

Contents

- Introduction 3
1. Josephine Roche: Becoming a Maternalist Reformer,
1886–1927 10
 2. Powers Hapgood: Becoming a Working-Class Hero,
1899–1928 29
 3. A. S. Embree: Becoming an IWW Organizer,
1876–1926 42
 4. The 1927–1928 Colorado Coal Strike: March
1926–October 18, 1927 63
 5. The 1927–1928 Colorado Coal Strike: October 18, 1927–
November 4, 1927 82
 6. The 1927–1928 Colorado Coal Strike: November 4,
1927–February 19, 1928 102
 7. The Aftermath of the 1927–1928 Colorado Coal
Strike: 1927–1930 118

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8. Traces of the 1927–1928 Colorado Coal Strike: 1931–1948	146
9. The Cold War, Deindustrialization, and Competing Legacies of Industrial Democracy	178
10. Trying to Remember the Columbine but Still Remembering Ludlow	206
<i>Epilogue and Acknowledgments</i>	243
<i>Notes</i>	249
<i>Bibliography</i>	301
<i>Index</i>	319

Introduction

At dawn on November 21, 1927, at least five hundred marchers approached Serene, the company town Rocky Mountain Fuel Company (RMFC) built twenty miles northwest of Denver. Serene housed coalminers and their families at the RMFC's newest and most valuable property, the Columbine coalmine. On October 18, 1927, the majority of Colorado's 12,500 coalminers had voted to go on strike, and the following day, most of the state's coalmines closed. The RMFC management, however, decided to keep the Columbine open, which turned the town into an anything-but-serene target. Almost daily, as strikebreakers readied for work, strike supporters marched through town, behind an American flagbearer, boisterously singing "Solidarity," the anthem of the union leading the strike, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

On November 21, for the first time, Serene's gates were locked. Inside, a handful of Weld County sheriffs, RMFC officials, and reporters nervously mingled outside the camp's office, and a phalanx of twenty newly commissioned state strike police lined the fence. Marchers demanded entrance for their morning "parade," but Louis Scherf, the strike police leader, refused.

When Scherf insisted upon speaking to their leader, the crowd replied, “We are all leaders!” After that, eyewitness accounts diverge, but this much is certain: Police shot and killed six striking coalminers and wounded perhaps sixty more. That violence soon became known as the Columbine Massacre, and it was the turning point of the 1927–1928 Colorado Coal Strike. This book is about that strike and its historical legacies, which, ironically perhaps, includes its omission from the dominant United States historical narrative.

Several elements of this walkout make it worth knowing more about. For example, from generalized textbooks to specialized IWW monographs, historians have declared that the IWW died out after its intense World War I-era persecution. Yet, if the IWW was truly dead, how did it lead a successful, statewide strike in 1927 and 1928? To appropriate Mark Twain’s sardonic quote, perhaps reports of the IWW’s death have been greatly exaggerated, especially when compared with the relative strength of the United Mine Workers (UMW) during that same era.

Josephine Roche could also use additional historical examination. Biographies of Roche and accounts of the 1927–1928 strike have, until now, repeated the following narrative: Roche did not legally or financially control the RMFC when the Columbine Massacre occurred, so she could not have prevented it. Only after gaining control of the company in March of 1928 was Roche able to implement her vision of industrial democracy, which led to the September 1, 1928, contract between the RMFC and the UMW. Since, as I will explore, this contract wielded an outsized influence on national labor policies, it is worth knowing more about, and my research began with this question: Since the only role the UMW played in the IWW-led strike was denouncing it, why did the UMW get that contract?

Little research has gone into answering that question, probably because most historians looking at Roche have viewed her through the lens of women’s history, not labor history. It is hardly surprising that Roche is celebrated as a significant figure in women’s history, even before that field got subsumed by gender studies. Roche was probably the only woman to run a coal company in United States history. Then, she leveraged that position to achieve even more remarkable accomplishments in politics and at the UMW. In 1935, she ran for governor of Colorado. Although she lost, it was a first in state history. From 1935 through 1937, Roche served as assistant secretary of the

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Treasury, which made her the second-highest-ranking cabinet member in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. (The highest-ranking was her friend, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins.) Until 1940, Roche chaired FDR's interdepartmental health committee, charged with exploring and proposing policies to expand national health care. Beyond Roche's significant government service, because of her influence within the UMW, she also played key roles in influencing the nation's coal policies. As a direct consequence of the 1928 RMFC-UMW contract, Roche and John L. Lewis, president of the UMW, forged a decades-long personal and professional relationship, and throughout the 1930s, they helped shape federal labor policies. In 1945, Lewis hired Roche to design and administer the UMW Retirement and Pension Fund. Even after her forced resignation from the fund in 1972, four years before her death, Roche continued to influence the United States labor movement as she had for over half a century. In spite of Roche's significant impact on labor policies, however, Roche's biographers have primarily written about her through the admiring lens of women's history. For example, Roche biographer Elinor McGinn calls Roche an "angel of the coalmines."¹ Another Roche biographer, University of Maryland professor Robyn Muncy, argues that Roche was a "relentless reformer."² I will argue that Roche was neither. My aim is not to demonize Roche, but I do intend to tarnish her halo. Roche was not a saint, but a complex human being whose influence upon American labor has largely gone unexamined. Especially unexamined has been her role in the 1927–1928 Colorado Coal Strike, and specifically, the Columbine Massacre, events that not only changed the trajectory of Roche's life but also influenced the trajectories of the UMW, John L. Lewis, and the United States labor movement.

Also deserving closer examination are historical accounts that portray 1920s' and early 1930s' workers as quiescent. They were not. Even a cursory look through the online *New York Times* using the word *strike* as a search term pulls up the following number of articles: In 1925, 2,514; in 1926, 4,025; in 1927, 2,579; in 1929, 1,841; and in 1929, 2,358, and the overwhelming majority of these hits are about labor strikes. For example, in 1926, New York City fur makers, baggage handlers, plasterers, bricklayers, Pennsylvania anthracite coalminers, Chicago gravediggers, and Connecticut musicians went out on strike. In 1927, along with Colorado coalminers, New York City box makers, plumbers, teamsters, and taxi drivers also struck. In the taxi-driver strike, at

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least one person was shot to death and three others were badly beaten. In 1928, carpenters, textile workers (3,500 in Paterson, New Jersey, and 15,000 in Rhode Island), dental mechanics, laundry workers, dry cleaners, and even New Jersey doctors went on strike. In 1929, Texas railroad workers, oil truck drivers, and cafeteria workers, among others, walked off their jobs. The New York City truck drivers' strike led to street fights, and the cafeteria workers' strike resulted in at least 455 pickets, most extremely militant women, getting arrested. In the Elizabethtown, Tennessee, textile strike that year, again with mostly women strikers, state troopers had to be stationed at the mill for it to reopen.

Even though its articles reflected, as they do today, a distinctly regional focus, by the late 1920s, the *Times* increasingly promoted itself as the nation's news source.³ In this capacity, the newspaper and its reporters helped write, as the saying aptly goes, the first draft of history. The *Times*'s dominance today, and its easily searchable online archives, award it continued power over historical narratives. So, while the strike article examples above prove that the newspaper did report on events throughout the country, including the 1927–1928 Colorado Coal Strike, it also reflects important biases. For example, the Colorado strike—a statewide, seven-month conflict led by the IWW—warranted just thirty-four total articles. That coverage suggests that, if anything, the *Times* under-reported strikes nationwide, and ignored other regions of the country entirely, probably because it did not employ stringers in non-urban areas.⁴

United States' coalfields were especially volatile, yet this is not how they are portrayed in dominant historical narratives, exemplified by textbooks. These narratives mostly go like this: In June of 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the National Industrial Relations Act (NIRA) with its 7(a) clause that endorsed labor unions into law and, combined with the bold leadership of John L. Lewis, who flooded the coalfields with UMW organizers, a wave of UMW memberships jumpstarted the nation's organized labor movement. That "great men, great deeds" interpretation of labor history still dominates 1930s' historical narratives, even though there is little evidence it is true. In fact, I will argue that narrative has it backwards. Militant workers, especially coalminers, inspired so much fear among policymakers, their militancy proved the proximate cause that led to New Deal labor reforms. Contrary to textbook accounts, evidence shows that coalminers neither

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awaited FDR's blessing nor obediently followed Lewis's directives when they joined the UMW. Furthermore, the 1927–1928 Colorado Coal Strike is one of many examples demonstrating that coalminer militancy arose *before* the summer of 1933.

Another reason to learn more about the 1927–1928 Colorado Coal Strike is because what little we know about it stands in stark contrast to the abundance of popular and scholarly histories generated about the 1913–1914 phase of the coal strike in Colorado, which includes the April 20, 1914, Ludlow Massacre.⁵ This documentary discrepancy between the two strikes raises important questions about how and why certain historical events get incorporated into our national historical narrative and others do not. For example, although the Ludlow Massacre briefly appears in many secondary and college United States history textbooks, the 1927–1928 Colorado Coal Strike and the Columbine Massacre go unmentioned. Why do historians remember Ludlow but forget the Columbine? Exploring answers to that question requires examining historiography itself, an exploration I will pursue in the pages that follow.

Chapters 1 through 3 focus on the lives of Josephine Roche, Powers Hapgood, and A. S. Embree, respectively, three historical actors closely associated with the 1927–1928 Colorado Coal Strike. Roche led the RMFC where the Columbine Massacre took place, Hapgood was a ubiquitous labor figure who went to work for Roche four months after the 1928 RMFC–UMW contract went into effect, and Embree was the primary IWW strike leader of the 1927–1928 walkout.

These chapters also introduce the theme of industrial democracy, which threads throughout the book. From the progressive era through the end of World War II, the concept of industrial democracy drove public discourse and policy debates, although its definitions varied as much as its advocates, which included Roche, Hapgood, and Embree. As a helpful baseline, Joseph McCartin offers three visions of industrial democracy that inspired policy decisions during World War I. He writes, “One vision was advanced by a group of farsighted employers, influenced by renegades from the scientific management movement who had begun to recognize that workers’ participation could influence the efficiency of production. Another vision, championed by the leadership of the AFL [American Federation of Labor], posited the trade

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union collective bargaining agreement as the sine qua non of democratic industrial relations. A third vision, less fully articulated than the other two, emerged from the ranks of trade union militants and their allies. It linked industrial democracy to a radical restructuring of workplace and social relations.”⁶

These definitions generally align with the visions of industrial democracy Roche, Hapgood, and Embree acted upon in the late 1920s. Roche represents the enlightened employer, although she also pushed for the UMW contract at the RMFC. Hapgood pushed for AFL contracts, but he also worked alongside organizers like Embree, whose militancy made such contracts possible. Embree absolutely hoped workers would change the world, yet he was also a pragmatic labor leader. Therefore, none of these historical actors was an ideologue, and their actions demonstrate that, over time, they all modified their beliefs in response to changing circumstances. Even so, their fundamental visions of industrial democracy remained remarkably consistent, which allows us to follow them, their ideas, and their influence over a large swath of time, from the late 1800s through the 1980s. My aim is not to write three biographies, however, because both Roche and Hapgood, although not Embree, already have biographers. Instead, I examine evidence associated with all three that has not been included in previous sources or that relates to the 1927–1928 strike. That approach allows the inclusion of additional historical actors (such as George Creel, John Brophy, or John L. Lewis) and themes (such as worker militancy and gender) that help place the strike’s significance within the larger arc of a fairly consistent United States labor history narrative.

Chapter 1 follows Roche’s life as a progressive reformer through her 1927 inheritance of half of the RMFC, and it ends when the 1927–1928 Colorado Coal Strike begins. It demonstrates that, contrary to Robyn Muncy’s claims, Roche had not been living her life to “right the wrongs of Ludlow.”⁷ Chapter 2 examines Hapgood’s unsuccessful efforts to democratize the UMW from within during the 1920s, a movement that contextualizes why the 1928 RMFC–UMW contract proved so significant to Lewis. Chapter 3 follows Embree through the rise and purported fall of the IWW up until the union sends him to Colorado in 1926.

Chapters 4 through 6 trace the 1927–1928 Colorado Coal strike from its unofficial beginning August 8, 1927, through its official end on February 18, 1928. These chapters follow the chronological development of the strike and

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contextualize the various local, state, and national social and political pressures that influenced the strike's trajectory.

Chapters 7 through 10 examine the legacies of the strike, including how and why it has been included, but mostly forgotten, in history. Chapter 7 looks at the strike's short-term consequences, especially for Roche and the RMFC. Negative reactions to the Columbine Massacre prompted Roche to finally assert control over the RMFC, and one of her first tasks was to create "spin control" in response to that violence. Her narrative soon evolved into the "elevator pitch" she made to potential investors; a pitch that, unsurprisingly, painted both Roche and the RMFC in a favorable light. What is remarkable is that the narrative she spun has gone unexamined for so long. In chapter 8, I examine how the disastrous impacts of the Great Depression pushed Roche, Hapgood, and Embree deep into the orbit of John L. Lewis and the CIO.⁸

Chapter 9 follows two of the divergent paths organized labor took during the early Cold War. Although the concept of industrial democracy no longer drove public debates and policies, the roots these divergent paths followed can be traced to earlier WWI-era visions of industrial democracy. The path Mine Mill organizers Maurice Travis and Clinton Jencks pursued was built upon Embree's egalitarian vision of industrial democracy. The path Roche forged at the UMW Retirement and Pension Fund combined the industrial democracy visions of enlightened employers and the AFL's emphasis on contracts, a combination that seemed to represent the best hopes and worst fears that bread-and-butter unionism had to offer. Anti-Communist fears and deindustrialization, however, brought both paths to ignoble ends in the 1960s.

There are many historiographical reasons why postwar historians continue to remember Ludlow but forget the Columbine, and chapter 10 explores two of these. One relates to Fred Thompson, who has dominated historical constructions of the IWW, especially regarding the 1927–1928 Colorado Coal Strike. The second relates to the oral history "boom" of the 1970s, when, at last, participants were asked to recall the 1927–1928 Colorado Coal Strike. Even though informants tried to remember the Columbine, however, they continued remembering Ludlow instead.