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A Balance Shifted: The Unionization of Michigan’s Lake Copper District, 1935-1955

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By Daniel Schneider

Three decades after the unsuccessful 1913-1914 strike at the Lake District copper mines of Michigan, workers organized as Local 584 of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers (Mine Mill) signed a union contract with Calumet & Hecla Consolidated Copper Company. C & H was the last and most significant of the region’s three major copper mining companies to unionize during the three-year period from 1939 to 1942. This paper tells the untold history of the successful union drives in the Lake District’s copper mines, starting with Copper Range Company in 1939 and encompassing the subsequent unionizations of Quincy Mining Company and finally C & H. The paper develops thematic connections between the 1913-1914, including Mine Mill’s lineage to the Western Federation of Miners, parallel ethnic dimensions, and, most significantly, the contrasting role of state authority between the two time periods. The paper carries the Lake District’s labor history forward to 1955 to include United Steelworkers’ successful challenge to Mine Mill in 1950 and the strike of 1955. This history also incorporates source material from the papers of highly influential union organizer and representative Eugene Saari, material which to date has not been integrated into the labor history of the region.

Keywords: Power Relationships, Labor vs. Capital, Hard Rock Mine Unions, State Authority, 1913-1914 Strike, International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers

Biographical Statement: Daniel Schneider is a graduate student of Industrial Archaeology at Michigan Technological University. His research interests include labor history, social relationships in the context of industrial production processes, social dimensions of technology, and material culture.