COAL CREEK REBELLION

EAST TENNESSEE MINERS

VS.

CONVICT-LABOR SYSTEM

A collection of two articles
by Philip Foner & Archie Green
This is the story of coal miners at Coal Creek, East Tennessee in the late 1800s. It is a collection of two articles. The first is by Phil S. Foner. It is a chapter from his book, *The History of the American Labor Movement, Volume II* (published by International Publishers). The second is by Archie Green, and is a chapter from his recent book, *Only A Miner* (published by University of Illinois).

The pamphlet tells the history of the militant struggle of Appalachian coal miners in Anderson County against the convict labor system. Under that system the state would lease prison inmates to businessmen to use as laborers. After the Civil War and Reconstruction, the rulers of the South had moved quickly to re-enslave both blacks and poor whites. As a result, Southern jails were filled with people who weren't convicts at all, certainly not even in the modern sense of that word. They were in jail because of their race and their class. The Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company leased prisoners, paying almost nothing for them. They then tried to force pay cuts on the miners, and if the miners refused and went out on strike, they would use the prisoners as scabs.

The importance of the pamphlet, we think, lies in the very militant struggle of the miners and the community against this system. And the fight wasn't against the prisoners, but always against the company and the government. Prisoners were either sent back peaceably or aided in escape. And of course this history shows the very close ties between the company and the government. The government not only leased the prisoners, but sent state troops to enforce their use as strike-breakers. The history of the Coal Creek Rebellion is another chapter in the rich tradition of Appalachians fighting for economic and social justice.
COAL CREEK TROUBLES
My song is founded on the truth,
In poverty we stand.
How hard the millionaire will crush
Upon the laboring man.
The miner's toiling under ground
To earn his daily bread;
To clothe his wife and children
And see that they are fed.

Some are from Kentucky,
The place known as my birth;
As true and honest-hearted man
As ever trod this earth.
The Governor sent the convicts here
And works them in the bank;
The captain and his soldiers
Are leading by in rank.

Although the mines are guarded,
The miners true and fair,
They mean to deal out justice,
A living they declare.
The corruption of Buchanan
Brought the convicts here,
Just to please the rich man
And take the miner's share.

The miners acted manly
When they turned the convicts loose;
You see, they did not kill them
And gave them no abuse.
But when they brought the convicts here
They boldly marched them forward;
The miners soon were gathered
And placed them under guard.

Soon the miners did agree
To let them take their place;
And wait the legislature
To act upon the case.
The law has made no effort
To lend a helping hand;
To help the struggling miner
Or move the convict band.

Buchanan acted cruelly
To put them out to toil.
He says he has not room enough
For the convicts in the wall.
He has no law to work them
Only in the pen.
Why should they be on public work,
To rob the laboring man?

I am in sympathy with the miners,
As every one should be.
In other states they work free labor,
And why not Tennessee?
The miners true and generous
In many works and ways,
We all should treat them kindly,
Their platform we should praise.

The Lord in all His wisdom
Will lend a helping hand,
And if we hold out faithful,
God will strive with man.
He gives us happy sunshine,
A great and glorious light.
He'll give us food and raiment,
If we'll only serve Him right.

COAL CREEK TROUBLES
While the nation was concentrating on the terrific labor struggle in the steel industry, it was aroused by tremendous battles between capital and labor in two sections of the mining industry: the struggle of the coal miners in eastern Tennessee and that of the copper miners in Idaho. Like their brothers in the steel industry, the miners, both eastern and western, faced bitter employer opposition, and like them, they were forced to meet the full might of the state power arrayed on the side of the employers.

THE CONVICT LABOR SYSTEM IN TENNESSEE

A labor song of the 1890's, entitled "Buddy, won't you roll down the line," contained the lines:

Way back yonder in Tennessee
They leased the convicts out
Put them working in the mine
Against free labor stout.
Free labor rebelled against it
To win it took some time.
But while the lease was in effect
They made 'em rise and shine.

The uprising referred to in the song was the "Coal Creek Rebellion," the great struggle in eastern Tennessee against convict labor, which is scarcely mentioned in most histories of the American labor movement, despite its dramatic and significant episodes. It was a revolt against the vicious system under which the state rented convicts to private businessmen who guarded, disciplined and worked them as they saw fit with no supervision by the state authorities. The supplying of convicts to plantation owners, construction contractors, and mine owners was so profitable a business that innocent men, many of whom were Negroes, were railroaded to jail to furnish convict labor to employers.

By 1891, public opposition, spearheaded by labor organizations, had compelled a large number of states to abolish the use of prison labor for profit. But in Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Texas, and other Southern states, the system still continued.

Since 1889, convicts in Tennessee had been contracted out to the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company, which owned and controlled nearly all the mines in eastern Tennessee and also operated mines in Alabama with convicts. The company paid the state about $60 per head for convicts, and since it had a monopoly of all the men imprisoned during the life of the contract, it sub-leased its excess convicts to other companies at a profit. The great struggle in Tennessee against contract prison labor began in April, 1891, when the miners of Briceville, a short distance from the village of Coal Creek in the northeastern part of the state, went out on strike against the Tennessee Coal and Mining Company. The contract with the K. of L. having expired, the company had set out to break the union. Only miners who signed an "iron-clad" agreement that they would not join a union would be given employment. The company demanded that the men agree not to employ their own checkweighman to weigh the coal—a right granted to them under the state law—but to have "implicit confidence in the integrity" of the company. Having been systematically robbed for years by the company's checkweighman before they had compelled it to accept one of the union members in the post, it is not surprising that the miners refused to sign the proposed agreement.

The company promptly locked out the miners and evicted from company houses all who refused to sign the agreement. B. A. Jenkins, president of the company, signed a five-year contract with the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railway Company to supply him with contract convict labor.

From April 10 to July 1891, the miners kept the mines shut down. On July 4th, Independence Day, the Tennessee Coal and Mining Company announced that convicts were to be imported to break the strike at Briceville. The next day, 40 convicts were brought in, leased from the

* Thomas C. Platt, Republican boss of New York State, was president of the company, and many of the biggest stockholders were northern capitalists. In 1907, the company became a subsidiary of the United States Steel Corporation.

† After the law was passed in 1887 giving miners the right to elect their own checkweighmen, the Briceville miners had selected one of their own members. But it took a strike to compel the company to recognize him. In other mines, too, it was found that the law could be enforced only where there was a strong union to police it.
Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railway Company, and put to work tearing down the houses formerly inhabited by the evicted strikers. The lumber from the houses was used to build a stockade to keep a group of 130 convicts expected to arrive on July 15.

RELEASE OF THE CONVICTS

The company's action in importing convict labor aroused the entire community. A citizens' mass meeting was held on July 14, and the miners, merchants and other property owners, all of whom stood to lose from the importation of convict labor,5 unitedly decided to march on the stockade and demand the release of the convicts.

Shortly after midnight, a determined band of about 300 miners and other citizens, armed with shotguns, revolvers, rifles, and army muskets, appeared before the stockade. Far outnumbered, the guards turned the convicts over to the crowd. Convicts and guards were marched to Coal Creek, a distance of five miles. There they were loaded on a train for a 32-mile journey southeast to Knoxville. The entire incident was well organized and went off without the slightest confusion or violence.6

After they had released the convicts, the miners and their allies sent a telegram to Governor John P. Buchanan explaining their action as a necessary step to defend their families from starvation and their property from ruin. In appealing to him to prevent the return of the convicts, they emphasized that only bloodshed would result if the company persisted in using convict labor to take away the free miners' livelihood.7

Governor Buchanan's reply to the committee's telegram was to call out three companies of the state militia.8

Organized labor in Tennessee came to the support of the miners. Mass meetings were held in the principal cities, and resolutions were adopted by the assembled unionists condemning the Governor and demanding that all union men in the militia return home at once.9 The Chattanooga Federation of Trades sent a representative, H. H. Schwartz, to express solidarity and to bolster up the spirits of the locked-out workmen. Much to his surprise, he discovered that they needed little encouragement. He sent back this report:

"I should like to impress upon people the extent of this movement. I have seen the written assurance of reinforcements to the miners of fully 7,500 men, who will be on the field in ten hours after the first shot is fired. But the time for action has not arrived. There is no division of sentiment. The entire district is as one over the main proposition, 'the convicts must go.' I counted 840 rifles on Monday as the miners passed, while the vast multitude following them carried revolvers. The captains of the different companies are all Grand Army men.5 Whites and Negroes are standing shoulder to shoulder."

THE MARCH ON THE STOCKADE

On Sunday afternoon, July 10, a miners' committee called upon Colonel Sevier, commander of the militia, with a proposal for a peaceful solution. The troops and convicts were to depart retaining their arms. The miners would assist with their transportation and baggage. The Colonel's reply was that if the miners attempted to enter the camp they would be fired upon.

At a mass meeting that evening, the miners drew up plans to move upon the stockade the following morning. Before daybreak, miners converged on Briceville from all the mining camps of northeast Tennessee. They came on foot, trains, and mules, armed with rifles, shotguns, Colt pistols, and old squirrel guns. Eugene Merrell was in command. The miners were organized in strict military discipline, prepared for whatever might happen. A roll call was drawn up listing each man, with a note as to his arms. Those who had been drinking were ordered to fall out. Marching four abreast, in two columns, two thousand miners and farmers started out on their two-mile hike to the stockade. "Their organization was complete," said a contemporary newspaper, "and their leaders placed them along the hills with military precision."10

As they approached the camp, situated on a knoll in a valley, the miners occupied the hills and completely surrounded the stockade. A column of miners marched to within 200 yards of the camp when Merrell gave the signal to halt. A committee of three, under a flag of truce, called for Colonel Sevier and went to meet him. When the Colonel made a move as if to take the committee captive, Merrell waved his handkerchief, and at once 1,500 miners sprang from the hillside and made their way towards the stockade. Impressed with the strength of the miners and considering resistance futile, Colonel Sevier surrendered. The miners agreed not to injure company property and to assist in guarding the convicts. Then Merrell and his committee waved their hats and swords, a signal of success. There was a tremendous cheer from the miners.

In high spirits the miners started the convicts, guards, and militia on the march to Briceville. At the town they boarded a train of flat cars waiting for them. While waiting for a special train at Coal Creek, the miners invited the soldiers into their homes for lunch. The troops,

* The reference is to the Grand Army of the Republic, the Union Army during the Civil War.
many of whom sympathized with the miners, departed in good spirits, and as the train left Coal Creek there were reciprocal cheers by soldiers and miners. When they arrived at Knoxville, the soldiers gave the press a statement in which they thanked the miners for the “many courtesies and kindness extended to us during our stay in camp."

Meanwhile, the miners released 125 convicts being used at the Knoxville Iron Company mine and placed them on a train for Knoxville. Then at a closed meeting, the miners took an oath not to molest state or company property and to remain quiet and orderly. Guards were placed around company property to prevent injury, for the miners were familiar “with the old tactic of coal companies of planting a charge of dynamite in time of strike to incite public opinion against the miners.”

The discipline and organization of the miners in the second release of the convicts aroused admiration in many parts of the state. “The capture of the Tennessee militia was one of the most amazing things in military tactics,” declared the Louisville Times. The conservative newspapers, spokesmen for the mine owners, carried screaming headlines denouncing the strikers: “Anarchy, Law of Tennessee Set at Naught, Organised Mob of Miners Defy and Override the Power of the State.”

Taking his cue from these headlines, Governor Buchanan, after consulting T.C.I. officials, issued an order mobilizing the full military strength of the state, 14 companies of militia, and prepared for war. Troops were ordered out from six cities and placed under the command of General Samuel T. Carnes of Memphis. As Gompers correctly put it in denouncing the Governor’s action: “The state of Tennessee really converted itself into a bureau to supply scab labor.”

On July 25, the convicts were returned under military escort accompanied by Governor Buchanan. They were received in silence by a crowd in Coal Creek. Thirty-six convicts were delivered to the Tennessee Coal and Mining Company, and 125 to the Knoxville Iron and Mining Company. A speech announced by the Governor had to be cancelled when no one turned out to hear him.

THE LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Yielding to pressure from labor and its allies, Governor Buchanan had agreed to call a special session of the legislature to consider the miners’ demand that “The convicts must go!” But in the very proclamation calling for the session, the Governor made it even more clear than before that he was a servant of the corporations. The first item on the agenda was to be conferring upon the governor greater authority over the militia, and an increase of its strength. His final betrayal of the people came in his message to the legislature, in which he advocated the continuance of the convict lease system in the face of the clear desire of the majority of the people to be rid of that iniquitous evil. Modification perhaps, but no repeal, said the Governor, and he cited as his main reasons for retaining the system that it would be too expensive to consider building a new prison to house 1,500 convicts and that the state would lose $100,000 a year, the sum received from the convict contract.

The legislature refused to repeal the convict lease system by a vote of 59 to 23, and passed laws which made the convict lease system even more obnoxious. Interference with the labor of a convict was made a felony punishable with five years’ imprisonment. Leading a protesting group—“mob” was the word used in the law—was to be punished by seven years in prison. And the sum of $25,000 was appropriated for the maintenance of the militia with which to further intimidate the miners, while $14,458.13 was set aside to pay the bill already incurred by the militia at Bricelville. Finally, the Governor was commended by the legislature for his firm and prompt action in restoring order in the mining district.

The Governor could now do legally what he had been pleased to do illegally.

Not only the miners but the entire state was shocked by the legislature’s action. Senator Woodlee, a Farmers’ Alliance Democrat from Grundy County, declared: “It is a disgrace to have been a member of this general assembly.”

At a mass meeting on October 28, the miners’ committee made its final report and tendered its resignation in these words: “As the state had willed it, and is prepared to enforce its will with bayonet and Gatling gun, that you peacefully give up your work, your homes, and your sweet memories that around them cling, and like Hagar did, find a protection in a Divine Providence, for surely you can find none elsewhere, with sorrow too deep to express, we ring down the curtain on the last act in the Bricelville drama by tendering our resignation.”

THE STORMING OF THE STOCKADE

However, the last and what was by far the most dramatic act in that drama was just beginning. Convicts had been used in the mines since 1871 and the miners had waited patiently for 20 years for the law to redress their grievances. They had refrained from resorting to extra-legal methods until they had exhausted every possible legal instrument. Now the miners were prepared to use much more drastic action.

On the last day of October, word was passed around announcing a meeting in each mine. As the men approached, all lights were extinguished so that no one could be recognized. “Jack-in-the-box” spoke, advising all
miners to disguise and arm themselves, and gather together that night at Rock Bottom Hall.

From the hall the miners marched 1,500 strong to the stockade which was quickly surrounded. The leaders, with handkerchiefs across their faces, demanded of the warden that the convicts be turned over to the miners. The demand was met at once. After furnishing each convict with civilian clothes, they were set free. The stockade was burned to the ground. This was the first violence to property in the long struggle. It was clear that, whatever the cost, the miners did not intend to permit the convicts to return again.

The convicts at the mine of the Knoxville Iron Company were also freed, though here the stockade was not burned, for the warden's wife was seriously ill in an adjoining house. The guardhouse and the office, however, were destroyed. Convicts were supplied with clothing before they were set free.19

The release of the convicts had been conducted with the utmost secrecy and with no shots being fired. Everything had gone off with military precision.

Newspapers sympathetic to the miners compared the attack on the stockade to the storming of the Bastille in the French Revolution. When the Nashville Banner asked, "Shall Tennessee allow a gang of thieves, robbers, ruffians and outlaws to trample with impunity upon the law?" the Chattanooga Republican replied:

"They are not ruffians and they are not cut-throats. Rather call the legislature robbers. . . . Rather call the legislature inhuman because they refused to listen to the appeals of the miners; and when they asked for the right to labor and earn bread for their families, received in answer the contemptuous reply: we not only make it a crime for you to interfere with state convicts, but we send more convicts in your midst to show you that the power of the state is supreme." 19

A reward of $5,000 was offered by the governor for the arrest of the leaders of the miners and of $250 for each additional member of the miners' union who participated in the attack on the stockade. But no one was arrested and no legal action was taken against the miners. It was impossible to proceed legally against an entire county. No one knew who was responsible, at least no one would talk. As for the convicts, most of them were rounded up by railroad and company detectives.20

For several months following the attack on the stockade, peace reigned in the area between Coal Creek and Briceville. Most of the companies decided that it was the better part of wisdom to deal with the union on reasonable terms. They met with committees representing the United Mine Workers to which organization the miners, formerly affiliated with the K. of L., now belonged, and agreed to permit the miners to select their own checkweighmen, and to desist from importing convict labor. In Briceville the company finally decided that it had had enough. In spite of pressure from Godwin, agent of the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railway Company, the Briceville mine owners refused to bring back the convicts. Convicts were never again used in Briceville.21

On July 15, 1892, the first anniversary of the freeing of the convicts at Briceville was celebrated. Eugene Merrell made the welcoming address, and Billy Webb, president of the United Mine Workers in the district, was the principal speaker. During the afternoon and evening there was dancing on a platform constructed from the old timbers of the convict stockade. "It's funny what a little organization will do," Webb wrote in the United Mine Workers' Journal, describing the celebration.22

The miners' rejoicing was premature. The Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railway Company was determined that the state of Tennessee should have convicts mine its coal, regardless of what the miners and the rest of the population thought about the matter. It proceeded to buy out a number of companies that had signed agreements with the miners' union, rebuilt the stockades that had been burned, built new ones, and brought in convicts. In these mines, convicts worked full time while the free miners received only one or two days a week. The best places in the mines were given to scabs and blacklegs. Miners who had been active in the convict fight were discharged and blacklisted.23

Trouble was in the air. Once more the miners began to hold secret meetings.

THE BATTLE OF OLIVER SPRINGS

This time the explosion burst in Tracy City in the southeastern part of Tennessee. Although the miners at Tracy City had suffered under the convict lease system longer than any other group (it was here in 1871 that the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railway Company had first introduced the use of convict labor in the mines), they had not taken part thus far in the war to end the system. Then in July, 1892, the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company cut the free miners to half time, while the convicts were working full time. A committee of miners asked that as soon as work picked up, they should be given more time instead of giving it all to the convicts. The company replied that they would give the request consideration, but promised nothing.

Soon more orders came in. Instead of heeding the miners' request, the company imported more convicts, and increased the number of guards at the stockade, located at Oliver Springs, several miles to the north of Tracy City. It was this action that caused the pent-up resentment of years to explode.24

About five o'clock on the morning of August 13, 1892, a committee of
miners called on Superintendent Nathrust. They demanded employment on equal terms with the convicts. He made a vague promise to take up the matter with the company officials. When the miners received this report, they decided to take action. They were fed up with promises.

At nine o'clock in the morning, 150 miners approached the stockade at Oliver Springs, while three miners covered each guard. With drawn guns, the leaders, Berry Simpson, Bob Vaughn, and Jim Frazier, demanded the keys to the stockade. All personal property of the convicts and the company were carefully removed. The stockade was burned and the convicts placed on the train for Nashville. 28

The next day the conservative press demanded that the Governor take immediate action to preserve "the dignity of Tennessee." "There must be a stop to this," raged the Nashville American. "We point to anarchism and communism in other states, and at the same time are nurturing them in our midst." 28

The Governor did act. Troops were sent in, the convicts were returned, and the stockade was rebuilt. More and more free miners' jobs were taken by the convicts. A permanent armed garrison was now stationed at Coal Creek.

On August 14, the story of the battle of Oliver Springs was related to a mass meeting of miners at Coal Creek. Full approval of the miners' action was voted. Resolutions were also adopted railing the Homestead workers for their courage in battling the Pinkertons employed by the Carnegie Steel Company. There was a demand for new action to rid the entire area once and for all of convicts. 27

On August 16, miners from all parts of eastern Tennessee and southern Kentucky poured into Coal Creek. Everyone realized that the final showdown was at hand. Freight trains were taken over by the miners as a small army of miners, 3,000 strong, moved in the direction of Oliver Springs. At 4:30 am. they arrived before the stockade.

Under a flag of truce the miners agreed not to injure company property, guards or militia, provided that the convicts were released. In the face of such odds, the guards and militiamen surrendered. As the guards and militia marched out between a double file of miners, they were disarmed and permitted to leave unharmed. For the third time in a year, a carload of convicts moved toward Knoxville. Again the stockade at Oliver Springs was burned.

Before the Oliver Springs battle began, word of the miners' plans had reached the authorities and a regiment had been sent to the area from Chattanooga. A train was waiting to convey the regiment to Oliver Springs, but the railroad engineers and train crews refused to move the train. In spite of the raging threats of the officers, the men stood their ground. The train did not move. 28

Invited to a conference by the miners, the Governor replied evasively, advising them to remain quiet and satisfactory arrangements would be made. He was merely stalling for time, for he had already set about mobilizing the entire military power of the state. Regiments of troops were ordered to Coal Creek, and, acting under the new legislation passed at the special session, the Governor ordered the sheriffs in all the neighboring counties to furnish large forces of men for duty. Volunteers, "all belonging to the best families," responded to the sheriffs' appeals for forces. Arms and munition were supplied by the United States War Department. The armed force, which included, according to a Knoxville newspaper, "some of the most prominent citizens of the place ... Good representatives of the class of men who favor the maintenance of law and order," started for the front at Coal Creek. 29

The miners entrenched themselves on Walden's Ridge opposite Fort Anderson. Pickets were posted on the surrounding mountain top to prevent a surprise attack, for word had reached the miners that thousands of soldiers were on their way.

On August 10, however, trainloads of soldiers arrived in Coal Creek. With the large number of soldiers came field guns and Gatling guns.

Greatly outnumbered and unable to withstand the artillery shelling, the miners were driven from their positions commanding the fort. Coal Creek was in the hands of the militia. Troops continued to pour in, and as soon as it was known that armed resistance had been broken, large numbers of volunteers turned up eager to fight the dispersed miners. 30

THE REIGN OF TERROR

The war turned into a mad man-hunt. Revenge and terror were the order of the day. The troops combed the hills and mining towns taking custody of hundreds, not only miners but ordinary citizens, regardless of whether they had been participants in the war. Hundreds were arrested and prisons soon overflowed. 4 The village schoolhouse was converted into a prison, and when that was filled, the Methodist Church was used for the same purpose. 31

On August 20, General Barnes announced that he had 300 miners in custody and was continuing the reign of terror with zeal. "Soldiers have been engaged all day arresting miners and the work is to be prosecuted with vigor. Houses are to be searched and all arms and ammunition in them will be confiscated. No quarter will be given miners who resist." 32

A Negro, Jake Witsen, who was alleged to have "resisted," was shot and killed, his body being pierced with a dozen bullets. Witsen, described

* There would have been even more miners imprisoned if the citizens of the area had not hidden and fed them. Even though they knew that if they were discovered they would be arrested, these citizens hid the miners in cellars and attics.
in the conservative press as a "desperado," had been one of the leaders in the revolt. His body was carried to his home at Clinton and a funeral was held which was attended by several thousand white fellow-workers and neighbors. Three hundred miners were indicted for conspiracy, carrying of arms, murder and many other "crimes." Nothing was said at their trials about the lawless acts of the companies nor of the soldiers and how they had terrorized women and children. After long drawn-out trials, a number of miners were sentenced to the penitentiary. D. B. Monroe, one of the leaders of the battle, was given seven years in the penitentiary. He served only two years, and, after his release, was again in Grundy County organizing the miners.

Following the battle at Coal Creek in August, 1892, there was comparative quiet in the mountains until the spring of 1893. Then the miners of Tracy City staged the final pitched battle of the convict wars. The stockade near Tracy City had been burned in the August battle. A short time later it had been rebuilt. The new structure was a real fortress, complete with portholes from four to six inches in diameter, and block houses on the corner. Miners continued to drill in secret against the day when they would fight again for their jobs.

On the evening of April 19, 1893, 150 miners approached the stockade. Coats were thrown over their heads for disguise. For several hours a battle raged. As soon as the news of the battle reached Nashville, five cannon shots were fired from Capitol Hill, the signal for the troops to take off. A special train carried four companies of the First Regiment of the Militia, a cannon and Gatling gun. At Murfreesboro further reinforcements were picked up. Adjutant-General Fytte and Captain Henry Ward of the United States Army were in command.

With the arrival of the troops, the outnumbered miners dispersed and a hunt began for their leaders. Most of them took to the woods. They were hidden and cared for by hundreds of friends and sympathizers who wanted to see the convict lease system abolished. Thus ended the final battle in the great convict war.

While apparently defeated in their long struggle, the miners were the final victors in the fight over the convict lease system. Their struggles had aroused the state to the point where public opinion demanded an end to the convict lease system in the mines. In response to the continued pressure from the miners, their union, the United Mine Workers, and their supporters throughout the state, the contract with the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railway Company was not renewed when it expired in 1896. After exactly 25 years of suffering and struggle, and two years of pitched battles, the miners rid themselves of this yoke and wiped from the slate a disgraceful mark against the state of Tennessee.
Coal Creek Troubles

AMERICA'S FOLKLORE map is marked with names on the land remembered in song: Big Bend Tunnel, Chisholm Trail, Springfield Mountain, Sierra Peaks, Birmingham Jail, the Banks of the Ohio, the Lake of Pontchartrain, the Streets of Laredo. Each of these locales is a place of contour and substance, an intersection of latitude and longitude. Coal Creek, one such specific community in Tennessee, is also the setting for a folksong cluster—but this designation no longer appears on current maps. After a lake was impounded behind the Tennessee Valley Authority's Norris Dam in 1936, Coal Creek renamed itself Lake City. The new appellation is apt, for TVA hydroelectric power and atomic energy are giants in the region and a prominent Lake City neighbor is Oak Ridge. Coal Creek was also an apt name: Tennessee's coal-bearing counties lie on the Cumberland Plateau, which forms a mountainous corridor bisecting the state from northeast to southwest. This belt (some forty to fifty-five miles wide) lies directly east of a Cumberland Gap-Chattanooga diagonal. The plateau's eastern edge—Cumberland Mountain, Walden Ridge (North), Walden Ridge (South)—forms a belt prominent in history and folklore.

Coal Creek's original settlers built their cabins on the banks of a mountain stream bearing the same name, below the point
where the stream broke through Walden Ridge in Anderson County. The early frontier economy of hunting and fishing, small-scale farming, and livestock raising prevailed until the Civil War, but it was severely disrupted by that conflict. East Tennessee was divided in its loyalty between Jeff Davis and Abe Lincoln, and Coal Creek was but one of many border communities devastated by virtue of its geography. Until 1805 Walden Ridge had been a legal boundary line between settlers and Cherokees in the Indian Territory; during the Civil War it became an unofficial boundary between Unionists and Confederates and the site of considerable guerrilla warfare. But Walden Ridge was more than a forested dividing line: its flanks were rich in coal. Desultory mining on the Cumberland Plateau began in 1814 in Roane County. The extension to commercial use of east Tennessee coal occurred in the 1830’s, when it was shipped by river as far away as New Orleans. When railroads pushed their lines into the mountains during the 1850’s, coal mining became a major Tennessee industry.¹

Prior to the Civil War, Anderson County coal was floated down Poplar Creek and the Clinch River for southern sales, and some was carted by oxen to nearby Knoxville for local sales. By 1871 the Knoxville & Kentucky Railroad reached Coal Creek, and the Knoxville Iron Company opened a mine which employed fifty men and shipped, in its first year, 2,000 tons of coal to Knoxville for rolling-mill and related processes. Like many isolated Appalachian towns, Coal Creek became an industrial boomtown after mining began, although it was physically set in a verdant area of hills and streams, and never really escaped the aura of being “in the woods.”

The earliest residents of the area came largely from the Carolinas and Virginia. In the decades 1880-1900, Anderson County led Tennessee in coal production, and therefore it attracted some Negro as well as European immigrant miners. A few years after the Knoxville Iron Company’s initial operation, four additional mines were opened. During 1875 more than 60,000 tons of coal were shipped from the district. Coal Creek was never immune from the problems which plagued bituminous mining throughout the United States. The Coal Creek miners called their first strike in 1876 to protest against a company wage cut from 5¢ to 2½¢ per bushel. In the following year, one response of the Knoxville Iron Company to its workers’ action was to bring in convicts to replace them. The miners showed their concern by exploding three powder kegs under the convicts’ quarters, but the intruders remained. This powder smoke lingered in Coal Creek’s air for decades.²

Organized labor’s fight against the convict-lease system is one of the most dramatic episodes in trade-union history. It was largely a political campaign mounted in legislative halls and from convention or journalistic platforms, but the Coal Creek encounters became shooting battles between miners and militia in Anderson and neighboring Morgan counties, as well as in Grundy and Marion more than a hundred miles to the southwest. Parallel to this political and physical encounter was the long fight by a handful of southern reformers against the post-Civil War retention of slavery.³

The arrival of a group of prisoners in Coal Creek during 1877 was not an isolated phenomenon. Throughout the defeated South a surreptitious re-enslavement of the Negro had occurred under the convict-lease system instituted by post-Reconstruction, whitesupremacy state governments. Heavy penalties for petty crime were enforced rigidly against black men; consequently large numbers of ex-slaves were available for lease to railways, turpentine and logging operators, mining corporations, or individual planters. The system eliminated penal expenses, provided state revenues, and perpetuated prewar patterns of labor relations. Some intellectuals opposed,
the system from its inception. John Berrien Lindsley — Tennessee physician, educator, and minister — was one of the earliest public critics of convict leasing; in 1874 he published a pamphlet, On Prison Discipline and Penal Legislation, which showed fellow southerners the road to reform. Other tireless social critics such as Mrs. Rebecca Felton of Georgia and Miss Julia Tutwiler of Alabama joined Lindsley in the uphill fight against the mores of their region. They linked their attack on the convict-lease system with their fight for woman suffrage and temperance.

The most effective fighter in this cause was George Washington Cable, the Louisiana writer on Creole life. While a member of the New Orleans grand jury, Cable discovered that blacks arrested on charges of hog stealing or fistfighting were subsequently leased out by penal authorities to private contractors for long periods of heavy and forced labor, which in turn led to appalling death rates. When he learned that the system extended far beyond New Orleans, he assembled data from twelve states and took to the lecture platform to rally southerners against the evil which he characterized as "murder for money." On September 26, 1883, Cable addressed the National Conference of Charities and Correction at Louisville on the subject; his paper was subsequently printed as "The Convict Lease System in the Southern States." This lucid essay was followed by "The Freedman’s Case in Equity," in which Cable enlarged his subject to cover Negro civil rights.

While describing an Alabama train trip, Cable penned a few lines pertinent to understanding the response of coal miners to convict labor: "At the next station there came aboard a most melancholy and revolting company. In filthy rags, with vile odors and the clanking of shackles and chains, nine penitentiary convicts chained to one chain, and ten more chained to another, dragged laboriously into the compartment. . . . The keeper of the convicts told me he should take them in that car two hundred miles that night. They were going to the mines."4

Cable’s revelations brought him credit as a social critic, but at the price of renunciation as a traitor to his native South. Notwithstanding the esteem in which he was held as a novelist, Cable was exiled to Massachusetts and withdrew from public controversy. But the attack on the prison-labor system continued. J. C. Powell, a

Florida prison guard, published The American Siberia (1891), a matter-of-fact narrative exposing the barbarism inherent in the convict-lease system: medieval tortures of prisoners, cruel guards, primitive living conditions, lack of state inspection. Among other vivid details, Powell revealed that many ordinary citizens displayed their opposition to the system by aiding prisoners to escape. In the very year of The American Siberia’s appearance, great numbers of convicts were helped to flee the Coal Creek mines.

In a multi-level view of literature — sophisticated, popular, folk — one can place Cable’s and Powell’s writings, respectively, in the first two categories, and then look for folk parallels. The ballad to be discussed in this chapter, "Coal Creek Troubles," commented specifically on local happenings which occurred when miners themselves challenged the pernicious convict-labor system. Although the history of the war (insurrection and rebellion are alternate designations) is well documented, no ballad scholar has brought together its songs. Before turning to such material (in this and the next chapter) I shall summarize the war’s events and comment on its treatment in subsequent historical and folkloric studies.8

The Coal Creek miners had revealed their hostility to convict workers as soon as they appeared in the community (1877), but no major demonstration recurred until July 14, 1891. On this anniversary of the French Bastille Day, more than 300 miners, some active in the Knights of Labor, stormed the Bricville stockade of the Tennessee Coal Mining Company intent upon eliminating "slave" labor — predominately black — from the area. The prison guards were no match for the aroused workers, many of whom were Union or Confederate veterans newly united in a common cause. After a bloodless victory, the guards and convicts were marched to Coal Creek and loaded on a convenient freight train to Knoxville. This action brought Governor Buchanan to the scene for a confrontation with miner leader Eugene Merrell at Thistle Switch (between Coal Creek and Bricville).

The contrast between the workers’ and the state’s spokesmen reveals something of the polarization which industrialism forced upon agrarian America. Merrell, whose name is hardly mentioned in historical annals, had been born Jean Rousseau in France on October 8, 1849. During his childhood his parents brought him to
New Orleans, where his father died. Upon his mother's remarriage, Jean took his stepfather's name. When still a young man, Merrell became a coal miner near Paris, Illinois. About 1880 he joined the Danville, Illinois, local assembly of the Knights of Labor, and he organized for them in Indiana and Tennessee. While working at Brickeville, he was discharged and blacklisted. Eugene opened a small grocery store, but during the troubles distributed his entire stock of goods to the miners, going heavily into debt for this contribution. Merrell's devotion to his fellows never wavered. Long after he had been driven out of Tennessee with a price on his head, he returned to Knoxville, where he spent his last years organizing wool-mill and other workers; he died about 1923.6

John P. Buchanan (1847-1930), a coalition Democrat as well as the president of the Tennessee Farmers' Alliance, had been elected in 1890 with labor and populist support.7 The decade of the 1890's marked the high point of the "wool hat" revolt which brought to power such figures as "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman in South Carolina and Tom Watson in Georgia. Not all the radicals were able to cope with the pressures of a modern South caught between the rival forces of finance capitalism and agrarian tradition. Buchanan, less militant than his peers, turned on the Coal Creek "insurrectionists," returning the Tennessee Coal Mining Company convicts and augmenting their guards with state troopers. The first physical encounter between the militia and the "Free Men of the Mountains" took place on July 20, resulting in a defeat for Colonel Granville Sevier's soldiers at the Tennessee mine. After entraining both prisoners and militiamen for Knoxville, the miners set their own guards around company property to prevent employers from planting dynamite to turn the community against the union. The rebels also captured the Knoxville Iron Company's stockades (near Coal Creek), where, years before, convicts had been introduced to the area. Following these twin victories, the men returned to work by accepting the Governor's promise that, through the General Assembly, he would seek to end the convict-lease system. The legislators, in a special session (August 31—September 21), refused to act on behalf of the miners; instead, they gave Buchanan more funds and troops and made it a felony to interfere with working convicts.

The miners' response to legislative intransigence, as well as to the militia in their midst, was renewed direct action, which they styled as their personal "extra session." On October 31 they burned the Tennessee mine's Briceville stockade — the first violence to property in the war. Nearby, they liberated the Knoxville mine's prisoners, without a fire because the warden's wife was ill. This time there was no train trip for the released convicts. Instead, the captives were told to scatter over Walden Ridge; some formed a "colony" in Harlan County, Kentucky. Governor Buchanan posted a $5,000 reward for the arrest of the unionists' leader, $250 for each man who had attacked a stockade, and $25 for the return of a convict. However, Anderson County residents supported the miners' cause. The Brickeville mines reopened with free workers and the small operators began dealing with newly organized United Mine Workers of America committees. On November 2 the rebels launched their toughest battle at Oliver Springs (Morgan County), where the Cumberland mine (Big Mountain Coal Company) prisoners were released and their stockade set ablaze. No shots were fired and no miners were identified. It seemed that the war was over, with the mountain region free of convicts.

In the face of normalized labor relations, the Governor, spurred by the powerful Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railroad Company, stepped up action against the miners. On New Year's Day, 1892, Colonel Keller Anderson, a cavalryman, arrived in Coal Creek with 200 convicts consigned for the Knoxville Iron Company. The Colonel built "Fort Anderson" on a hill overlooking Coal Creek and instituted Gatling-gun law. To this day his encampment is called Militia Hill. The occupation dragged on all year with continuous harassment by the outside troopers. After the hanging by the militia of a young miner named Drummond — giving rise to several local legends about the ghost at "Drummond's Trestle" — open hostility resurfaced.

During the summer slack period, men in the "free" mines were only partially employed, but the convicts, protected by a standing army, worked full time. The volcanic situation exploded in mid-August when the miners burned the Tracy City (Grundy County) stockade of the Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railroad Company, entraining the convicts for Nashville. The operation was repeated at
Although the miners felt their cause to be just, they could not win a military war against Tennessee. Consequently they transferred their battles to the political and legislative arena. As a result, Governor Buchanan, stripped of the labor element of his previous coalition, was soundly defeated in August, 1892. His successor, Peter Turney, a Bourbon Democrat, visited Coal Creek in September, 1893, and called for order in the district; in the next month he finally removed the state troops. Meanwhile, legislators, reading the election returns, reopened their debate on the convict-lease system. Nevertheless, it was not actually ended until 1896. One of the aftermaths was the construction of Brushy Mountain State Prison at Petros, near Oliver Springs, in which convicts dug coal for Tennessee itself until World War II. This locale is remembered in the hillbilly and bluegrass ballad variously titled “In the Hills of Roane County” or “Roane County Prison.”

No historian has ventured to say precisely why the Tennessee miners were more militant than their fellow workers elsewhere, who also opposed the convict-lease system. Miners in all fields — before and after the Coal Creek war — had been and continued to be extremely active in labor disputes. The Coal Creekers, in addition, were engaged against a complex political ring (governor, legislators, lobbyists, penal officials) as well as a major corporate power. Tennessee's convict-lease system dated to 1866. An early lessee was the Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railroad Company (popularly known as the TCI), which began to use prisoners in Tracy City mines early in 1871. In 1889 the TCI took over for a six-year term all the state's leased convicts — about 1,600 men at $100,000 per year. The company used some directly but leased others to subcontractors at Coal Creek and elsewhere. In its Annual Report for this period the TCI president prided himself that this firm had “obtained the [convict] labor for $1000 per annum less than the amount required under the previous lease.” The Report added: “The prisons owned by the company, both in Tennessee and Alabama, are in excellent condition, and the entire management . . . is satisfactory to the authorities of the respective States. The health of the prisoners has been better than in any previous year, and the death rate is lower.” Complementing this presidential statement, the general manager for the Alabama division wrote:

Inman (Marion County), except that the stockade (under a railroad bridge) was dismantled rather than burned. On October 16 the miners suffered their first setback in a pitched battle at Oliver Springs, when the guards refused to surrender their charges and opened fire on the miners. After the wounded men received reinforcements, they set the torch to the stockade. This intensified action led Governor Buchanan to call unsuccessfully for U.S. War Department troops.

The rebellion had now touched base in widely separated points on the Cumberland Plateau, and had involved free miners from Kentucky and other states. By late August, General Samuel Carnes had more than 5,000 Tennessee troops in the region as well as considerable field artillery. Ironically it was his forces — cloaked under such flamboyant names as the Rosier Zouaves, the Memphis Chicksaw Guards, the Maurelain Cadets, the Hibernian Rifles, and the Tullahoma Light Infantry — who instituted a reign of terror. Supported by 40,000 rounds of ammunition from the federal arsenal at Indianapolis, Carnes hunted down rebel miners and also guarded convicts, who continued to dig coal during the turbulence. In the face of massive arrests of miners and their citizen friends, who were imprisoned in temporary jails in Coal Creek's schoolhouse and Methodist church, and of indictments for conspiracy and murder, the rebellion ended. However, troops remained at Militia Hill for a year, and at faraway Tracy City the rebels staged a defiant last battle on April 19, 1893.
The convict department [Pratt mines] is in first-rate condition, the men are well treated, are in good health, and cheerful and contented. Their tasks are easily performed and nearly all of them earn extra money every day. . . . The new prisons are large, well ventilated and lighted, and arranged with strict regard to proper sanitary precautions. They [convicts] do their work well and regularly, and in case of strikes they can furnish us enough coal to keep at least three of the Ensley Furnaces running and possibly all four of them.8

The use of prisoners as potential strikebreakers was important to American entrepreneurs after the Civil War, as craftsmen became fully aware of industry’s power. In a New York Times interview a TCI official stated: “One of the chief reasons which induced the company to take up the system was the great chance it offered for overcoming strikes. For some years after we began the convict-lease system, we proved that we were right in calculating that the free miners would be loath to enter upon strikes, when they saw that the company was amply provided with convict labor.”9 The scene of the TCI’s largest use of convicts, the Pratt mines (on the outskirts of Birmingham), was far from Coal Creek, but Pratt events frequently appeared in the labor newspapers read by all coal miners. In April, 1891, the United Mine Workers Journal carried a long report by a correspondent on the Pratt use of specially trained small, dull red foxhounds— not bloodhounds — who ran down the convict-miner escapees. Two months later the Journal reported a horrible accident at Pratt, naming the white and colored convict miners killed by fire and suffocation.10 These reports on foxhounds and fires were read in Coal Creek and Briceville at the time when local miners were displaced by TCI-leased prisoners. The accounts belied the company’s position that its convicts were “cheerful and contented.”

While the TCI established basic mine-labor conditions for much of Tennessee and Alabama, it was actually a “captive corporation draining profits northward.”11 The TCI president at the time of the Coal Creek conflict was Thomas C. Platt, New York’s powerful Republican party boss; in 1907 the TCI, largely based in the Birmingham area, became a U.S. Steel Corporation subsidiary. In 1945 the TCI relinquished its Tennessee charter in favor of one from Alabama, and in 1952 it was reorganized as a division within

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U.S. Steel. By 1964, in a further streamlining of the parent structure, the TCI division was phased directly into the U.S. Steel Corporation. Metaphorically, the old TCI ghost still lingers at U.S. Steel’s Fairfield Works—the South’s largest steel-making operation—in the Oossum Valley to the west of Birmingham. For many decades Fairfield employees have been organized by the United Steelworkers of America, but it is doubtful that these present-day unionists are aware of Coal Creek history or folklore. It can be observed, however, that in a spirit of editorial justice, the United Mine Workers Journal noted in an article on the Coal Creek rebellion that the TCI was at that time (1938) under contract with the UMWA (CIO) and “our relations with the company are satisfactory.”12

The specific event which had precipitated the Coal Creek turmoil was a labor dispute during the spring of 1891 between the Tennessee Coal Mining Company at Briceville and its employees, members of a Knights of Labor local assembly. The issues at stake were typical of bituminous-mine industrial relations in the 1880’s and 1890’s. The men objected to payment in scrip tokens instead of legal tender. Such tokens were redeemable at par in the company store but discounted elsewhere; naturally company-store prices were higher than elsewhere. The second grievance was directed
against the demand that men sign iron-clad agreements with the company certifying their "implicit confidence in the integrity" of their employers and pleading not to join unions of their choice. (In later years the synonymous term yellowdog contract took the place of iron-clad agreement.)

Additionally, the company insisted that the men dismiss their checkweighman, A. H. Bradley. Before miners were organized it was customary to cheat them when loaded coal was weighed at the tipple. Hence, an early organizational demand was for the men themselves to elect a checkweighman, paid out of their wages, to give them honest weight. The job demanded strong character and considerable intelligence. This right to representation at the point of economic payment had been guaranteed by Tennessee law in 1887.

Because the Coal Creek miners were adamant in defense of their demands, the Tennessee Coal Mining Company shut down its Bricceville operation in April, 1891, transforming the strike into a lockout. On July 4, violating the spirit of Independence Day, the company announced that it would reopen the mine with prisoners leased from the TCI. It was this specific importation of convicts from Tracy City during an unsettled labor dispute that led to the Bastille Day uprising. Since miners in east Tennessee were sensitive to political and economic strategies, national as well as local, this Bricceville incident in turn sparked a widespread rebellion.

During January, 1890, at Columbus, Ohio, a number of rival groups — industrial and craft, secret and open, radical and conservative — had formed the United Mine Workers of America. In its formative years this new international union competed with the older semi-secret Knights of Labor, which had previously organized a large coal-digger membership in its National Trades Assembly. In spite of rivalry at the top, many rank-and-file members maintained two affiliations: at times covertly in KL local assemblies and openly in newly chartered UMWA local unions, and sometimes openly in both. Normally, American laborite, with strong beliefs in exclusive jurisdiction, viewed dual unionism as anathema, but for a few years after 1890 some members accepted an "undercover dualism" with the same staff serving the dual national bodies. This situation prevailed during the Coal Creek war, which opened with Knights storming a Bricceville stockade, and ended with UMWA leaders convincing state legislators to abolish the convict-lease system.

The Coal Creek miners were supported in their rebellion by their friends and neighbors, many of whom were populist in their views, as well as by local merchants with whom they traded. James Lee, a Farmers' Alliance spokesman, stated early in the struggle: "Our fathers years ago took guns and fought for liberty, and shall we, their sons, at the sanctions of Mr. Morrow [TCI agent], be made to acquiesce . . . ?" In addition to bringing together farmers and miners, Knights of Labor and UMWA members, as well as Civil War veterans from North and South, the Coal Creek rebels also included black and white workers in their ranks. An early observer noted of the disciplined miners: "The captains of the different companies are all Grand Army [of the Republic] men. Whites and Negroes are standing shoulder to shoulder." Late in the war a Negro leader, Jake Witsen, was shot to death by the militia. "His body was carried to his home at Clinton and a funeral was held which was attended by several thousand white fellow-workers and neighbors."

In the century of American engagements between trade unionists and troopers or police, the issues have always been the same: law and order versus anarchy, syndicalism, insurrection, and violence. The Nashville American's formulation was vivid and typical: "Shall Tennessee allow a gang of thieves, robbers, ruffians, and outlaws to trample with impunity upon the law?" During 1890-92 Governor Buchanan clearly represented the prevailing notions of property rights in contracts. The TCI contract to lease Tennessee convict labor was fully sanctioned by law and upheld by the courts. Against this notion, Eugene Merrell, the Coal Creek Knights of Labor leader, invoked a Jeffersonian belief in personal liberties and human rights which seemed perfectly natural to the descendants of Tennessee's mountain pioneers. Merrell's dialogue with Buchanan began early in the war and continued long after the unionists fled the state because of his role as miners' spokesman. The rebel position was stated very early in the conflict when the workers informed the Governor that they had "come together to defend [their] families from starvation, [their] property from depreciation, and [their] people from contamination from the hands of the convict labor."
Needless to say, it was many decades after Coal Creek before legislators and courts fleshed out these notions of workers' rights to their jobs.

5. For a recent analysis of Cable's position see Arlin Turner's introductory essay, "George W. Cable as a Social Reformer," in the Patterson Smith reprint of *The Silent South* (1969).
7. Data on Merrell from Mrs. Grace Roberts, Clinton, Ind., in James Dombrowski, original field notes and interviews for "Fire in the Hole."