THE ESSENTIAL WORKERS’ REVOLT

In the weeks since the coronavirus pandemic took hold in America, the country has come to redefine essential work and to appreciate that essential often means vulnerable. We’ve watched the people who pack online orders, stock grocery stores, and deliver takeout assume unprecedented risk, often for low pay in unsafe working conditions. Some who’ve protested have been silenced; some who’ve carried on have been infected.

Workers also see evidence, though, that in a collective (and profit-threatening) emergency, the big companies that employ essential workers will, under duress, raise wages and offer paid sick leave. The government will find the money to give more families at least $1,200, no application necessary. And at seven every night, we cheer.

But will the country remember its newly essential workers once the social and economic shock wears off? That hopeful and haunting question will be on many people’s minds leading up to the presidential election in November, and in the months after. Covid capitalism could see the country extend the privileges of the wealthy, of monopolistic corporations, of the insured, of anyone who’s had the luxury of keeping their jobs while working from home. Or it could see the country rewrite its increasingly one-sided social contract.

Reckonings like this tend to come every couple of decades—expected by some, denied by others. On occasion, American capitalism is reformed; rarely does it stay that way. The Great Depression brought on Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, which eventually helped the country return to prosperity, but not for all, which in turn prompted the Great Society reforms of Lyndon Johnson. Before either of those movements, at the start of the 20th century, came Theodore Roosevelt’s Square Deal.

The progressive moment announced itself in 1902 with a monthslong coal strike that revealed miners to be the essential and undervalued workers of their time. Americans had known, in an abstract way, that the advances and luxuries of the industrial age depended on the willingness of a few thousand men to hazard dangerous conditions and to appreciate that essential often means vulnerable.

Almost half a million immigrants arrived in 1901, only to find themselves crowded into unhealthy tenements and some of the most dangerous and unreliable jobs. The backlash against Reconstruction in the South—and pervasive racism throughout the country—meant many African Americans were struggling to rise out of poverty. Women could work on the production lines and in the sweatshops, but they earned considerably less than men, and few could vote. When Roosevelt came to power in 1901 after the assassination of William McKinley by a former factory worker, the possibility of social unrest seemed close. “The storm is on us,” said Henry Adams, a historian and friend of the new president.

The tempest threatened to begin in the anthracite coal mines of northeastern Pennsylvania. For decades the region’s workers had been doing some of the country’s most dangerous jobs. They knew all the ways they could die. Mines could collapse, rocks could fall, water could rise. The dust and damp and explosive powder could turn their lungs black. They knew the whistle that signaled for work to begin, and the one that signaled someone had met his end. In 1901 the warning whistle blew three or four times a day in the 346 Pennsylvania mines that held almost all of the nation’s hard coal. Twelve hundred miners were injured that year, and an additional 500 died. The bodies were claimed by families who might not have set aside money to bury them, and only some employers would help.

If a miner died alone and friendless, his corpse was donated to a medical school and dissected.

America’s industrialization depended on that coal. Anthracite made possible stronger grades of iron and steel, which made stronger rails, which allowed for heavier locomotives, which made interstate trade on the transcontinental railroads possible. It generated steam for those locomotives and for manufacturing glass, textiles, ceramics, and chemicals. It warmed the homes, offices, and schools of a distant America, urban and modern.

The coal companies depleted the easily reached deposits in the years after the Civil War, which meant they had to spend more to extract what remained. Independent operators eventually sold out to bigger companies, which were backed by the railroads, which had financial supporters of their own. By 1874 most of the coal land in northeastern Pennsylvania was controlled by the railroads. And by 1900 most of the railroads were controlled by John Pierpont Morgan. Morgan wasn’t the richest person in the U.S., but through his companies and connections he influenced more money than anyone else in the country, maybe the world. If anything important was happening on Wall Street, Morgan was assumed to be behind it.

As the coal railroads came under his sway, a cartel took shape. Having beaten back labor unrest and early attempts at unionization, the anthracite bosses frequently hired workers they thought wouldn’t challenge their authority. They recruited miners from central and eastern Europe, often more than they could fully employ, which helped to depress wages. Then they lowered production and raised prices.

But in the Midwest and states such as West Virginia, where coal was bituminous and more mines independently owned, labor organizers had some success. The United Mine Workers, which claimed 95,000 members, was headed by John Mitchell, who’d first gone underground in Illinois at age 12. At 28, he was ambitious, well liked, and politically astute—and he saw an opportunity in Roosevelt. The new president was promising a government that would hold corporations to account, that

By Susan Berfield

In 1902 thousands of coal miners showed Americans that crucial work was often low-paid and dangerous, helping forge a new kind of social contract. Could it happen again today?
Five months after Roosevelt was sworn in, he took on Morgan and the enormous railroad company he’d just formed, Northern Securities, which threatened to dominate the country’s vast Northwest. The governor called on the courts to enforce antitrust law and break up the company. Morgan was shocked by the attack. Wall Street traders described it as a “thunderbolt out of a clear sky”—unreasonable, dangerous, theatrical.

Even at this early point in his administration, Roosevelt understood the power of disputes. As a member of Congress he had helped bring about arbitration laws. As governor of New York he had negotiated a settlement in a strike of stenographers. Now he was to be the arbiter in a nation-wide confrontation between a past in which power was concentrated in the hands of a few elite capitalists, and the current system of ownership…is on trial, “ Roosevelt wrote to a letter from a concerned citizen pleading with him, as a good Christian, to help the miners. “The rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for,” Baer wrote, “not by the labor agitators, but by the Christian men to whom God in His infinite wisdom has given the control of the property interests of the country.” A God-given right to dominate the nation’s economy? That was too much.

For Roosevelt to win, Mitchell said, “The operators do not seem to understand that the present system of ownership is on trial, “ Roosevelt wrote. “I have sent a similar dispatch to Mr. Root trusted Roosevelt far more than they trusted each other. On Saturday, Oct. 11, the financier welcomed the secretary onto his 304-foot yacht, the Corsair, which was anchored in the waters around Manhattan. Root and Morgan conferred for almost five hours, drafting a statement in pencil on eight pages of ivory-colored Corsair stationary.

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At first the coal executives seemed unconcerned. Some warned it would only bring them: payless days, rationed food, untreated illnesses, possibly eviction. “I am of the conviction that this will be the fiercest struggle in which we have yet engaged,” Mitchell wrote to Roosevelt.

Mitchell and Roosevelt watched anxiously; Mitchell because he feared the violence would spread. Three weeks later, though, public opinion turned decisively against the coal barons, when the newspapers held up a reply Baer had written to letters from coal-company officials and its citizens. “I am of the conviction that this will be the fiercest struggle in which we have yet engaged,” Mitchell wrote to Roosevelt.

“Wanted: A man who can steer a ship” — so said a sign. “The captain must be a man of energy and initiative,” it went on. “Now, I hold that that man is Theodore Roosevelt,” the ad concluded. “A God-given right to dominate the nation’s economy? That was too much.”

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