Chapter II

THE NEGRO AND THE UNITED MINE WORKERS OF AMERICA

The Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis and Something of Their Meaning: 1890–1900

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I

In April 1877, fifteen hundred Braidwood, Illinois, coal miners struck against the Chicago, Wilmington & Vermillion Coal Company to protest a third wage cut in less than a year and a resulting 33 per cent drop in wages.* Two months later the company imported Kentucky and West Virginia Negroes to replace the stubborn strikers, and its superintendent contentedly reported the Negroes as saying they had "found the Land of Promise." But in July the strikers chased four hundred Negroes and their families from Braidwood, and only a couple of Illinois militia regiments brought them back. When winter approached, the defeated strikers returned to work. The violence accompanying the

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great 1877 railroad strikes drew national attention away from Braidwood, but in that small town only the coming of the Negroes mattered, not the faraway riots in Pittsburgh and other railroad centers. John Mitchell, then a seven-year-old orphan, lived in Braidwood and witnessed these events.[1] No record exists of young Mitchell's feelings at that time, but twenty-two years later an older Mitchell, now the newly elected President of the nine-year-old United Mine Workers of America, gave testimony before the Industrial Commission (set up by Congress in 1898) that might suggest to the innocent only that history repeats itself. Relations between Negroes and whites in the coal-mining industry troubled Mitchell and other UMW leaders. In 1898 and 1899 violence and death had followed the coming of Negro strikebreakers and armed white police to the Illinois towns of Pana, Virden, and Carterville. "I might say, gentlemen," Mitchell advised the Commission in 1899, "that the colored laborers have probably been used more to decrease the earnings in the mines . . . than in any other industry." To this fact Mitchell attributed much unrest. "I know of no element," he continued, "that is doing more to create disturbances than is the system of importing colored labor to take white men's places and to take colored men's places."[2]

Mitchell and the other UMW witnesses before the Commission did not draw the conclusion that such Negro strikebreaking justified the exclusion of Negroes from trade unions. They said the opposite and took pride in their interracial union. Although Mitchell personally believed that the Negro "standard of morality" was "not as high as that of white people," he nevertheless berated only those operators who used Negroes against the union and, insisting that the UMW constitution did not bar Negroes from membership, told the Commission: "Our obligation provides that we must not discriminate against any man on account of creed, color, or nationality."[3] Even more explicit than Mitchell, UMW Secretary-Treasurer W. C. Pearce insisted before the Commission:

> As far as we are concerned as miners, the colored men are with us in the mines. They work side by side with us. They are members of our organization; [and] can receive as much consideration from the officials of the organization as any other members, no matter what color. We treat them that way. They are in the mines, many of them good men.

Pearce objected to Negroes only when they became strikebreakers, but he blamed this condition on "their ignorance of the labor movement and the labor world" and on the frequent deceptions practiced against Negroes by operators. "When they get to a certain place," he said of these Negroes, "why, they are there, and some of them, I know, many times are sorry for it."[4]

These pages consider certain aspects of the early contact between the United Mine Workers and Negro miners. Too little is yet known for that story to be told fully, much less clearly understood. By 1900, when the UMW was only ten years old, Mitchell and Pearce estimated that between 10 and 15 per cent of the nation's four hundred thousand coal miners were Negroes.[5] They almost all worked as bituminous miners, and their number varied between regions. Few labored in western Pennsylvania, and many concentrated in the Border South (West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee) and Alabama. The older bituminous areas of the Middle West all had smaller numbers of Negro miners than the South—and Negro miners spread through other states, too.[6] Some first came as strikebreakers, but most Negroes became miners in a more normal fashion—seeking work as unskilled or semiskilled laborers in a rapidly expanding industry. At the same time as the mining population increased in the 1890s, its ethnic composition changed radically. Traditional dominance of native whites and British and Irish immigrants began to decline as East and South European Catholic immigrants and American Negroes settled into the industry. So heterogeneous a population posed vexatious problems for early UMW leaders. "With all of these differences," existing in industries like the mining industry,

the Industrial Commission concluded in 1901, "it is an easy matter for employers and foremen to play race, religion, and faction one against the other." Even where employers made no such efforts, nationality and ethnic differences separated men in a common predicament. But although early UMW bituminous locals were based on nationalities, by 1900 they had given way to mostly "mixed" locals. In many mining districts the union "mixed" recent immigrants with "old" immigrants and native miners—and Negroes with whites.[7] Negro support explained part of the union's early successes among bituminous miners. By 1900, Negroes had contributed significantly to the building of that union, and twenty thousand Negroes belonged to it. Here we give attention mainly to the role and the ideas of one early UMW Negro leader.

II

The most important of these Negro miners, Richard L. Davis, twice won election to the National Executive Board of the United Mine Workers, in 1896 and 1897, but it is the way his entire career challenges traditional explanations of the relationships between Negro workers and organized labor in the 1890s and not alone his high office that forces attention on him. Biographical material so essential to fully knowing Davis and other Negro UMW officers is scant, and in Davis' case comes mainly from his printed letters and scattered references to him in the *United Mine Workers' Journal.* Such limited information allows only the piecing together of the barest outlines of his life. Much must be inferred and much is unknown, even his status at birth. Davis was born in Roanoke, Virginia, in 1864, the day before Christmas and only a few months before the Civil War ended, but there is not even a hint that he came of either slave or free Negro parents. The *Journal* called him "a full-blooded colored man" but said nothing else about his forebears. For several years Davis attended the Roanoke

schools during the winter months. At eight, he took employment at a local tobacco factory and remained with that job for nine years when, "disgusted with the very low wage rate and other unfavorable conditions of a Southern tobacco factory," he started work as a coal miner in West Virginia's Kanawha and New River regions. In 1882 Davis moved to Rendville, Ohio, a mining village in the Hocking Valley region and southeast of Columbus. He married, supported a family of unknown size, and lived and labored there the rest of his brief life. Apparently only union duties took him away from Rendville and then but for brief periods. Davis died there in 1900. Of his life other than his work as a miner and his union career, nothing else is known.[8]

Life as a miner allowed Davis few amenities. Unsteady work made him, like other miners, complain frequently of recurrent unemployment. The depression in the mid-1890s hit Ohio miners hard. "Times in our little village remain the same . . . —no work and much destitution with no visible signs of anything better," Davis reported in February 1895.[9] More than a year later he wrote again: "Work here is a thing of the past. I don't know what we are going to do. We can't earn a living, and if we steal it we will be prosecuted."[10] The year 1897 proved little better. One week Davis' mine worked only half a day.[11]

His commitment to trade unionism added difficulties ordinary miners did not face. In August 1896, after certain Negro miners blamed Davis and another miner for organizing a strike to restore a wage scale, Davis went without work. "Just how they could stoop so low I am unable to tell," an angered Davis wrote of these Negroes, "and some of them, if not all, call themselves Christians or children of the most High God, but in reality they are children of his satanic majesty." Some Negro coworkers he called "as true as can be found anywhere" but his betrayers were "as mean men as ever breathed."[12] The *Journal* defended Davis and reminded Ohio readers he deserved their "respect and moral support" because of "his devotion to the cause of unionism."[13] But nearly four months later Davis, still with-

out work, feelingly complained: "Others can get all the work they want; but I, who have never harmed anyone to my knowledge, must take chances with winter and its chilly blasts without the privilege of a job so as to earn a morsel of bread for my wife and little ones."[14] Two years afterward, in 1898, and for reasons unknown, Davis lived in a pitiful condition—this time, black-listed. A letter dated May 16, 1898 poured forth a pained despair:

> I have as yet never boasted of what I have done in the interest of organized labor, but will venture to say that I have done all I could and am proud that I am alive to-day, for I think I have had the unpleasant privilege of going into the most dangerous places in this country to organize, or in other words, to do the almost impossible. I have been threatened; I have been sandbagged; I have been stoned, and last of all, deprived of the right to earn a livelihood for myself and family.
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> I do not care so much for myself, but it is my innocent children that I care for most, and heaven knows that it makes me almost crazy to think of it. I have spent time and money in the labor movement during the past sixteen years, and to-day I am worse off than ever, for I have no money, nor no work. I will not beg, and I am not inclined to steal, nor will I unless compelled through dire necessity, which I hope the good God of the universe will spare me. . . . I can not think of my present circumstances and write [more], for I fear I might say too much. Wishing success to the miners of this country, I remain, as ever, a lover of labor's cause.[15,*]

* "Old Dog," a Congo, Ohio, Negro miner, took up Davis' complaint. "He can't get work in the mines, and he says he can't get work to do as an organizer." Old Dog called Davis "a staunch union man" and reminded *Journal* readers that Davis had "done more" than any single person to bring Ohio Negroes into the union. "I think he should be provided for in some way," he went on. "You do not often meet up with colored men like Dick. . . . He has a family to keep and I think we owe him something. He nor [*sic*] his children can not live on wind, and further, if he was a white man he would not be where he is—mark that—but being a negro he does not get the recognition he should have . . . such

In December of that year Davis still sought work. "I am still a miner," he remarked, "but cannot secure work as a miner. Yet I love the old principles I have always advocated. Even though a negro, I feel that which is good for the white man is good for me, provided, however, it is administered in the right way. I want to see the negro have an equal show with the white man, and especially when he deserves it. I want it in the local, in the district, and in the national."[17] Little time remained for the fulfillment of Davis' wishes. Thirteen months later, one month after his thirty-fifth birthday and while the UMW met in convention in another city, Davis died of "lung fever."[18]

Learning of his death, the UMW convention delegates paused to pay special tribute to their deceased Negro brother.

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treatment will not tend to advance the interest of our union, but will retard its progress and cause colored men to look with suspicion upon it. . . . Give us an equal show. Dick deserves better usage. . . . He feels sorely disappointed. . . . For my part, I think if we would do right he could either go in mines to work or we should see to it that he was started up in a small business or given field work. I want President [Michael] Ratchford to show all colored men that he values a man irrespective of his color and he can best do this by giving Dick a helping hand. I hope you will excuse my bad writing and language and also method of speaking, but I believe in calling a spade a spade. I am sure we are not being treated just as we should."[16] In 1909, William Scaife, British-born, an Illinois miner and then retired editor of the *United Mine Workers' Journal*, remembered the troubled last years of Davis. Scaife gave no details but noted: "R. L. Davis, by his devotion to the miners' union, deserved better treatment than that accorded him in the last few years of his life." He scorned those who criticized Davis as a "has been" and "a barnacle," calling them "some of the mushroom growth of latter-day leaders" who were "unmanly and unremindful of the past." Davis had worked for the union when it "took sand, pluck, and grit to do it." Scaife lamented: "I sometimes think the poet of nature was hitting the right head with a ten-pound hammer when he said, 'Man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousand mourn.' . . . Our ignorance has often led us to injure, abuse and crucify our best friends." (Old Timer [William Scaife], "Forty Years a Miner and Men I Have Known," *United Mine Workers' Journal*, Nov. 19, 1909.)

Davis deserved their attention. Enduring many difficulties, he had been one of the founders and pioneer organizers of the United Mine Workers during the 1890s, its first and perhaps most difficult decade. The delegates called attention to the "many years of his life . . . devoted to advancing the interests of his craft" and lamented that the union had "lost a staunch advocate of the rights of those who toil, and his race a loyal friend and advocate."[19] The particular experiences that drew Davis toward organized labor are unknown, and only scant evidence links him to the Ohio miners' unions that preceded the UMW in the 1880s and to the Knights of Labor. But there is no doubt of his importance to the UMW after 1890. The evidence is overwhelming. Many of his letters appeared in the weekly *Journal* and related quite fully his role in the Ohio unions, his career as a local and national organizer, and his feelings and ideas about the Negro, organized labor, and the changing structure of American industrial society.

Davis' formal role in the UMW can be described simply. In 1890 he attended its founding convention as delegate and also won election to Ohio's District 6 Executive Board. Another year he spurned efforts to nominate him for the vice-presidency of District 6. But until 1895, when he ran for the National Executive Board and lost by only a small vote, Davis won annual re-election to the District 6 office. His close defeat for national office in 1895 proved* "very clearly" to him that the "question of color in our miners' organization will soon be a thing of the past," and he predicted that "the next time some good man of my race will be successful."[20] The year 1896 found Davis right. He and fourteen others stood for the National Executive Board at the annual UMW convention and Davis got the highest vote, 166. The next largest vote, 149, went to a white Illinois miner, James O'Connor.[21] A year later, Davis won re-election and ranked second among those vying for that

* Twenty-eight men stood for the office; six were elected; Davis ran seventh and got 173 votes.

high office.* The *Journal* celebrated Davis' first election in its customary fashion by printing brief biographical sketches of all new officers. It called Davis ("Dick") a man of "very fair" education, "a good reader," and the author of a "very good letter." It boasted that he gained election because UMW members found him "a good representative of his race and because the miners believe the colored men of the country should be recognized and given a representative on the [the executive] board." The *Journal* made much of the fact that he was Negro:

> He will in a special way be able to appear before our colored miners and preach the gospel of trade unions and at the same time will be able to prove to our white craftsmen how much progress may be made with very limited opportunities. . . . If it be a good principle to recognize races or nationalities on the board in preference to individuals, per se, the convention has done well to elect Dick, for he has certainly merited this recognition. In fact, he has merited it from either standpoint, for as a man, and more especially as a union man, he has deserved well of the miners of the country.[23]

The weekly wished Davis "success," and Davis took his charge with great seriousness, enthused over "this manifestation of kindness in recognizing my people." He felt his election to be of great importance to all Negro miners:

> Not only am I proud but my people also. I know that a great deal has not been said publicly, but I do know that our people are very sensitive, and upon many occasions I have heard them make vigorous kicks against taxation without representation. Now, then, they cannot kick this year, for although the representative himself may be a poor one, it is representation just the same.

He promised to "try to so act that those who elected me shall not be made to feel ashamed."[24]

* Although renominated in 1898, he failed to win a third term. For unknown reasons, his popularity among convention delegates fell dramatically, and he got only ninety-four votes.[22]