

TELEPHONE OPERATORS UNION

operators, resulting in the formation of over 50 new TOD locals outside New England in the next several months. The TOD, although severely handicapped by lack of funds, even managed to establish 11 locals in the Deep South, where women's unionism was almost unknown. Major operators' strikes occurred in several southern cities during 1919, as well as in St. Louis, Cleveland, and along the Pacific Coast.

The TOD was determined to promote women's labor leadership and heighten operators' self-esteem by involving the rank and file in the burgeoning post-World War I workers education movement. This movement offered young women workers the opportunity to acquire both a broad cultural education and the writing and speaking skills necessary to administer union locals and negotiate with management. Telephone operators flocked to night classes at Boston Trade Union College, which assembled arguably the most impressive faculty of any workers' school. Sizable operator delegations were enrolled at Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers in Industry, the principal residential workers' school for women. Union operators also attended the National WTUL Training School in Chicago.

The TOD devoted considerable effort to enhancing worker dignity, combating unfavorable stereotypes of operators in the mass media. It pressed for higher wages, in part to permit operators to live independently of their families. The TOD also pioneered in countering the prevailing images of the sexes in trade union iconography, which depicted workers as brawny men and women as maternal figures. Its emblem, the "Weaver of Speech," presented the woman as a worker performing a task critical to commerce: the telephone operator held in her hands the lines through which the entire nation communicated.

The TOD declined sharply during the early 1920s as telephone management initiated a campaign to install company unions, part of a larger anti-union campaign that significantly weakened the labor movement. By 1923, TOD membership outside New England had largely evaporated, and the New England telephone men had seceded from the IBEW to form a company union. New England Telephone began plans to introduce the dial system, which threatened job loss and would greatly reduce union leverage. Boston's local, the TOD's largest, was torn by factional strife. With New England Telephone refusing to consider a wage increase, the TOD president, Julia O'Connor, who had directed the 1919 New England walkout, led the operators out on strike in June 1923 for higher wages and the seven-hour day. Although many operators refused to heed the call, the strikers put up a determined fight, paralyzing service in many of the region's major cities. As in 1919, violent conflict between prostrike crowds

and strikebreakers erupted on several occasions. The strike was broken after a month, and its leaders and many operators were permanently blacklisted.

After the failure of the strike, the TOD was in effect destroyed, although it maintained a skeletal existence under O'Connor until 1938. Telephone operators' unionism did not return to New England for nearly 50 years. Three of the nation's most prominent women labor activists during the next several decades—Julia O'Connor Parker, Rose Finkelstein Norwood, and Rose Sullivan—began their careers as leaders of the operators' union in Boston. Through them, the TOD continued to advance workers' interests long after its demise.

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See also **Women's Trade Union League**

TENNESSEE CONVICT UPRISING (1891-1892)

Between July 14, 1891, and late August 1892, over a thousand Tennessee miners rose up in arms to protest the use of convict laborers in the State's coal mines. Most of the miners were white, while a majority of convicts were black. The miners targeted three coal companies in east Tennessee: Briceville, Coal Creek, and Oliver Springs, and one in mid-Tennessee, Tracy City. The largest of the companies, Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company (TCIR) in mid-Tennessee, leased convicts from the State of Tennessee; the smaller east Tennessee companies subleased convicts from the TCIR to work in their respective coal mines. The "Convict Wars" (the name given by contemporaries to the rebellion) took place amidst America's turbulent labor struggles of the 1890s, a period in which workers throughout the country challenged the waxing power of large-scale corporations, portrayed increasingly by unions as fostering unjust workplaces and perverting America's democratic ideals.

Over the course of this 13-month-long rebellion, the miners coupled military actions with vigorous political efforts in an attempt to undermine the convict lease system. They asked supportive government officials to intervene legally on their behalf and compelled the governor to call a special session of the legislature to

debate the convict lease system. Continuing a legal strategy begun in the late 1880s, the miners brought a number of cases to the courts seeking to secure their rights as workers and to limit the reach of convict laborers into the east Tennessee mines. When all these efforts failed, the miners established a formal political alliance with the Farmers Alliances in an effort to secure the election of legislators committed to ending Tennessee's convict lease system. These political actions were interspersed with four distinct attacks on the prison stockades and suggest two important points: that the miners viewed the attacks as a form of political petition, and that they saw political and economic actions as two sides of the same coin. This worldview was particularly noteworthy at a time when major labor federations, like the American Federation of Labor, frequently disengaged from political lobbying and adopted a strategy that relied primarily on economic negotiations with company employers.

The miners' sustained political engagement with the State of Tennessee offers numerous indications of their political sensibilities and cultural outlook. The men who opted to work in Tennessee's coal mines in the late nineteenth century came from the areas surrounding Anderson and Grundy County, where the majority of farms were worked by their owners. As the population of these rural communities grew, younger sons, who did not inherit property, sought work in the nascent postbellum Tennessee coal mines. When they came to the east Tennessee coal towns, many of them bought houses and began to call the towns home. None of these mining sites were traditional company towns where the coal companies owned not just the mine, but also the land in the town and the local store, and thus could dictate rents, housing allotments, and the cost of mining and household supplies. Rather, many of the families who came to live in the mining towns viewed themselves as homeowners with a serious stake in the future of the mines and the surrounding towns. This perspective was shared by both the miners and the shopkeepers who came to service these communities.

In petitioning against the use of convict labor in the mines, the men of east and mid-Tennessee repeatedly spoke in the phraseology of homeownership. Were the coal companies to replace them with convict laborers or to force them to accede to lower wages by threatening to replace them with unfree miners, the miners argued that they would lose their homes, not just their jobs. The local shopkeepers, who joined the miners in the Convict Wars, likewise realized that if the miners were to lose their jobs to convict laborers, their businesses would suffer greatly. Thus, the miners and their local supporters positioned themselves politically and ideologically as family men who had

economic stakes in their communities—not as itinerants who moved from mining camp to mining camp with only a commitment to the next paycheck.

At the same time that the miners portrayed themselves as upstanding propertied citizens—and certainly not of the “school of the commune or nihilist,” as Shapiro has noted in her larger study, *A New South Rebellion*—they depicted the companies as behaving in unpatriotic, “un-American” ways. The miners' leaders made clear that as a group they favored competitive capitalism but objected to what they believed were unfair interventions into the marketplace. They were particularly irked by the state government's decision to lease convicts to privately owned coal companies, thereby enabling the companies to impose onerous and unjust contracts on the miners. Should miners refuse to accede to company demands, the coal company owners could easily threaten to fire recalcitrants and replace them with convicts.

The Convict Wars ended in August 1892. During the miners' fourth attack on convict stockades, four militiamen were killed, some in murky circumstances. This loss of life turned public opinion against the miners. Faced with diminished public support and a much larger contingent of militia whom state officials had brought in from all over Tennessee, the miners capitulated. The aftermath of the rebellion continued to be felt in Tennessee's mining districts and in the state capital over the next few years, particularly in the form of court battles between the State of Tennessee and the coal operators over who should bear the costs of the rebellion and between the State of Tennessee and the miners. Although the rebellion had boosted labor organization in the Tennessee coalfields, especially the nascent United Mine Workers of America, its aftermath decimated these organizations as labor leaders faced a succession of rebellion-related prosecutions. Convict leasing continued in the State of Tennessee until the convict lease contract between Tennessee and the TCIR ended in December 1895.

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