnic workers.

Employers and their journals were not silent on this issue. In March 1913, for example, the New York-based *Engineering & Mining Journal* noted that sweeping changes were transforming the nature of the mining workforce. "The itinerant, self-reliant miner, jack of all trades, and master of several," it acknowledged, was now rare:

The new type of miner is not so intelligent, but is more obedient and more industrious. He works generally for less than the scale established at such camps as Butte and Goldfield [Nevada]. By himself, he is far less efficient, but as part of a system employing a multiplicity of bosses, he probably delivers a lower labor cost per ton. To many companies he is a more desirable employee than a skilled miner, even when the latter will work for the same wages.³

Mine owners embraced ethnic diversity, not as a gesture of tolerance or generosity, but with two aims firmly in mind. The first, as the passage above implies, was to reduce labour costs. The second objective was to weaken unionism. Mellinger quotes a mining company executive who claimed that "The mixing of nationalities [was] the secret of his company in downing the Unions ... [because] the Unions cannot hold peoples from different countries together into a solid mass." (6) This strategy was not uncommon. In British Columbia, for example, a mine manager assured a Toronto capitalist of the need for "a mixture of races. ... the strength of an employer, and the weakness of the Union."⁴ The need to reduce labour costs and the determination to diminish the strength of organized labour reflected changes in the material basis of the copper industry. High grade and easily-treated deposits, notably those of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, were nearing depletion while the price of the metal itself continued to decline.⁵ Of course, Mellinger's

²Ronald M. James, "Defining the Group: Nineteenth-Century Cornish on the North American Mining Frontier," *Cornish Studies*, 2 (1994), 32-47. Cf. David M. Emmons, *The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town, 1875-1925* (Urbana 1989).

³*Engineering & Mining Journal*, 95 (8 March 1913), 534. Logan Hovis and I explore this process in "Miners, Engineers, and the Transformation of Work in the Western Mining Industry, 1880-1930," *Technology & Culture*, 37, (July 1996), 429-56.

⁴Edmund Kirby to T. G. Blackstock, 31 January 1901, Rossland, #53085, MG 26, G, Laurier Papers, National Archives of Canada.

⁵For a persuasive analysis of the geological basis of changes within the copper industry, see Christopher Schmitz, "The Rise of Big Business in the World Copper Industry, 1870-1930,"

focus on ethnicity requires little justification, but more explicit recognition of this context would have been useful. The complex ethnic make-up of the copper workforce in the American Southwest that the book describes was largely constructed by self-interested corporations.

The book provides readers with much detail on the ethnic dimension of the mining camps of the American Southwest. Mellinger is at his best when describing the complex social milieu of these places (communities in Arizona — Bisbee, Clifton-Morenci, Globe-Miami, Jerome, Ajo and Ray — receive the most attention). Curiously, Mellinger neglects to mention a recent book on Bisbee, also published by the University of Arizona Press, a large format volume which includes remarkable photographs of that mining community. Recent events have made some of these images even more poignant, such as the several shots of Serbian volunteers leaving Bisbee to fight in the Balkan Wars.⁶ Mellinger's book also makes good use of photographs, and on occasion these illuminate his evidence. For example, he has an excellent discussion of the ethnic organizers of the 1903 Morenci strike, with haunting photographs of four of the leaders (mugshots taken in Yuma prison). He also offers some intriguing detail concerning the relationship between Mexican miners in Arizona and the volatile political situation just across the border. Another book claims that observing the Mexican Revolution was a popular pastime in the mining community of Bisbee. During skirmishes and battles, such as the 1913 siege of Naco, people would travel to the nearby border with their Kodaks and take snapshots of the action.⁷

Overall, Mellinger's book is weakened by its lack of focus. Too frequently, illuminating discussion of a specific incident trails off into a rather confusing narrative. I found myself frequently puzzled by the author's intentions, re-reading sections in an effort to understand just what point he had in mind. Despite its flaws, however, the book is a useful reminder of the significance of ethnicity. For example, Mellinger chastises those who conflate individuals from a Hispanic background with "Mexicans," insisting that the latter description is frequently problematic. In fact, mining communities included Yaqui Indians from Mexico, long-time American residents of Mexican origin, recent Mexican immigrants, as well as Spanish-speakers from Europe: clearly a diverse group. Other writers have not adequately acknowledged the significance of ethnicity or its complexities.

In some respects Rosenblum's book on the 1983 miners' strike follows logically from Mellinger's. The first chapter of *Copper Crucible* provides readers

Economic History Review (2nd Series), 39, (1986), 392-410. For an indication of the downward trend in the price of copper, see the graph "The Real Price of Copper, 1890-1945," in George H. Hildebrand and Garth L. Mangum, *Capital and Labor in American Copper, 1845-1990: Linkages Between Product and Labor Markets* (Cambridge 1992), 108.

⁶Carlos A. Schwantes, ed., *Bisbee: Urban Outpost on the Frontier*, (Tucson 1992), 60, 94.

⁷Schwantes, *Bisbee*, 123. For similar anecdotes, see John S.D. Eisenhower, *Intervention! The United States and the Mexican Revolution, 1913-1917* (New York 1993).

with a quick history of twentieth century copper mining in the US, and references throughout the text recall Mellinger's narrative. Rosenblum also describes the more recent history of racist indignities endured by miners of Hispanic descent: "Antonio had made local history back in the late 1950s when he broke Phelps Dodge's race barrier in the locker rooms — a Mexican-American, he rinsed himself in the Anglo showers." (119) While one can be grateful that the narrative does not shy away from issues of race and the way in which they played out during the 1983 strike, the book's strength lies elsewhere. Perhaps as a result of his engaging writing style, Rosenblum is able to touch on corporate policy and decision-making, union negotiating strategies, the arcane detail of US federal labor law, as well as the day-to-day struggles of striking miners and their families without ever losing the reader. This is an impressive book.

The book begins with a photograph of a naked man confronting marching uniformed men, amidst clouds of tear gas. The opening paragraphs do the image justice: "the last thing these riot troopers expected to find blocking their way was a naked man." (3) The confrontation took place on the strike's anniversary, the day that miners had been out for a year. Rosenblum deftly works backward from this event, to flesh out the remarkable — and remarkably depressing — story of the strike. After two years of struggle, the employer — mining giant Phelps Dodge — had destroyed some thirty unions with a combined membership of more than two thousand workers. As Rosenblum explains, the book "is about a company in the throes of change, about people who work the copper rock, and about the life and death of union locals in America." (11)

The fundamental issue in the strike was the union's determination to hold on to its cost of living allowance, as well as its ability to negotiate pattern contracts with all the major players in the industry. For its part, Phelps Dodge was determined to win major concessions from the union and to disregard the model of pattern bargaining. The company was adamant that it would not follow the lead of the other mining companies, all of whom had settled with the union prior to the strike and accepted the union's "pattern" contract. Phelps Dodge decided to use replacement workers and to continue its operations throughout the strike, something it had not attempted in earlier disputes.

Rosenblum describes this corporate strategy in some detail and identifies Phelps Dodge president Richard Moolick as the person responsible for the company's hard line in 1983:

He was, for the 1980s, the corporate counterpart to Ronald Reagan. President Reagan demonstrated to the American public that skilled public service workers could be replaced and airplanes would still fly. Richard Moolick achieved the same role in private industry, demonstrating that industrial workers belonging to the country's strongest unions could be replaced — even in a legal strike — and furnaces would still roar. But there was more. Moolick's Arizona crusade assembled corporate power with rare efficiency: academic intelligence, police power, and administrative authority all operated at optimal capacity in

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the Phelps Dodge strike. With such an arsenal field-tested at Phelps Dodge, antiunion campaigns would be stepped up throughout this country. ... Richard Moolick had shown the way. (214)

As this passage hints, Phelps Dodge was able to call on help from a range of sources. One of the more intriguing parts of the book is Rosenblum's description of the role played by the Wharton School in the strike. The Wharton School, the business faculty of the University of Pennsylvania, brought out a primer for companies wishing to maintain operations while strike-bound. *Operating during Strikes* "was effectively a how-to guide for companies contemplating replacing their union workers. ... Phelps Dodge not only ordered a box of *Operating during Strikes* in 1983, but distributed the book, according to one company official, as the strike 'bible'." (62)⁸ One of the key figures at the Wharton School was Professor Herbert Northrup, chairman of the industry department. Northrup was of the view that multi-union bargaining, instituted in the copper mining industry in 1967-68, "was a threat to American management's right to control its future." (61) Northrup told Rosenblum the idea for the book was his, and subsequently — in a vindictive review of Rosenblum's book — acknowledged the substance of Rosenblum's account.⁹

Rosenblum's book also sheds light on the inner workings of the National Labor Relations Board and its role during the strike. He begins this discussion with an anecdote, describing a visit by Jimmy Hoffa's successor, Teamster president Fitzsimmons, with Ronald Reagan. The teamsters had heard that Reagan was considering appointing Milo Price, a person with well-known anti-labour views, to head the National Labor Relations Board:

[Fitzsimmons] carried nothing in his hands: no briefcase, no briefing notes. That's the way he met with presidents — trucking lines presidents or U.S. presidents. Fitzsimmons wasn't there to negotiate. He barely got out a hello before delivering this demand to the president: "Mister Reagan don't bring in Milo Price. He's a sonofabitch." (185-6)

The intervention was successful: Price remained in Phoenix as regional director of the Arizona and New Mexico office of the NLRB. From this position, he played a critical role assisting Phelps Dodge with its conduct of the strike, in effect, deflecting union charges that the company's conduct could be defined as bargaining in bad faith. (190-1) ^③

⁸The exact citation is: Charles R. Perry, Andrew M. Kramer, Thomas J. Schneider, *Operating during Strikes: Company Experience, NLRB Policies, and Governmental Regulations* (Philadelphia 1982).

⁹See Herbert R. Northrup, review of George H. Hildebrand, Garth L. Mangum, *Capital and Labor in American Copper, 1845-1990: Linkages Between Product and Labor Markets* and Jonathan D. Rosenblum, *Copper Crucible*, in *Journal of Labor Research*, 16, 4 (Fall 1995), 493-9.

Rosenblum provides equally illuminating detail and vignettes from the strike itself, examples of the ways in which the strike brought workers face to face with the contradictions of their country. A local man who was on leave from the army — he was a corporal with a mechanized unit that patrolled the Berlin Wall — watched familiar equipment such as armoured personnel carriers roll into town, while combat helicopters thudded ominously overhead. Many of the strikers had also served overseas; they watched in silence. Television screens throughout 1983 chronicled the Polish unrest and the state suppression of Lech Walesa's "Solidarity." The irony was not lost on the town's residents, who greeted the media with placards reading "Welcome to Poland." The human interest stories were subversive: the buddies who had fought together in Vietnam, for example. Nine had gone over to 'Nam, and six never came back — the stuff of a *Time* news story back in 1970 ("unquestioning patriotism persists among most of Morenci's tough-minded mining families," enthused the magazine). Now the three former Marines were out on the line together. (82) A theology student stood in for his dad on the picket line, where he delivered his first sermons. He was questioned by strikers and ended up doubting his own church.

But perhaps the strike's most fascinating story at the level of the community was the ways in which it changed gender relations. Rosenblum describes how the miners' union encouraged the resurrection of the women's auxiliary and proposed as president a well-dressed insurance representative:

When the auxiliary supporters saw a leader with painted fingernails and false eyelashes in charge, some of them rebelled and called their own meetings. "We saw them eyelashes afluttering and we said no way," said Toni Potter, one of the earliest auxiliary members. "This isn't going to be a "Ladies" auxiliary. Kiss that shit good-bye. This is going to be the Women's Auxiliary." (144)

Another writer, Barbara Kingsolver, spent a good deal of time in Clifton-Morenci during the strike. Her account, *Holding the Line*, is a vivid portrait of the dispute, particularly its impact on women in the community. A perfect complement to *Copper Crucible*, Kingsolver is often inspirational. As one of the women activists boasted to Kingsolver, "Just look at us. At the beginning of this strike, we were just a bunch of ladies."¹⁰ And as far as the women were concerned, they won the strike:

The women who came through the strike together shared this sense that they were the lucky ones. They had been given a gift. ... Berta Chavez ... said, "We've won this strike already." It wasn't the victory they'd expected, she admitted, but it felt better than anything they imagined; it felt like respect.¹¹

¹⁰Quoted in Barbara Kingsolver, *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* (Ithaca 1989), 174.

¹¹Kingsolver, *Holding the Line*, 182.

Even the cops granted them that. When the strike was more than a year old, one state trooper complained that "If we could just get rid of those broads, we'd have it made."¹²

In assessing the meaning and significance of the 1983 strike, Rosenblum argues that it "represented a kind of harmonic convergence of conservative forces that massed their resources to fight unions." (222) He stresses the way in which the strike symbolized organized labour's decline in recent years. Studs Terkel picked up this theme on the dust jacket, describing *Copper Crucible* as "a stunning metaphor for labor's trouble today." But Rosenblum's narrative also cautions against too superficial a reading of the strike. He concludes that the unions sidestepped some hard issues during the strike. Locals were frequently forced to conform to directives from a distant headquarters. The Steelworkers, who had only displaced the earlier Mine Mill local in Clifton-Morenci in 1967, "created a top-down structure that ultimately stifled local, democratic representation. The voices of Clifton and Morenci were smothered by the combination of Steelworkers procedure and personality." (220) Nor did labour win the public relations struggle: "Unions ... failed at one of their most basic tasks: educating the workers and the public about labor's needs." (218) This section is sub-titled "Solidarity Lost," and it is instructive to recall Hobsbawm's perceptive comment: "The habit of solidarity, which is the foundation of effective trade unionism, takes time to learn. ... It takes even longer to become part of the unquestioned ethical social code of the working-class."¹³ Today, as Rosenblum notes, the outlook is not promising. Rates of unionization continue to drop, in Canada as well as in the United States.¹⁴ Scholars interested in labour, such as readers of this journal, need to study this disturbing trend carefully. Rosenblum's book is a good place to start.

¹²Kingsolver, *Holding the Line*, 15.

¹³E.J. Hobsbawm, "The Machine Breakers," in *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London 1964), 9.

¹⁴See for example John O'Grady, "The Decline of Collective Bargaining in the Private Sector," in Mercedes Steedman, Peter Suschnigg, and Dieter K. Buse, eds., *Hard Lessons: The Mine Mill Union in the Canadian Labour Movement* (Toronto 1995), 21-5.