

Greek Labor In 19th-20th Century U.S.

By Steve Frangos

In the 1880s, the largest emigration from Greece in modern times began. The United States was then experiencing a major industrial expansion, for which millions of new laborers were needed. Between the 1880s and 1920s, the Greeks were the very last of the Europeans to arrive in response to that open call for labor. Demographically, the greatest concentration of Greeks lived and worked West of the Mississippi river until the end of WW I. The West was then a dynamic area needing a seemingly endless supply of workers for factories, mines, railroads, road building, and numerous other types of industrial enterprises and efforts. For those Greek-Americans whose forefathers arrived during that period, many have heard tales of those initial years of vio-

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The Warning Shot No One Heard: T

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lent conflict and relentless toil.

The labor issues, killings, and subsequent incredible silence surrounding the events of early February 1911 in Kenilworth, UT are all too typical for that time and place. As far as can be determined from public sources now available, at least two men – one Greek, one American – were killed. Two Greeks and a Swedish immigrant were seriously wounded, and four Greeks were taken to jail – one of them treated by the police to a process called “sweating,” which can only be interpreted as beatings or worse.

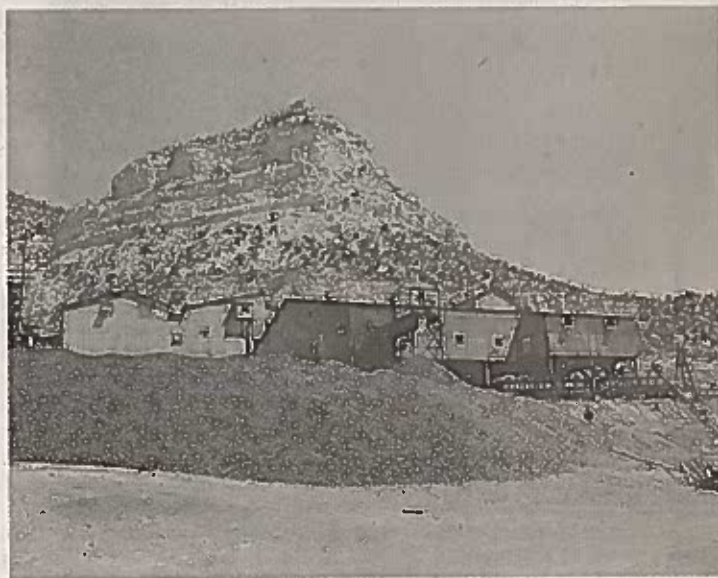
The press provides so many other statistics for arrested Greeks it is uncertain how many were either captured or died from gunshot wounds while escaping attack. That incident far from unique was one of a long string that led to a major strike in 1912 that stopped all mining production in the county known as the great Bingham Strike, where Greek miners became the leaders of the conflict and so were the focus both of the national union organizers and the mining company officials.

Only fairly recently have historians begun to depict the continuous violence between labor and management from the end of the American Civil War to the beginning of WW II as simply the same long conflict focusing on workplace rights, safety, and benefits. During that period, the individuals and small groups known respectively as the Robber Barons and monopolistic corporations were simultaneously fighting each other to consolidate control over the Western coal fields, smelters, railroads, and other sources of wealth, such that ultimate ownership fell into fewer and fewer hands. That relentless drive for the consolidation of the nation's wealth above all else inevitably led to abusing the workers.

Kenilworth is located in Utah's Carbon County, where the subsidiaries of the railroads, the coal mines, were constantly opening new veins. In 1912, Bingham Canyon, also located in Carbon County, was experiencing an enormous increase in copper production, and thus required thousands of new



ABOVE: Panoramic photograph of the Independent Coal & Coke
BELOW RIGHT: Leonidas G. Skliris, leading labor agent of the A
LEFT: The ICC tippie in Kenilworth Utah. The tippie was the
weighed, transported and loaded the coal onto railroad cars.



laborers. The long-established company practice was to bring in cheap labor through agents who recruited whatever number of men were required. Union leaders decried the use of new workers who out of sheer ignorance would work far below normal wages. The agents would alternate among ethnic groups so that first Austrians would be working the mines, smelters or railroads. Once they recognized they were being exploited and raised complaints, the agents would bring in Italians, Greeks, Japanese, or some other ethnic group that did not speak the same language as the prior group and thereby could not use its members as strikebreakers. That was an endlessly repeated process and in many cases the first role of immigrants in the Western United States.

Those labor agents, known as patrones, did not simply get a worker a job; they also charged for getting the immigrant a spe-

cific job and usually extracted a continuing fee as long as that person held that particular job. This was part of a culture of exploitation in which the worker found himself, charged special fees by the foremen, the company for his housing, and the company-owned store, and the worker was even required to pay for his own dynamite or explosive power necessary to extract the coal, iron, and/or other minerals from the mines.

Greeks in Carbon County soon outnumbered other ethnic groups, but they were far from the only foreigners present. Due to the demands of industrialization, the remote Utah county soon became an incredible mix of newly-arrived folks, among them Austrians, Bulgarians, English, Finns, Germans, Irish, Italians, Koreans, and Japanese.

The Greek response to this neverending workplace abuse and continuous cycle of conflict, which frequently included phys-

STORY

The 1911 Kenilworth, Utah Shootout



Company of Kenilworth Utah. American West, c. 1912 BELOW machine that sorted by grade,



would have it, the principal labor agent in the West was a fellow Greek, Leonidas G. Skliris.

Skliris established his main office in Salt Lake City in 1897 and soon thereafter served as a labor agent for the Utah Copper Company, Western Pacific Railroad, Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad, and all the Carbon County coal mines in Hiawatha, Sunnyside, Scofield, and even Kenilworth. With long-established contacts with labor agents in Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, Nevada, and California it was well-recognized that Skliris could within minutes of a telephone call have men on a train traveling to a destination where they could be hired as workers

or used as strikebreakers. Skliris had incredible power at that time and place. Consequently, however, he was exploiting his fellow Greeks. Once they realized that, they collectively worked against not only him, but also against the illegal and exploitative system that he helped maintain.

What began as an all too common labor dispute at the Independent Coal and Coke Company of Kenilworth soon exploded into not simply a major shootout, but also a hurricane of news accounts found in newspapers all across the United States, Canada, and even Australia. Fear and anger against the Greeks can be read in the overwhelming majority of these accounts. The viewpoint that the striking Greeks actively sought legal documents and a peaceful resolution was rarely conveyed by the press.

Accordingly, more should be made known in sufficient detail about how the Greeks actually conducted themselves and also how the historic public record still unjustly and incorrectly reports that those men were "rioters."

ical violence and other offenses against the workers, was twofold. Half of all Greeks who ever journeyed to America between 1880 and 1924 simply returned to Greece. The original intention of the vast majority of them was to work abroad long enough until family debts were resolved or until enough cash was raised to improve family conditions and then return home. Of those that remained in North America permanently, roughly only half ever married and stayed in this country. Tabulations regarding how many of these married couples had children are not available. What constitutes the Greek-American community today springs from that uncertain population, as well as from those who arrived after WW II.

For those Greeks working in the American West and especially those in Utah, this entire culture of exploitation was even harder to withstand. As fate

2012 Presidential Race - Update

By Constantinos E. Scaros

The phrase "Obamacare on Trial" refers to the Supreme Court's review of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) which, essentially, is the health care legislation passed by Congress at president Obama's prompting. Part of what the nine Justices will examine in rendering a decision by the end of June is whether or not it is Constitutional for government to require Americans to purchase health insurance in some manner. Do we have a Constitutional right to be left alone - even if that is not in the best interests of our health? The answer to that question - and, effectively, the partial or total repeal of the ACA, aka "Obamacare" - may very well be a referendum on Obama's presidency itself.

If Obamacare is repealed, the president will look quite foolish in having established as his centerpiece legislation a highly controversial and undoubtedly confusing plan that was snubbed by the High Court for failure to pass Constitutional muster. Then again, if the Court repeals Obamacare, one of the president's two most damaging issues (unemployment being the other) will be off the table.

Add to the mix that virtually every Republican presidential nominee this year was able to make an excellent case against Obamacare - except of course for the one who'll get the nomination, Mitt Romney, whose Massachusetts Romneycare was the prototype by which Obama was inspired. What will the Supreme Court decide, and which Obama will the ruling affect the most? Stay tuned!