John Mitchell Biography

John Mitchell

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Biography

John Mitchell (1870-1919) was one of the most respected American labor leaders in the early years of the 20th century.

John Mitchell was born on Feb. 4, 1870, in Braidwood, Ill., a coal mining village. Orphaned at the age of 6, he was raised by a strict Presbyterian stepmother. Economic circumstances compelled him to enter the mines at an early age. In 1886-1887 he tried mining in Colorado and Wyoming but returned to Illinois frustrated and penniless.

Mitchell decided coal miners could achieve a better and more secure life by organizing. He joined a Knights of Labor local, but its unsuccessful strikes convinced him to enter the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) at its founding in 1890. A year later he married Katherine O'Rourke, a miner's daughter, and began to read law and study social and economic problems. Mitchell rose rapidly within the union; in September 1898 he became the UMWA president.

President Theodore Roosevelt intervened in a strike in 1902 by the anthracite miners of northeastern Pennsylvania and assisted the strikers in gaining several aims. Mitchell's leadership of the strike won public acclaim for his moderate and restrained approach to industrial relations. Roosevelt said of him, "There was only one man in the room who behaved like a gentleman, and that was not I." Mitchell had also demonstrated that the southern and eastern European immigrants (the majority of anthracite miners) could be effectively organized into unions.

A slight, wiry man of conservative dress and a sober, thoughtful disposition, Mitchell wrote two books, *Organized Labor* (1903) and *The Wage Earner* (1913), expressing his basic idea that there need not be hostility between capital and labor and the prosperity of both were linked. His outlook led him to associate with the National Civic Federation, an organization of employers and labor leaders dedicated to establishing harmonious relations between businessmen and unions. But Mitchell's growing conservatism estranged the UMWA's members. After stepping down as UMWA president in 1908, Mitchell served as head of the Civic Federation's trade-agreement department while remaining second vice president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

In 1911 militants within the UMWA forced Mitchell to choose between the union and the Civic Federation; he resigned from the federation. In 1915 he was appointed chairman of the New York State Industrial Commission, a position he held until his death on Sept. 9, 1919.