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

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

Daniel Schneider

30 June 2014

The story usually told about labor history in the Lake Copper District of Michigan's Upper Peninsula is that of the 1913 Strike led by the Western Federation of Miners. That strike was an important and potent part of the copper country's history. Its events echo through the streets of Calumet and Hancock, of Painesdale and South Range, to this day. But the 1913 Strike is not the whole story of labor in the district, even if it is oftentimes presented as such. This is a labor history of the Lake district from the late 1930s through the mid-1950s. This was a time when the workforces of the Lake District copper mines organized as locals of the International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers (Mine Mill) and negotiated the district's first union contracts with their employers. The time period for this labor history extends to 1955 to include the first major strike of the unionized era. This timeframe also allows the inclusion of the union locals' transition from Mine Mill representation to representation by the United Steelworkers of America under circumstances presaging the McCarthyism of 1950s America.

Background: The Strike of 1913-1914

By mid-summer, 1913, the Western Federation of Miners (W.F.M.) had begun enjoying success turning the district's miners to their cause. The W.F.M. had reestablished a local in the district in 1908, making gradual progress growing its membership in the ensuing years. It was the companies' decision to transition to the one-man rock drill that helped most to grow the ranks of the union, as underground mine workers rallied against this technological transition which promised to reduce the number of miners' jobs and the trammers' prospects for promotion. The story goes that the national W.F.M. organization, its war chest depleted by strikes in the West, was dragged into the 1913-1914 Strike by its zealous locals, who sent letters to the mining companies' management demanding a conference and recognition of their union. The Strike began on July 13, 1913 and lasted through the bitter winter — bitter not so much from the cold as from the acrimony hung in the air of the mine towns and locations; bitter most acutely from the Italian Hall tragedy, when a false call of "fire" during a Christmas Eve party caused a panicked rush and more than 70 people were crushed to death at the bottom of the hall's lone exit stair. When the strike finally ended in mid-April, 1914, the emotional wound of Italian Hall was still fresh. The nine months of antagonism between the union and the mining companies had carved deep rifts through the populations of the Lake district's copper mining communities. When it was all over, the W.F.M. was not much

better off than it had been when the affair started. The mining companies never budged on any of the union's demands, least of all the demand that the companies recognize the W.F.M. as their workforce's bargaining agent. That was the Lake Copper district's experience with unionism in the early part of the 20th century.¹

Themes of ethnicity, paternalism, and economic power, which were central to the 1913 Strike, remained significant during the unionization of the Lake district from 1939 to 1942, though during this later period they took different forms. The most significant and dramatic shift to occur between the two time periods was in the government's role. State power in the 1913-1914 Strike was manifested in a National Guard encampment set up to keep the peace in Calumet, just days after the workers went out on strike. By 1939, the National Labor Relations Act, or "Wagner Act," had been passed and implemented, putting the power of federal law behind the copper miners' right to organize. With the onset of World War II, federal strategic procurement policies would provide economic benefits for both the companies and their employees.

The unionization of the Lake District copper mines began in South Range.

Copper Range Mining Company

On August 28, 1939, the voice of Adolph Germer went out over the airwaves of the copper country of Michigan. The president of the state's Industrial Union Council spoke of six-dollar-a-day wages and eight-hour workdays in the copper mines of Montana and Arizona. Among the employees, making \$3.20 per day at the Copper Range Mining Company, who heard Germer's radio address was William Hendrickson, a miner in Copper Range's No. 4 Painesdale shaft. Hendrickson had come to work for Copper Range in April of that year. He was a union man, a veteran of United Auto Workers' 1936 organizing campaign in the auto plants of Detroit. After hearing Germer's speech, Hendrickson and some of the other miners got together behind the idea of forming a union at Copper Range. Hendrickson wrote up a petition and began circulating it during lunch periods and shift changes at the No. 4 shaft. His petition was the first seed

¹ For a concise account of the 1913 Strike, see chapter 13 of *Cradle to Grave* by Larry Lankton. Chapter 16 of Arthur W. Thurner's *Rebels on the Range* provides a detailed account of the strike's aftermath.

of unionism to take root and grow into a recognized union in the Lake copper district, Local 494 of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, C.I.O.²

Hendrickson began circulating his petition September 4, 1939. He claimed 250 signatures by the morning of September 20, when his gang leader tracked him down in the shower room of the No. 4 dry-house and told him to go have a talk with the mine captain.

"Here's your settlement slip," Captain Jose told Hendrickson when the petitioner arrived at the office.

"What's the reason for my discharge," Hendrickson asked.

"We got no place for you," the captain replied. "Got too many men."

"Well, has my work been satisfactory?"

"Yes, your work has been alright. I got no kick on your work."³

Hendrickson's story so far is his own account, written in a statement to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) charging Copper Range with violating the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. Matt Savola, president of the Timber Workers Association, Local 15 of the Industrial Woodworkers of America, C.I.O., in Ironwood, Michigan, filed the charges with the NLRB on behalf of Hendrickson and the other Copper Range miners. He mailed them to the board's regional director September 25, 1939 with an accompanying letter stating: "The Company is endeavoring to smash the preliminary attempts of the miners to organize by discharging William Hendrickson."⁴

When Hendrickson returned to the dry-house the morning of his discharge, the underground men gathered around asking what had happened in the captain's office.

"I explained to them that I got my settlement slip or discharge," Hendrickson wrote to the NLRB. "Some of the men in the group said, 'We know what you got fired for, Bill.'"

² W. Hendrickson, statement to the National Labor Relations Board. GSC Box 3 Folder 40.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ M. Savola to J. G. Shott, September 25, 1939. GSC Box 3 Folder 40.

Some of the men became angry and said, 'Have you got that petition, Bill? We want to sign it.'"⁵

The company's internal rationale for Hendrickson's dismissal is documented, albeit in an undated, handwritten note: Hendrickson was fired "for soliciting signatures for C.I.O."⁶

Savola's letter on Hendrickson's behalf drew a swift response from the National Labor Relations Board. I. Komaroff, the NLRB's regional examiner in Milwaukee, wrote Copper Range president William Schacht a letter on the sixth of October, "suggesting" Schacht reinstate Hendrickson, and further that he post formal notice that the company would abandon its plan to establish its Employees' General Committee as a formal collective bargaining agent. Schacht complied with with Komaroff's recommendations. The posting advised employees of their right, under the National Labor Relations Act, "to join any union of their own choosing and to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing."⁷ Schacht also posted his own sub-notice below it, attributing the language of the first posting to the NLRB and stating that notice had been put in place "at that Board's request." The sub-notice further advised employees "it should also be understood that this does not mean that employees must join any organization (emphasis original)."⁸ This portion of the notice drew the attention of NLRB officials, who read the underscored "must," in particular, as Schacht unduly influencing employees against unionization. Schacht posted a tabulation of the company's financial performance for the previous 10 years alongside the sub-notice. The table showed an operating loss of \$500,480 during the 10-year span.⁹ A company memo indicates Schacht posted the table at Komaroff's suggestion,¹⁰ but the posting fit with a management strategy that was repeated elsewhere in the copper district as unionization progressed: emphasizing the company's weak financial performance to employees, with the tacit implication that extravagant union contract demands would cause the company's collapse, and with it the loss of their jobs.

⁵ W. Hendrickson, statement to the National Labor Relations Board.

⁶ Handwritten note to W. Paine, possibly from P.F. Beaudin. CRCL Box 328 Folder 41.

⁷ Notice to Employees by W. Schacht, October 7, 1939. CRCL Box 328 Folder 41.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Notice to Employees by W. Schacht, no date. CRCL Box 328.

¹⁰ Memorandum by Copper Range Mining Company, October 6, 1939. CRCL Box 328.

Copper Range had a company union in place a few years before Hendrickson circulated his petition, Copper Range had set up the Employees' General Committee, or Employees' Representative Committee as it was alternately called, was an in-house organ to identify and try to address workers' grievances. Minutes of the committee's meetings between 1937 and 1939 indicate the nature of those grievances in the years prior to unionization. In October of 1937, employees in the smelter were working half time and "finding it hard to meet the high cost of living." Rental rates in company owned houses ranged between \$7.50 and \$12 per month at that time, depending on amenities.¹¹ Previously, Copper Range had depended on contracts to process ore from the Isle Royale and Mohawk mining companies in order to operate its smelting works at full capacity. Management proposed finding additional work for the smelter employees in other parts of the company's operation, or idling the smelter intermittently to bank up the ore necessary to operate at full capacity. It is not clear from the records which option, if either, was followed. Other grievances related to the company's paternalistic practices. Copper Range sold domestic coal to its employees, charging \$7 per ton. When employees noted, in July of 1938, that Calumet and Hecla charged its employees only \$5.30 per ton for domestic coal, they got a quick response from the company, which posted a notice the same day announcing \$5.90 coal. Under the heading "Climatic Equipment" the minutes from July 2, 1938 note "The surface employees have requested that the Company furnish rain-coats to all employees working outside on rainy days. This matter was left with Mr. Manderfield."¹²

By October 1, 1939, the Copper Workers Industrial Union of South Range, Michigan, had applied for a charter with the Congress of Industrial Organizations, with Savola listed as a local C.I.O. representative familiar with the Copper Workers. Savola, it appears, continued to focus on his work with Local 15, T.W.A. The application listed another C.I.O. representative and Timber Worker who in the coming weeks would help guide the Copper Workers from nascency to recognition, and in the coming years would marshal the successful unionization of the copper workers throughout the Lake district. That was the Timber Workers' secretary, Gene Saari.¹³

¹¹ Minutes of November 10, 1937 Employees' Representative Committee meeting. CRCR Box 294.

¹² Minutes of July 2, 1938 Employees' General Committee meeting. CRCR Box 294.

¹³ Copper Workers Industrial Union C.I.O Local charter application, October 1, 1939. GSC Box 3.

Gene Saari was born in 1909 in Chisholm, a mining town on Minnesota's Mesabi Iron Range. His father, August Saari, was a miner there during the early years of Saari's childhood. The failure of a WFM attempt to unionize the Iron Range caused the elder Saari to seek a life for his family elsewhere. They moved to a homestead farm on Sugar Island near Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. Farming the the Upper Peninsula of Michigan was hard living, "very near the subsistence level," Gene Saari wrote, and at age 15 he left to find work at an auto plant in Wayne, Michigan. This was the first of many industrial jobs for Gene Saari. He worked as a drill press operator, lathe operator, and door parts inspector for different automotive manufacturers; as watchman, deckwatch, and deckhand on Great Lakes iron ore freighters; and as a teamster and pulp cutter in Upper Michigan's lumber camps. Saari had participated in the 1937 sitdown strike at Cadillac Motor Company. He actively organized for the C.I.O. in all of these industries. His efforts for Mine Mill on behalf of the Copper Range employees would be his first entry into the nonferrous mining industry.¹⁴

Copper Range management kept records on the union officers during this time, recording their length of employment, marital status, and ethnicity, among other information. Four of the union's six officers, including President Irving Uitti, were Finnish, the other two Croatian. The union's grievance committee comprised three Finns and an Englishman.¹⁵ Management was meeting with the CWIU's grievance committee during October of 1939, and it was at one of these meetings that a formal election was proposed. The grievance committee met with Schacht on October 27 and "stated the purpose of the meeting was to recognize the Copper Worker's Industrial Union, an affiliate of the C.I.O., as the sole bargaining representative of all the employees of the Copper Range Company." Stating he had "no authentic information as to whether the CWIU was the choice of the majority of the employees," Schacht said it was "only fair" that he have "something definite on this matter before he could state whether the Copper Range Company would accept the CWIU as the bargaining representative." This, it was noted in the company's internal memo of the meeting, "brought on a very orderly discussion in which nearly everyone present participated." The result: plans for a union consent election overseen by the NLRB.¹⁶

¹⁴ G. Saari, Autobiography, February 14, 1967. GSC Box 6.

¹⁵ Memorandum by Copper Range Mining Company, October 24, 1939. CRCR Box 328.

¹⁶ Copper Range internal memo summarizing meeting, October 27, 1939. CRCR Box 328.

Two dates for the election were set. Copper Range's mine workers would vote November 30 at the Finnish Hall in Painesdale, mill workers at the Freda post office. Employees in the company's smelter department would vote the next day at the powerhouse of the smelter. That part of the election would take place on company property is indicative of the new power workers enjoyed with the Wagner Act and the NLRB behind them. The union election ballot offered three options: representation by the CWIU Local 494, C.I.O.; representation by the Copper Range Independent Union, or no union representation at all. The Copper Range Records offer little information on the second union, the Copper Range Independent Union.

Management was confident no union would win consent. A handwritten note among records from Copper Range's Boston office, dated October 13, stated "WHS's (Schacht's) office said majority of men he talked to were against C.I.O. and are (in) favor or no union at all and he said they favored dealing with management individually."¹⁷ The election results show the company had a poor handle on its workers' feelings with regard to union representation. When the NLRB's 12th Regional Office tallied the results, the CWIU had won 643 of 950 votes cast. The Independent Union received 256 votes. Only 28 employees voted for no union representation.

The Copper Workers Industrial Union came to the bargaining table December 19, 1939 with a proposal calling for a \$5.75 daily wage for miners at 12-cent-per-pound copper.¹⁸ On February 1, 1940, employees of the Copper Range Mining Company brought home the Lake copper district's first union contract. Miner's daily wages at 12-cent copper were \$4.00 per shift, a 25-cent increase over their previous wages. They were still far short of the six-dollar-a-day wages being paid out west.

Isle Royale Copper Company

The documentary record for the Isle Royale Copper Company is scant in comparison with the other mines of the Lake copper district. Among the Copper Range records, there are a few undated notices from Isle Royale management to employees which refer to union activities. As union organization was picking up steam in the district, Isle

¹⁷ Unsigned, handwritten note. CRCR Box 328.

¹⁸ Copper Workers Industrial Union "Exhibit A," December 19, 1939. CRCR.

Royale was just resuming mining operations after several years' hiatus. One of the notices describes the situation, making thinly veiled references to union organizational work:

During the last six years the mine was closed, no organization offered to put up money to open the mine or to give you a chance to work. A group of private citizens took over the mine, unwatered it and started mining, at a heavy expense to themselves. Now that the mine is working it appears others wish to come in and share in the situation.¹⁹

The notice was much more direct in its language regarding unions than similar postings at Copper Range had been. In one paragraph, management asks the employees to make a list of their grievances and "see how many any organization can cure and how many can be cured without outside help. See if the difference is worth paying dues for. Keep in mind that any sensible employer of labor knows that labor is the most valuable investment in any industry and treats it accordingly."²⁰ Like Copper Range, Isle Royale management invoked the company's financial hardship in its appeal against unionism.

If the mine is to continue operating, shafts must be sunk deeper and drifts extended to provide stoping ground. With the present development program it is not possible to break even on 11 cent copper and it will take money out of the treasury to keep the mine going. With 12 cent copper the base rate for wages would be 40¢ per day higher and additional increases are made if the price goes higher. It takes at least 12 cent copper for this mine to do development work and break even on its expenses.

If it is hard to live on present wages, and you know it is, how will it be any easier if you have to pay dues out of those wages? We just have a tough situation to face where there is not enough money coming in to pay good wages, and the organizers won't put up any money to increase wages but will only take a part of what you now get.²¹

Management published another notice, "at the request of the National Labor Relations Board," advising employees of their rights to unionize under the Wagner Act. This notice, too, has no date, but if its posting followed the pattern established at Copper

¹⁹ Isle Royale Mining Company notice to employees, no date. CRCL.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

Range, it was probably done as a result of complaints employees made to the NLRB about anti-union sentiments expressed in previous notices.²²

Isle Royale had a union consent election on September 26, 1940. The results show employees had not been swayed by management's appeal connecting wages to company prosperity, and casting union organizers as interlopers: 273 Isle Royale employees voted in favor of union representation; 79 voted against it. Local 513 of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers won recognition at the Isle Royale Copper Company.

Quincy Mining Company

Mine Mill organized Quincy Mining Company in late November and early December of 1940. When Gene Saari, by then a field organizer for Mine Mill, and the officers of the new Mine Mill local met with company management in Quincy's offices on December 3, 1940, the "Grand Organizer"²³ spoke like a man holding a strong hand.

"After these formalities I believe I have the first word in this matter," Saari said, by way of opening the meeting.

"You may have it," Quincy General Manager Charles Lawton replied.

"Some time ago, about three weeks I believe to be exact, on November 19th, we started organizing the boys here in your company, both in the mine and mill operations," Saari said. "And the organizing has progressed to the extent that at the present time we represent more than a majority — a substantially healthy majority."²⁴

Management had been aware of the union activity. Lawton wrote to Quincy Mining Company President William Parsons Todd on November 19, 1940, calling his attention to reports of a "C.I.O. meeting over in Coburntown this afternoon, relative to the

²² Second Isle Royale Mining Company notice to employees, no date. CRCR.

²³ This is the title C. Lawton applied to Saari, probably sardonically, in a December 27, 1940 letter to W.P. Todd.

²⁴ Minutes of Dec. 3, 1940 meeting between Quincy Mining Company officials and Mine Mill representatives. QMC.

Quincy situation,"²⁵ and he sent Todd a similar letter nine days later. But Lawton and Todd's written exchanges during the period indicate they were not aware of the scale or apparent success of Mine Mill's organizing efforts.²⁶

"Over 500 cards have been distributed, signed and the enrollment fee has been paid," Saari told Lawton. "Thus, we have a legal bargaining agency under the National Labor Relations law."²⁷

Saari went on to ask for collective bargaining rights from the company on the basis of those signed union cards.

"In brief," he said. "We would like to hear your General Manager's views on that question, and your position on it."

"It would be rather unusual to jump too quickly, I am quite sure," Lawton said. "You, no doubt, are accustomed to many bluffs and re-bluffs."

"We certainly are."

"There will be no blustering," Lawton said. "We won't do any bluffing, but we have something to say, and percolating all through what I say will be . . . a friendly spirit of finality which I hope you will realize and carefully consider, else we may not understand each other."²⁸

In Lawton's correspondence with Todd, the general manager was deferential, sometimes even meek, in his tone. His manner was quite different in his exchange with Saari, projecting a paternalistic air as he cast the mining company in the role of job provider to the community.

²⁵ C. Lawton to W. P. Todd, November 19, 1940, QMC Box 346.

²⁶ C. Lawton to W. P. Todd, November 28, 1940, QMC Box 346.

²⁷ Minutes of Dec. 3, 1940 meeting between Quincy Mining Company officials and Mine Mill representatives. QMC.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

"After an idleness of about five years the Quincy Company at our special suggestion and earnest urging, resumed operations of the mine, largely in the interest of its old employees that still remained on Quincy Hill and in the district," he said. "Thus to give them greatly needed employment. Thereby enabling them to earn a living — better than a W.P.A. living."

Racked by the Great Depression, which sank copper prices as low as 7.5 cents per pound, Quincy Mining Company had shut down its operations at the Pewabic Lode in September of 1931. The mine would remain idle for the next five years, during which time Quincy did make an effort to preserve the livelihoods of its former employees, plowing land for vegetable gardens on Quincy Hill, and letting some workers stay rent-free in company houses.²⁹

Quincy began to put its surface plants back in working condition in October of 1936, resumed production at the number 6 shaft in early June of 1937, and at the number 8 shaft July 1 of that year. The total cost to bring the shafts and the surface works back into production over the course of those two years came to \$313,102.21, including everything from structural rehabilitation of the mine shafts to replacement of hoisting cable. Resumption costs continued during succeeding years, though by 1939 these amounted to only \$10,845 worth of repairs to the shafts and several thousand replacement ties for the company's railroad.³⁰ Resumption of operations at Quincy's stamp mill appears to have coincided with renewed work underground, though as of 1938 the mill was still in need of "major repairs, re-arrangement, and additional equipment" before it could operate efficiently.³¹ The company's smelter remained idle during this time. From resumption of operations management's first meeting with the union representatives, Quincy lost money. Its annual operating losses during that time peaked at nearly \$60,000 in 1938, declining to \$8,323 in 1939.³²

"To show our interest and sincerity, we would state that during this period the President of the Quincy Company has received no salary," Lawton told the Saari and the rest. "Neither has its General Manager."

²⁹ Lankton, 223.

³⁰ Quincy Mining Company Annual Reports for 1936-1940.

³¹ Charles Lawton's Report, 1938 Quincy Mining Company Annual Report.

³² Quincy Mining Company Annual Reports for 1936-1940.

Quincy planned to use its financial condition as a rhetorical tool during its negotiations with the union. Todd wrote Lawton on December 13, 1940:

While it may be considered or claimed to be unfair labor practice, under the present laws, to address or communicate directly with our employees on many subjects, I feel it is important to use the present discussions and negotiations with representatives of our employees in a way so that they will understand as fully as possible the conditions under which the company is trying to operate . . . It seems to me that if the price of copper does not advance, than an increase in wages on a twelve-cent copper market means a discontinuance of operations at the Quincy within a short time.³³

This threat echoed sentiments Lawton expressed in the first meeting with union representatives.

"We have lived during during the elapsed time believing the Quincy men and their families have appreciated the Quincy Company's activities in their behalf," Lawton said. "But if it should develop that they do not realize this, are not appreciative, by a goodly proportion of them now being willing to bow to and vote for a Union, it would more than likely take a way their privilege of earning a living at Quincy. Because, by adding further handicaps to the mine's operations it might make it impossible to continue those operations."

Lawton went on to explain that the Quincy continued operations, absent profit, because the mine continued "to look fairly well for copper. The tenor of the rock being mined is of a higher grade than for many periods in its history." Lawton felt prospects in the mine looked favorable for Quincy to generate a profit for its shareholders, but he felt just as strongly the company's future financial stability was tenuous.

"There is no future," he told the union men, "unless the market for copper advances. Quincy ran ahead in October about \$1,000, and in November she ran behind. I just got the figures just before you came in."³⁴

³³ W.P. Todd to C. Lawton, December 13, 1940. QMC Box 346.

³⁴ Minutes of Dec. 3, 1940 meeting between Quincy Mining Company officials and Mine Mill representatives. QMC.

Lawton had begun constructing an appeal based on the company's weak financial condition weeks prior to meeting with the union. He wrote Todd repeatedly seeking financial statements to dispel the idea "that all mining companies are very rich and making money and therefore can stand most any wages."³⁵

When Lawton finally gave a direct answer to Saari's question about whether the Quincy would recognize the Mine Mill local on the basis of the 500-plus signed union cards Saari said had been collected, he said this: "I would have to take it under advisement. I would be inclined to say that you should go away and leave the laboring men at Quincy and their families in peace to work out their own future. Forget your profits in the Union dues for the time being, else dire hardships and distress will surely come to the good people."

In 35 years at the company, Lawton said, he had "seen families grow up" and had "boosted them up." In short, the Quincy Mining Company was doing the best it could by its employees.

"If you rock the boat," Lawton concluded, "it is so easily tipped over."

Saari was unmoved.

"Are you through, Mister?" he asked Lawton.

"Yes."

Saari continued: "First, I want to state this: that the statement you made in behalf of the company is the customary statement we have received from all employers . . . However, I want to make this a matter of record. We are not here at the present time requesting to bargain, or in the process of bargaining. We are merely in the first stages of approaching the bargaining rights."³⁶

³⁵ C. Lawton to W.P. Todd, November 15, 1940. QMC Box 346.

³⁶ Minutes of Dec. 3, 1940 meeting between Quincy Mining Company officials and Mine Mill representatives. QMC.

During the conversation that followed, Saari asked Lawton to consent voluntarily to the Mine Mill local serving as collective bargaining agent for the workers at Quincy. Lawton replied he would need a week or more to communicate with company officials on the matter. Saari questioned the need for so much time:

“Are they located so far apart that it is inconvenient in getting a meeting?”

“I would think so,” Lawton replied. “They are all down east.”

“You would be able to wire or phone.”

“Wires and phones have to be paid for. I haven’t the funds to pay for them. It would be done by letter and not by wire.”

Saari was not sympathetic.

“You should be in a labor organization instead of at the head of a company in the copper industry,” he said. “We can afford to wire.”³⁷

The conversation that followed, one that the union representatives unequivocally led, was a direct reflection of the more powerful position Labor operated from following national implementation of the Wagner Act.

“Let’s set a date for the negotiations — how about that?” Saari asked.

“I will give you my answer one week from today,” Lawton replied.

“I will give you my answer,” Saari said. “We will proceed. I feel the delay is unnecessary and we will have to call in representatives of the National Labor Relations Board to take steps to certify us as the sole and exclusive bargaining agency.”³⁸

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

At this point, Mine Mill Assistant Organizer Emil Kangas spoke up, describing the Isle Royale Copper Company's recent experience with the NLRB.

"If you noticed the Isle Royale, they got quite a bit of friction when the National Labor Relations Board stepped into the picture," Kangas said. "The understanding I had of the matter is that the friction between employer and employee didn't work to the benefit of either one . . . We know that if the National Labor relations Board steps in here into the picture it is going to be a case of certifying the Quincy Miner's Union as the sole collective bargaining agency without any doubt. The only thing is that it makes the so-called friction a little bit tighter; where by mutual consent, if granted here, a lot of the friction could be avoided."

"We will take the situation as is," Lawton replied.³⁹

On the 14th of December, 1940, O.S. Hoebreckx, field examiner for the 12th District of the National Labor Relations Board in Milwaukee, sent northward an agreement establishing the parameters for the Board to conduct a check of the Quincy employees' union cards.⁴⁰ Four days later, both Lawton and Saari had signed the agreement calling for a consent check at the company's offices sometime during the week of December 21.

During the interim between the union's first meeting with Quincy management and the consent check later in December, Lawton wrote Todd to tell him "all of our men are more or less disturbed and nervous, and are not working as well as they might. (Mine Superintendent C.J. McKie and Mill Captain Maunder) feel this condition is due to C.I.O. agitation . . . We believe that organization is not going ahead as rapidly as they expected, but feel that they will succeed in signing up a majority of our men."⁴¹

Lawton wrote Todd, the week of the consent check, describing the mood at the Quincy mine and surface works, as he perceived it. "At the present time one notes a 'jittery' feeling among underground men on account, we suspect, of CIO agitation and many of the men are morose and glum." Lawton reported production rates had fallen off, and

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ O.S. Hoebreckx to Charles Lawton, December 14, 1940. QMC Box 346.

⁴¹ C. Lawton to W.P. Todd, December 7, 1940. QMC Box 346.

conveyed reports from the mine and mill superintendents that the men had grown “inattentive” and prone to arguments about union matters.⁴²

Hoebreckx arrived in Houghton Thursday, December 19 to check the union cards against Quincy’s payroll list. When the cards were all tallied, 454 of 550 employees — 83 percent of the company’s maintenance and production workers — had designated the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, C.I.O., as their collective bargaining agent. So Mine Mill Local 523 became the third union local to achieve recognition in the Lake district copper mines. And so the management of the Quincy Mining Company had a union on its hands. They set immediately to strategizing for the anticipated contract negotiations. Their expectation — and, perhaps, fear — was that the Quincy union would seek a pay arrangement similar to the one in Mine Mill’s contracts with Copper Range and Isle Royale mining companies, which featured a sliding wage scale tied to the prevailing price of copper. Lawton had worked up a proposal whereby the company and the employees would split any increase in copper prices evenly, to the first party as profits and to the second as increased wages.⁴³ Todd rejected the idea, stating such an arrangement was appropriate for profitable companies, but not the Quincy in 1940. “As we have not funds from which to draw to pay operating losses, we cannot afford to establish a higher wage scale until our operations show a profit.”⁴⁴ Management hoped making its newly unionized workforce aware of the company’s financial condition would serve to discourage them from making major contract demands. Todd went so far as to suggest the company’s financial straits might discourage the union, altogether. “If you can convince the union officials of the precarious condition of the company, due to lack of earnings,” he wrote Lawton, “they may not see much use in continuing their organization at the Quincy, and you should not hesitate to emphasize the fact that the men cannot afford to pay more than very nominal dues to the C.I.O. organization.”⁴⁵

Coincident with the successful unionization of Quincy’s workforce, and compounding Lawton’s frustrations during late December of 1940, the quality of the ore coming out of the Quincy mines made a downward turn. Lawton reported: “Production seems to be

⁴² C. Lawton to W.P. Todd, December 19, 1940.

⁴³ C. Lawton to W.P. Todd, December 20, 1940.

⁴⁴ W.P. Todd to C. Lawton, December 21, 1940. QMC Box 346.

⁴⁵ W.P. Todd to C. Lawton, December 24, 1940. QMC Box 346.

going all to pieces these days, not only on account of low grade rock being sent to the mill but the 'jittery' condition of the men,"⁴⁶ to which Todd replied:

I am very much disturbed at the low yield being secured during the last week or ten days and trust that this situation will adjust itself very shortly and that the average yield will be back to the usual 30 pounds per ton by the end of the month. I realize we are operating under rather unusual conditions just at the time, but I do not know why there should be a material reduction in the copper content of the rock.⁴⁷

"We seem to be right up against it," Lawton wrote on the 26th of December, 1940, and by the next day, his spirits had sunk further:

This morning I am feeling mighty blue, discouraged and worried. C.I.O. machinations galore — gossip — combined with the lowest tenor of rock during the past three years, makes a fellow feel he would like to run his country. And yet, we are actually interested to learn what can be developed on the better side of C.I.O., should there be such a side, which is doubtful. I am wishing you a Happy New Year, and especially contentment.⁴⁸

Before the year was out, Quincy's manager had reclaimed some vigor, buoyed by a letter from Todd that gave him "the 'whip-hand'" in forthcoming contract negotiations.⁴⁹ Those negotiations began in early January of 1941. The union's initial wage demands were based on a sliding scale tied to the prevailing price of copper, under which miners would receive \$4.30 per shift with copper priced at 12 cents per pound and up to \$5.20 if the price climbed above 16 cents.⁵⁰ The company's desire going into negotiations was to tie wage increases to profits: "It is only possible to increase wages through working out some arrangement with the men or their organization by which production can be increased in order to pay higher wages."⁵¹ Mine Mill's

⁴⁶ C. Lawton to W.P. Todd, December 21, 1940. QMC Box 346.

⁴⁷ W.P. Todd to C. Lawton, December 23, 1940. QMC Box 346.

⁴⁸ C. Lawton to W. P. Todd, December 27, 1940. QMC Box 346.

⁴⁹ C. Lawton to W. P. Todd, 30 December, 1940. QMC Box 346

⁵⁰ Wage schedule submitted by Mine Mill, January 3, 1941. QMC Box 487.

⁵¹ W. P. Todd to C. Lawton, December 23, 1940. QMC Box 346.

International leadership recognized the complications implicit in Quincy's financial straits: "I appreciate the very difficult situation it is trying to negotiate with a company whom you know is not making money," Mine Mill President Reid Robinson wrote Saari. "It is always difficult to prove mis-management to the outside world so as to get support even from the government officials in getting wage increases when a company is in the 'red.'"⁵²

By the end of January, the union was bargaining for a 30-cent-per-day wage increase, spread out over three months in 10-cent increments, for all production and maintenance workers.

"The month of February it will be 10 cents with an additional 10 cents in March and another 10 cents in April," Saari summarized at a February 1 bargaining meeting.

"No!" Lawton's replied.

"What do you mean?"

"No, no, 10 cents right down the line for ninety days."

"Ninety days? Well, that stops me short."⁵³

It took the first miners' strike in the Lake District since 1913-1914 to get even the 10-cent wage increase. Quincy's 552 employees went out on 24-hour picket duty for three days beginning February 11.⁵⁴ When the two parties sat down to finalize the 90-day contract, the union bargaining committee requested "that Mr. Lawton furnish the Four Roses (drinks)" to celebrate the occasion, following precedent that had been set in contract signings at Copper Range and Isle Royale.⁵⁵

⁵² R. Robinson to G. Saari, January 21, 1941. GSC Box 9.

⁵³ Minutes of February 1, 1941 meeting between members of the Mine Mill bargaining committee and representatives of the Quincy Mining Company. QMC Box 487.

⁵⁴ "Copper Miners Win 10c Wage Increase," *Midwest Labor*, undated news clipping, GSC Box 11 Folder 2.

⁵⁵ "Minutes of Meeting between Members of the Bargaining Committee of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (CIO) and Representatives of the Quincy Mining Company at Hancock, Michigan," February 14, 1941, QMC Box 487.

"The Quincy Company has nothing to celebrate about," was Lawton's reply. "You boys have lots to celebrate, and I congratulate you. However, I do not think it is within the dignity of my position with the Quincy Company to buy the drinks for the workmen. I do not wish to pose as a 'tightwad,' still I do not think I should do so."⁵⁶

Wartime Wages

Mine Mill had won 25 cents per day in its negotiations with Copper Range, and only 10 cents per day from Quincy. Workers from the two mining companies, and additionally Isle Royale employees, would win more substantial gains, amounting to one dollar per day, on the basis of copper price subsidies put forward by a federal government seeking to boost wartime production of strategic metals.⁵⁷ The regional labor press downplayed the federal role in securing the wage hikes, but made much of the gains themselves: "Dollar a Day Hike Won in Michigan" was the headline in *The CIO News*;⁵⁸ "CIO Cracks Another Tough Nut" trumpeted the Michigan *CIO News*, referring specifically to the wage hikes at Quincy, where the employees had been "the lowest paid workers in the Michigan Copper Area."⁵⁹

The federal government would force significant wage increases again two years later. On February 4, 1943, the Nonferrous Metals Commission of the War Labor Board ordered wage increases of \$1.25 per shift for all employees at Copper Range, \$1.35 for miners at Isle Royale (semi-skilled and unskilled workers were given a raise of \$1.25 per shift under the order), and \$1.49 per shift at Quincy.⁶⁰ In its opinion, the Commission stated wages at the Michigan mining companies showed "great inequalities with all other areas in their industry."⁶¹

With the federally imposed increases of 1943, wages at the three companies would finally approach the six dollars per day William Hendrickson had heard about over the radio back in 1939, though by this time the Anaconda Company was paying its miners

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ "Michigan Copper Miners Win Improved Contracts," *Michigan CIO News*, November 21, 1941.

⁵⁸ "Dollar a Day Hike Won in Michigan" *The CIO News*, November 24, 1941.

⁵⁹ "CIO Cracks Another Tough Nut," Michigan *CIO News*, November 28, 1941.

⁶⁰ Nonferrous Metals Commission of the War Labor Board Case No. D-10. CRCR Box 231 Folder 41.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

close to eight dollars per shift, and the War Labor Board had boosted non-ferrous metal miners' earnings in Idaho to \$8.25 per shift.⁶²

Wartime Capital

At the Quincy Mining Company, the federal government's wartime procurement policies were at least as beneficial for capital as they were for labor. In fact, they were likely the company's salvation. By 1942, five years after it resumed mining operations, the Quincy Mining Company had yet to turn in a profitable year.⁶³ The union attributed this fact to "gross mismanagement" on the part of the company,⁶⁴ though Lawton's correspondence with Todd in late 1940 indicates geology and other factors had dealt the company a tough hand.⁶⁵ Regardless, June 26, 1942 was a momentous day for the Quincy Mining Company. On that day, Quincy signed a contract with the Metal Reserve Company under which that federal agency would buy 30 million pounds of copper from Quincy, over the next three years, at a five-cent premium over 12-cent-per-pound copper. Quincy would reclaim most of this copper from its tailings deposits in Torch Lake, adjacent to its milling complex at Mason location. The Metals Reserve Company advanced Quincy \$1.15 million on the copper it would produce to help the company "in the acquisition of property, equipment, and supplies necessary for the above program." That is, for the construction of a dredge to retrieve the tailings from the bottom of Torch Lake, and of a shore-based processing plant which would employ state-of-the-art equipment to extract copper from them.⁶⁶ Under a contract between Quincy Mining Company, the Metal Reserves Company, and Calumet and Hecla Consolidated Copper Company, the latter company would build the plant. C&H had built a shore plant and dredge to reprocess its own tailings at the north end of Torch Lake some years earlier, and under the terms of the contract it would put its expertise and leftover material from that project into building the reclamation facility for

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Quincy Mining Company Annual Reports for 1937-1942.

⁶⁴ "CIO Cracks Another Tough Nut," Michigan CIO News, November 28, 1941.

⁶⁵ C. Lawton to W. P. Todd, December 21 and 26, 1940; W.P. Todd to C. Lawton, December 23, 1940. QMC Box 487.

⁶⁶ "Copper Sales Contract between Metals Reserve Company and Quincy Mining Company, June 26, 1942. C&HC, Box 521.

Quincy.⁶⁷ The Quincy reclamation plant went into operation November 1, 1943.⁶⁸ Its importance to the Quincy's operation is indicated by the fact that, immediately after the company's copper sales contract with the federal government expired, on August 31, 1945, the company discontinued work in its mine, while the reclamation of stamp sand copper continued as Quincy's sole operation for the remaining two decades of the company's existence.⁶⁹

Calumet & Hecla

The ink had scarcely dried on Mine Mill Local 584's contract with the Quincy Mining Company when Saari and Robinson turned their attention toward organizing the Calumet and Hecla Consolidated Copper Company. C&H was the undisputed titan of the Lake copper district. It had been the Western Federation of Miners's primary target in 1913-1914, and had rebuffed that challenge. It was probably not by coincidence that Mine Mill organized all of the district's other mining companies before taking on C&H. "As I stated in my earlier letters, C&H under any circumstances isn't the easiest to organize," Saari wrote Robinson in June of 1941. "Reasons are that they are paying higher wages than in the mines under contract and this tends to satisfy the employees to some degree. In addition, the Companies [sic] labor policy, if it can be called such, has deeply intimidated its workers. The whole Calumet area is known for its ultra-conservativeness."⁷⁰

Mine Mill's organizational campaign at C&H began December 1, 1941. Saari re-emphasized the challenges of organizing at C&H in an annual progress report to Robinson:

The C&H Company featured most infamously in the 1913 Michigan Copper Strike. Their employees for the past 27 years have been under the most severe intimidation and persecution of the Company. Most of the strikebreakers of 1913 found employment with this Company. Company

⁶⁷ "Construction Contract between Quincy Mining Company, Calumet and Hecla Consolidated Copper Company, and Metal Reserve Company," June 27, 1942. C&HC Box 521.

⁶⁸ Quincy Mining Company Annual Report for 1946.

⁶⁹ Quincy Mining Company Annual Report for 1945.

⁷⁰ G. Saari to R. Robinson, July 7, 1941. GSC Box 9.

Unions had further succeeded in dividing the people on racial, religious and political thoughts.⁷¹

Saari went on to describe the company's efforts to discourage unionism within the ranks of its workforce while union organization efforts progressed, successfully, at Copper Range, Isle Royale, and Quincy mining companies. These included pay raises proportionate to union contract gains at the other three companies. The "scattered" geography of C&H's various operations — mine shafts in Calumet and northward, mills and smelter in Lake Linden, reclamation plants further south on Torch Lake — also complicated the organization drive. Saari described the C.I.O.'s early organizing activities at the company: a December 21 union meeting with 150 in attendance; the chartering of the Calumet and Hecla Copper Workers, Local 584 of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers; worker enrollment; radio announcements in Finnish and English.

Saari's public message about the organization drive, delivered over the radio in late February of 1942, was more optimistic: "The efforts of the C.I.O. to organize the Calumet and Hecla employees has [sic] and continues [sic] to meet with favorable and successful response. Without undue noise or clamor the work of building the union is rapidly going forward."⁷²

In the same radio address, Saari's description of the company's behavior contrasted with his intra-union account:

It must be stated that the representatives of the Calumet & Hecla Company have not interfered with the rights of the employees to belong to an organization of their choosing. I am happy to acknowledge this fact for it indicates that the Company recognizes and is mindful of the National Labor Relations Act. There is reason to believe that this policy of not interfering will be maintained.⁷³

⁷¹ G. Saari to R. Robinson, "Organizational Report for Period of July 1, 1941 to July 1, 1942." GSC Box 7.

⁷² G. Saari, "Script of Radio Address," February 26, 1942. GSC Box 6.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

Mine Mill sent additional organizers, "Brother Joe Van Nordstrand and . . . Brother Irving Uitti,"⁷⁴ into the district. Canvassing house to house, by Saari's account, union organizers signed up more than half of the C&H employees by late April, 1942. Saari's progress report also described the activities of a group at Calumet and Hecla called the Satisfied Employees, a movement which he said was "obviously Company influenced" and which "carried on a vicious campaign against the C.I.O. to create confusion, disunity, etc." The Satisfied Employees' campaign included leaflets, group meetings, and radio announcements, and employed "all kinds of scare stories on land and house rentals, water, fuel price, bonus, etc."⁷⁵ Saari's claims here relate to Calumet and Hecla's paternalistic practices, such as housing rentals for employees and sale of at-cost household heating coal. This was not the first time the peculiarities of paternalistic community structure emerged in the unionization of the Lake District. During the organization of Copper Range, Saari had written to the NLRB field examiner inquiring whether employees were free to sign up members in their homes. "You see," wrote Saari, "The Copper Range Mining Company owns the houses the miners are living in and also the lots."⁷⁶

Similar concerns among Calumet and Hecla employees may have prompted the words Saari broadcast in a radio address delivered two days before C&H's first consent election:

As the notices of the National Labor Relations Board show you the elections will take place strictly on a democratic and secret ballot basis . . . No worker should be fearful that in casting a ballot for the union that it will become the knowledge of the Company. The National Labor Relations Board Director will have complete charge of the elections and will require that it is free from all coercion, intimidations, and undue influences.⁷⁷

The company itself had given similar assurances, along with a description of the polling process itself, in a full-page advertisement in Calumet's *Evening News Journal*:

⁷⁴ G. Saari to R. Robinson, "Organizational Report for Period of July 1, 1941 to July 1, 1942." GSC Box 9.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ G. Saari to I. Komaroff, October 16, 1939. GSC Box 3.

⁷⁷ G. Saari, Script of Radio Address, May 13, 1942, GSC Box 6.

The election will be decided by a majority of those who vote (emphasis original). You owe it to yourself to take part in answering this question. You owe it to your employer to see that the final answer is the answer of not a few but of all of the Calumet and Hecla employees. This you can do by exercising your right to vote.

The election will be by secret ballot. The voting places and voting times have been made as convenient as possible and you can vote where you work, regardless of which department keeps your time. The casting of the vote will take only a few minutes.⁷⁸

The election took place May 14 and 15, 1942. When the votes were tallied, 656 went for the union. But 736 went against Local 584.⁷⁹ This shows Saari may have chosen his words carefully when he spoke, in a radio address, after the NLRB checked union membership cards. Saari said the card check showed “that the Union had far in excess the amount required by law to warrant the holding of a labor board election.” But he did not say they had enough cards signed to ensure victory for the union.

Union organizers alleged interference on the part of the company had skewed the results of the election. Saari outlined some of this interference in a letter to Mine Mill Attorney Nathan Witt sent July 14, 1942.⁸⁰ He described the “Satisfied Employees,” an employees’ organization “completely influenced and dominated by the C&H Company,” which distributed leaflets prior to the election. A member of the group, Saari wrote, gave a radio address the night before the election in which “he intimidated the farmer employees of the company that land rentals may go up, and intimidating [sic] the rest of the workers with increased rentals, water and fuel prices, and bonus scales.” The address, which echoed sentiments contained in the Satisfied Employees leaflets, “did have a frightening effect on a certain section of employees that otherwise would have voted for the C.I.O.,” Saari wrote, further alleging C&H management had actively encouraged its foremen to interfere with the union’s activities, but ceased doing so “after the Union discussed these matters with the management.” The National Labor Relations Board came under criticism in the same letter for being “weak in determining the eligibility of employees to vote,” resulting in foremen and others in supervisory

⁷⁸ “To the Employees;” Calumet and Hecla advertisement in *The Evening News Journal*, May 13, 1942.

⁷⁹ NLRB C&H election results, May 15, 1942. GSC Box 6.

⁸⁰ G. Saari to N. Witt, July 14, 1942. GSC Box 6.

roles being allowed to cast ballots. The union was allowed to challenge these voters, “but considering the fact that the C&H employees for a number of decades have been under extreme terror of the Company and being the first NLRB election, the union observers hesitated in exercising at all instances their right to challenge at the polls.” By the time Saari sent this letter to Witt, the deadline for filing objections to the election results had passed, and ultimately the union took no action against the company with regard to the allegations.

Mine Mill organizers regrouped following their initial failure at the polls. Local 584's executive board posted a notice to Calumet and Hecla employees which read, in part:

We wish to state that the local union feels duty-bound in the interest of the 656 workers who voted YES, and their fellow employees to continue organization. Through this statement, we wish to announce to all of the employees that the union is reorganizing for a new drive to culminate, as soon as possible, in a new Labor Board election. This decision was based on the requests of CIO members and a large number of employees who voted NO in the election.

The outcome of the election did not express the employees wishes either for or against the union by a clear cut majority. It shows, however, that a large percentage of the employees do want a real bonafide labor union. We recognize that the matter of UNIONISM is more alive and needed in the C&H operations today than ever before. For this reason, we enter into a new drive.⁸¹

Local 584 succeeded in bringing about a second NLRB election. It would take place November 4 and 5, 1942. A group called the Independent Copper Workers Union emerged at C&H after the May NLRB election. Saari's letter to Witt, written in July of 1942, mentioned an Employee Representation Association at Calumet and Hecla, which was “clearly a Company dominated outfit,” had decided to form the Independent Union.⁸² Calumet and Hecla referred to the Independent Union in another full-page advertisement, similar to the one it had run in May. The November ad gave employees practical information about voting in the consent election, and admonished:

⁸¹ Mine Mill Local 584 Executive Board to Calumet and Hecla Employees, no date. GSC.

⁸² G. Saari to N. Witt, July 14, 1942. GSC Box 6.

Whether you want any union to have the sole right to talk for you, and if you do want one, which of the two it shall be, are questions which you as a group must decide for yourselves. The Company cannot assist you in making this decision, but it will accept the result of the election as an expression of the free choice of all Calumet and Hecla men. Each of you has a direct, personal interest in the outcome of this election, since your relations with the Company may be entirely changed as a result.⁸³

In a speech to Calumet and Hecla's production employees, Saari explained voting procedures, including steps the NLRB took to preclude questions of eligibility like those which had complicated the vote in May:

Undoubtably, all C&H workers realize that in these elections there will be two separate voting units. The first unit includes all production employees such as miners, mill, smelter, reclamation and surface workers. No Foremen, or any other persons close to the management of the Company will vote in this unit. Representing this unit is our union, Local 584, Int'l Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, CIO. Also appearing on the ballot for this unit will be the so-called "Independent." Workers in this unit have the opportunity of voting for the CIO, the Independent, or No union.⁸⁴

Saari gave his speech in Finnish before he delivered it in English. On the first day of November, 1942, 23 percent of Calumet and Hecla's employees were of Finnish descent. Forty-two percent of the company's underground workers were Finns.⁸⁵ The Finns had been a driving force behind the Strike of 1913,⁸⁶ and the bilingual character of Local 584's communications demonstrate ethnicity remained salient during the 1942 unionization campaign.

The Independent Copper Workers Local No. 1 garnered 547 votes in the November election at C&H. Local 584, International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers,

⁸³ "To the Employees," Calumet and Hecla advertisement in *The Evening News Journal*, October 31, 1942.

⁸⁴ G. Saari, Translation of Finnish Speech," November 3, 1942, GSC Box 6.

⁸⁵ "Nationality Descent Record," November 1, 1942. C&HC Box 393. Calumet and Hecla kept records of its workers nationalities through March of 1952.

⁸⁶ For a thorough account of Finnish involvement in the Strike of 1913-1914, see Gary Kaunonen's *Challenge Accepted: A Finnish Immigrant Response to Industrial America in Michigan's Copper Country*.

C.I.O., this time, prevailed with 943 votes.⁸⁷ Calumet and Hecla now had to recognize a labor union.

After negotiations lasting more than half a year, the employees of Calumet and Hecla Consolidated Mining Company went home from work with a blue booklet in their hands:

AGREEMENT
Calumet and Hecla
Consolidated Copper Company
— with —
International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers, CIO
— and —
Calumet and Hecla Copper Workers, Local 584
— o —
July 13, 1943⁸⁸

The date on the contract was 10 days shy of being 30 years, to the day, from the first day of the 1913 Strike.

From Mine Mill to United Steelworkers

About a decade after the Copper Workers Industrial Union Local 494, C.I.O., became the first union to achieve recognition in Michigan's Lake copper district, a power struggle played out within the ranks of the nonferrous mining union movement, itself. In February of 1950, the C.I.O. expelled Mine Mill on the basis of its tendencies toward communism and granted the United Steelworkers of America jurisdiction to represent

⁸⁷ National Labor Relations Board 12th Region "Certification of Counting and Tabulation of Ballots," November 6, 1942.

⁸⁸ C&HC Box 544.

workers in the nonferrous mining industry.⁸⁹ Saari, who had recently been fired as a Mine Mill International representative, began working as a representative for the Steelworkers at least as early as March, 1950.⁹⁰ On March 23, he wrote a letter to Calumet and Hecla management asking the company to recognize the new Copper Workers Union, Local 4312 of the United Steelworkers, as the collective bargaining agent for the company's production and maintenance workers. "Based on the number of applications for membership cards we are receiving daily, we expect that before April 1st the majority of the employees comprising the bargaining unit will have designated local 4312, USA, C.I.O as their bargaining representative," Saari wrote.⁹¹ C&H Vice President and General Counsel A.E. Peterman responded that the company still had a contract with Mine Mill Local 584, and required proof "whether the majority of our employees desire that union or your union to represent them."⁹² A similar exchange took place between Saari and Quincy General Superintendent C. J. McKie, with Saari claiming a unanimous vote by employees of that company to disaffiliate with Mine Mill and join Steelworkers Local 4312.⁹³ McKie was slower in replying than Peterman had been, and suggested Saari should "call for NLRB supervised election [sic] and be certified as representative of Quincy employees."⁹⁴

In the run-up to the consent elections that followed, the Steelworkers flaunted their C.I.O. affiliation along with the size and strength of their union, while Mine Mill cast itself as the smaller, more democratic union more in tune with the specific needs of copper mine workers. "Do You Want a Dictator Or Do You Want To Run Your Own Union?" asked one Mine Mill poster, which went on to tout that union's more regular conventions (annual vs. biannual), lower payments to the International out of local dues (80 cents versus \$1.00), two-year election cycles for International officers (instead of the Steelworkers's four-year cycle), and the fact that mine mill was 44 years older than the Steelworkers as an organization. "Remember that in Mine, Mill you are the BOSS," the

⁸⁹ Jensen, pp 251-268 and p 271, describes in detail Mine Mill's expulsion and the events that led up to it. Based on his account, charges of communism against the International leadership were by no means unfounded, but the union's rank and file, broadly speaking, did not identify with the Communist Party.

⁹⁰ G. Saari to C.J. McKie, March 25, 1950. QMC.

⁹¹ G. Saari to E.R. Lovell and A.E. Peterman, March 23, 1950. GSC.

⁹² A.E. Peterman to G. Saari, March 23, 1950. GSC.

⁹³ G. Saari to James McKie, March 24, 1950. QMC.

⁹⁴ C.J. McKie to G. Saari, March 30, 1950. QMC.

poster concluded. "So don't neglect this AMERICAN PRIVILEGE."⁹⁵ "Get OUT of Mine Mill!" exclaimed an opposing poster. "Unite with the rest of organized labor in Upper Michigan. Vote for a responsible, respected Union — the world's largest! STAY IN CIO!"⁹⁶ That poster reproduced a letter the Mine Mill Local 584 executive board had written to United Autoworkers President Walter Reuther, asking to be granted a charter with that C.I.O. union, and Reuther's response suggesting the Mine Mill local should instead affiliate with the Steelworkers.⁹⁷ A photostat-reproduced poster with hand-drawn illustrations and typewritten text urged C&H's Calumet Division employees to "get back in the C.I.O. so that we can mutually assist each other by presenting a solid front to those who would like to weaken or destroy organized labor by dividing it."⁹⁸

Days before the election, the entire executive board of Mine Mill Local 584 resigned, announcing the action in an open letter "to all Calumet & Hecla workers" published as a newspaper advertisement. They explained their action as an attempt to mitigate controversy surrounding them (some of it possibly related to the letter they had sent to Reuther) so that C&H employees could focus on the election. The executive Board did not hesitate to throw Gene Saari, so recently a leader of their union, under the bus: "If we are out of the picture as an issue," the letter read. "Saari certainly is not. He is directing the Steel campaign at a 'fat' salary and on a 'fat' expense account. This is his only concern."⁹⁹

It was a close vote on Friday, April 27, 1950, at Calumet and Hecla: 908 votes went for United Steelworkers of America, 869 for Mine Mill.¹⁰⁰ By June of 1950, the Steelworkers had claimed all of the Lake district's copper workers. In their newspaper, *Steel Labor*, under a photograph of miners and smelter workers casting ballots at C&H, the caption read: "First Labor Board election in jurisdiction formerly held by Communist-dominated Mine Mill union results in victory for the U.S.A.-C.I.O."¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Mine Mill "Do You Want a Dictator?" poster, no date. C&HC Box 544.

⁹⁶ United Steelworkers "Local 584 Executive Board BEGS to get out of Mine Mill!" poster, no date. C&HC Box 544.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* The poster states in small print: "Local 4312 has in its possession photostats of the original letter and envelope."

⁹⁸ UAW Local 174 "Why Calumet & Hecla Workers Should Vote C.I.O." poster, no date. C&HC Box 544.

⁹⁹ Mine Mill 584 executive board to Calumet and Hecla workers, April 23, 1950. C&HC Box 544.

¹⁰⁰ National Labor Relations Board "Tally of Ballots Sheet," April 27, 1950. GSC.

¹⁰¹ Undated news clipping. GSC.

The 1955 Strike

It was under the banner of the United Steelworkers of America Local 4312 that the employees of Calumet and Hecla went out on strike on Monday, May 2, 1955.¹⁰² While small strikes, walkouts, and other labor actions had been occasional parts of the union era,¹⁰³ this was the first major confrontation between labor and capital in the Lake copper district since 1913. The shutdown was total, idling the dewatering pumps in Calumet and Hecla's mine shafts, even leaving a charge of copper to freeze in a smelter furnace in Lake Linden. Only the company's water works, which provided Calumet's municipal water supply, and a steam plant which supplied a local school were left in operation.¹⁰⁴ The strike was over wages, with minor consideration of fringe benefits. The company's last offer, made April 30, 1955, was for a six-cent-per-hour average wage increase, with a sliding wage scale tied to the prevailing market price for copper. The union wanted a fixed base-rate wage. During this time, according to a full-page ad which the company placed in *The Daily Mining Gazette* explaining its position, Calumet and Hecla was stuck in a contract with the federal General Services Commission requiring it to deliver "62 million additional pounds of copper" at 29 cents per pound when the prevailing market price for copper had risen to 36 cents.

Federal and state conciliators, including Jerry Ford, then representing the Michigan State Mediation Board, arrived by Wednesday of the strike's first week.¹⁰⁵ By Thursday they had achieved an agreement allowing maintenance work to resume at the

¹⁰² "Union Votes for Walkout," *The Daily Mining Gazette*, May 2, 1955.

¹⁰³ In addition to the three-day strike which won the first union contract at Quincy contract in 1941, smelter workers at Copper Range went on a four-hour strike in July, 1941; Isle Royale workers went on strike for four days in September of that year; Quincy mill workers wild-catted in February of 1942 (Gene Saari, "Organizational Report for Period of July 1, 1941 to July 1, 1942." GSC); five timbermen walked off the job at Calumet and Hecla's No. 4 Ahmeek Shaft in November, 1942 (Memorandum by A.E. Peterman, November 25, 1942. C&HC); and workers at the Quincy reclamation plant voted to go on strike in July of 1948 (State of Michigan Labor Mediation Board, "Certification of Strike Vote," July 23, 1948).

¹⁰⁴ "Meetings Scheduled Late Today," *The Daily Mining Gazette*, May 4, 1955.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

company's operations;¹⁰⁶ Seventeen hundred union members and 500 salaried employees remained idled.¹⁰⁷

By early August, Calumet and Hecla had put forth its "final offer" of a 15-cent hourly wage increase with fringe benefits.¹⁰⁸ After Local 4312 rejected that proposal by a vote of 801-507,¹⁰⁹ the headline in the next day's *Daily Mining Gazette* was "C&H Liquidating Calumet Division Mines."¹¹⁰ The company's board of directors had authorized liquidation of its mines, its mills, and its smelter back on May 26, about three weeks after the strike began.

By 1955, Calumet and Hecla had become a diversified company. It had owned and operated its Wolverine Tube Division, with plants in the Lake district and in Detroit, since 1942.¹¹¹ It had organized the Lake Chemical Company in 1945.¹¹² The year of the strike, in particular, was marked by diversification, with C&H purchasing the Canada Vulcanizer and Equipment Company of Ontario, Canada, outright, and acquiring a controlling interest in the Goodman Lumber Company of Goodman, Wisconsin, which C&H merged with its Upper Peninsula land holdings to form a Forest Industries Division.¹¹³ So, in fact, the strike had idled only one part of the company's operations and on August 12, 1955, C&H announced its intention to lay off all mine, mill, and smelter personnel "not essential to the orderly liquidation of the Division" and sell off all of its machinery and equipment.¹¹⁴ The following day, in a mass meeting held at the Laurium village hall, a committee of five community members was chosen to meet with both the striking workers and management to facilitate new contract terms.¹¹⁵ This forestalled the threatened liquidation and on August 22, 1955, 111 days after the strike

¹⁰⁶ "Mediators Announce CIO Union Agrees to Permit Maintenance Work at Calumet, Hecla Mines," *The Daily Mining Gazette*, May 6, 1955.

¹⁰⁷ "Calumet & Hecla Submits Final Offer to C.I.O. Union Today; Time to Consider Requested," *The Daily Mining Gazette*, August 5, 1955.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ "CIO Union Rejects the Calumet and Hecla Pay Increase," *The Daily Mining Gazette*, August 11, 1955.

¹¹⁰ *The Daily Mining Gazette*, August 12, 1955.

¹¹¹ Calumet and Hecla Consolidated Copper Company Annual Report for 1942.

¹¹² Calumet and Hecla Consolidated Copper Company Annual Report for 1945.

¹¹³ Calumet and Hecla Consolidated Copper Company Annual Report for 1955.

¹¹⁴ "To the People of the Copper Country," C&H advertisement in *The Daily Mining Gazette*, August 12, 1955.

¹¹⁵ "Committee, C.I.O., C&H Groups Meet," *The Daily Mining Gazette*, August 13, 1955.

began, members of Local 4312 voted to go back to work for a 15-cent hourly raise.¹¹⁶ The strike cost the Calumet Division, directly, about \$1 million. During the strike, C&H's Wolverine Tube Division had to buy copper on the open market while the mines sat idle, at an extra cost totaling about \$900,000, and had operated at a reduced rate during the four months the strike lasted. Despite these setbacks, Calumet and Hecla Consolidated Copper Company's earnings actually rose 63 percent in 1955, to \$3,646,760.¹¹⁷ This was perhaps a demonstration of the wisdom of the company's diversification efforts.

Conclusion

From 1935 to 1955, the labor history of Michigan's Lake copper district played out in a dramatically different way from the labor-capital narrative that unfolded there earlier in the 20th century. Some themes were the same, and even some of the actors. But the difference in results amounted to a sea change. Workers at the Copper Range Mining Company became the first workforce in Michigan's nonferrous mining industry to use their new power under the federal Wagner Act to win recognition of their union and, later, to achieve contract wage gains (albeit modest ones). At the Quincy Mining Company, the federal government's role was much more pronounced, backing labor's efforts through the National Labor Relations Board, on one hand, and propping up capital, on the other, by providing wartime price supports and financing for a stamp sand reclamation facility that would later become the Quincy's sole enterprise. Through the federal government's wartime policies, the unionized mine workers of the Lake district finally earned wages which approached those paid at more prosperous mines in the American West. In perhaps its greatest achievement, organized labor won recognition at the Calumet and Hecla Consolidated Copper Company.

Within Mine Mill's expulsion from the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and the ensuing transition from Mine Mill to United Steelworkers representation in the Lake district mines, were undercurrents of the McCarthyism which would roil the nation's political and social waters throughout the decade to come. With its implications of corporate consolidation and threats of mine liquidation, the strike of 1955

¹¹⁶ "Calumet and Hecla Strike Ends," *The Daily Mining Gazette*, August 22, 1955.

¹¹⁷ Calumet and Hecla Consolidated Copper Company Annual Report for 1955.

foreshadowed future conflict between labor and capital in the district, and the end of copper mining on Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula.

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