

PBS's *Red Metal: The Copper Country Strike of 1913* commemorates Michigan's bitter labor past

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Produced by Jonathan Silvers

One hundred years ago, a major strike by copper miners was continuing in the Keweenaw Peninsula, which protrudes into Lake Superior in northern Michigan. In the middle of the months-long battle against intransigent mine owners, at least 73 people, mostly children, were killed in a horrific incident at a celebration on Christmas Eve in 1913.

Upwards of 700 adults and children of striking miners had been attending a party in Calumet, Michigan, organized by the Western Federation of Miners (WFM.) The deaths occurred after an individual wearing a button promoting the bosses' Citizens Alliance came into the hall and yelled fire. There was no fire, just a cruel provocation organized by anti-strike forces. The ensuing stampede from the second floor of the Italian Hall toward the street entrance resulted in the tragedy of terrible proportions.

Late last month, to commemorate the centennial of this calamity, public television stations across the US broadcast the documentary *Red Metal: The Copper Country Strike of 1913*, produced by Jonathan Silvers. The hour-long film is now streaming online on the PBS website.

The film opens and closes with singer Steve Earle performing *1913 Massacre*, written and recorded by left-wing singer-musician Woody Guthrie in 1941. Its haunting line, "See what your greed for money has done," sums up the miners' anger and grief at the time.

The portrayal of such an important, albeit relatively little-known struggle on US television is a rare and welcome event, although, as we shall see, the film has its serious weaknesses.

Silvers's *Red Metal* is based on the 2006 book, *Death's Door: The Truth Behind Michigan's Largest Mass Murder*, by lawyer and historian Steve Lehto. The book was reissued this year in connection with the centennial of the "Italian Hall Disaster," as the incident has come to be known. Lehto is one of those interviewed in the film, and his account provides many details about the event.

The organization of a strike of all the mines in the Keweenaw copper range in Michigan was no small accomplishment. Many of the workers were new immigrants from various parts of

Europe who often could not speak each other's language. There had been walkouts at individual mines in the area in the decade leading up to the 1913 strike. Two Finnish-American miners were shot and killed in one such strike, in 1907.

The copper miners worked in exceptionally harsh and dangerous conditions. Cave-ins, falls and other accidents claimed an average of one miner a week in the area. The annual death rate in copper mining was one worker in 200, making it the most deadly of all mining jobs.

The work was backbreaking, especially for the "trammers." These workers, usually the most recent immigrants, loaded huge trams with rock by hand and pushed them toward the main shaft using only their own brute strength.

Miners worked 10-hour days and as much as a mile deep underground. With the short northern winter days, that meant they went months without seeing the sun six days a week. They lived in company-owned barracks and rooming houses, or in houses on company-owned land.

The strike in Michigan's Upper Peninsula was part of a broad and explosive movement of the working class in the US. Tens of thousands of immigrant workers struck in 1912, under the leadership of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and organizers from the Socialist Party, in the Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile strike. Colorado coal miners, organized by the United Mine Workers, walked out in a dispute that resulted in the infamous Ludlow Massacre of April 1914, in which 19 were killed by state National Guardsmen and mine company guards.

In response to the copper miners' strike, Michigan's governor followed the example of the chief executives in a number of western states hit by mine strikes and also called out the National Guard. The latter camped out on mining company property. Meanwhile, the companies carried out their own brutal attacks. There were more than 14,000 miners on the range, and half of them were employed by the Calumet and Hecla Mining Company or its subsidiaries.

James MacNaughton, the company's general manager in the area, encouraged and organized provocateurs, Pinkerton agents and private security firms. He also deputized and armed scabs,

who acted as strikebreakers. Thousands of scabs were brought by train from Chicago and New York City. Injunctions against picketing were obtained.

The bosses' tactics led to hundreds of arrests, serious injuries and the deaths of several people, even before the Italian Hall tragedy in December.

The film presents the scene at the hotel where the WFM president, Charles Moyer, was staying at the time of the strike. Moyer had earlier worked alongside "Big Bill" Haywood, the legendary leader of the IWW. They faced frame-up charges in the assassination of Idaho governor Frank Steunenberg in 1906, before eventually being found not guilty.

After the Italian Hall deaths, Moyer began sending telegrams to officials, including the US president and Michigan's governor, calling for an investigation of the events. The local sheriff came to Moyer's room and warned him to stop sending telegrams, and demanded he sign a statement exonerating the Citizens Alliance in connection with the deaths.

When Moyer refused, the sheriff left. Shortly afterwards, as the film shows, thugs from the Citizens Alliance broke into Moyer's room. He was beaten and shot, and taken from his hotel room to a nearby bridge, where the goons threatened to kill him by throwing him into the river below. Moyer was forced onto a train bound for Chicago, where he was hospitalized with a bullet in the back.

To this day, no one has ever been indicted for the Christmas Eve mass murder.

The funerals for the 73 killed, 60 of them children, were massively attended. The footage in the film, including that of the bodies of Finnish-American children laid out in a temporary morgue, is heart-rending.

Lehto writes in his book that 500 iron miners from nearby Negaunee and Ishpeming chartered a train to attend the funeral. "Forty four children's white caskets, covered with flowers, each carried by a group of four miners, filled the streets. Although many of the coffins were small, the weight of the task appeared crushing. Grown men, some who pushed trams for hours without complaint, collapsed in grief and handed the coffins to those next to them."

A committee set up by striking miners coordinated funerals that took place at six churches simultaneously. Services were held in churches representing different religions and conducted in Finnish, Italian, Croatian and Slovenian. A mass funeral was held December 28, 1913.

The strike continued for another four months after the Italian Hall incident. The workers were eventually forced back to work on the employers' terms. Half the workers were hired back only after a coerced renunciation of the union on their part. They were forced to sign a book dedicated to MacNaughton and to contribute five cents each toward a memorial watch for their bitterest foe.

The 1913-1914 strike, while powerful and determined, was defeated primarily because it remained relatively isolated. A

contributing cause was the somewhat immature development of the working class itself. This was decades before industrial organization encompassed key sections of the economy.

The strike revealed the ferocity of class relations in the US, at a time when American capitalism was still in its ascendancy. Even a century ago, militant trade unionism proved inadequate in the face of big business and its state, armed to the teeth. Many of the strikers were sympathetic to the IWW or the Socialist Party, but it was not until the Russian Revolution a few years later that the most advanced workers were won to the perspective of socialist internationalism. Today, more than ever, an independent political and revolutionary perspective is needed to defend the most basic social rights.

Both the PBS film and the book on which it is partly based draw quite different conclusions from the 1913 conflict. The strike in the Upper Peninsula and the Italian Hall Disaster are treated as tragic and isolated episodes, which were followed by a return to labor "stability." They suggest that the lesson of the strike was the need for "pragmatism," a policy based on support for the trade unions and an appeal to liberals in the Democratic Party.

The unions have long since been transformed into open and loyal adjuncts of the corporations, and indeed the UAW, the leading union in Michigan, is a component of big business.

Economic conditions in much of the Upper Peninsula are very depressed, with a declining population and most of the major industries having collapsed. Cliffs Natural Resources announced in March 2013 that it would shut down its Palmer, Michigan (in the Negaunee-Ishpeming area), iron ore Empire Mine "by the end of 2014 or the beginning of 2015" (*The Mining Journal*), eliminating some 700 jobs. The outlook for the miners, according to the *Journal*, is "grim."



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