

## FIRST DRAFT

# Little-known miner helped forge massive coal strike of 1927-1928

**O**n Oct. 28, 1927, a headline in The Daily Sentinel announced that federal authorities had granted a temporary low-rate for shipping Utah coal to Colorado “to make up for shortage resulting from the (Colorado) coal strike.”

Two days later, Conrad Alvillar, known as Conrad, was in jail in Trinidad, along with colleagues from the Industrial Workers of the World — the Wobblies — which had organized the strike. Alvillar was accused of violating Colorado’s strict anti-picketing law.

The 1927-1928 coal strike was only 10 days old when the Sentinel story on Utah coal ran, and already it was having a significant impact on Colorado’s economy. By Nov. 1, 113 coal mines in the state had closed.

Small independent mines like those in the Grand Valley continued to operate, but others on the Western Slope, including most of the mines in Routt County, shut down.

Many strikers were jailed, some were beaten and eight people died as a result of violence during the four-month strike.

Like many other IWW leaders, Alvillar’s activities were constantly monitored by undercover agents or spies working for the mine companies, especially Colorado Fuel & Iron Co.. One CF&I agent called Alvillar “as dangerous to society as a rattlesnake.”

Born in southeastern Arizona in 1896, Alvillar had lived in Arizona, New Mexico and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. He was working in mines in Colorado by 1917 and he had joined the IWW in Walsenburg by 1924.

Alvillar’s grandson, Jim Alvillar of Grand Junction, is a retired prosecutor and insurance-law attorney. He knew his grandfather when Jim was in high school in California and his grandfather lived in Los Angeles.

“I really wasn’t aware of the struggles he was involved in,” Jim said. “He was an artist, a very good one. I saw some of his sketches but not his paintings.”

Several of Conrad’s drawings, lampooning coal-company big-wigs or hired militia, appeared in IWW publications during the 1927-1928 strike.

It appears Conrad Alvillar had very little formal schooling, but he was self-educated, said Dr. Michael Gonzales, a lecturer at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Gonzales wrote his PhD dissertation on IWW workers in Colorado, and he devoted a chapter to Alvillar.

“He did go to school for a time in Arizona,” Gonzales said in a telephone interview. And in some of his writing, he cited



Striking coal miners and family members march to a mine in Huerfano County in November 1927.

PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



BOB SILBERNAGEL

unnamed revolutionaries as his inspiration.

“There was something about him that was pretty amazing, that caught people’s attention,” Gonzales added. Alvillar quoted

ancient Greeks and Romans in his writing, and young college students at what is now the University of Texas, El Paso, gravitated to the intelligent man who worked as a custodian at the school in the 1940s and 1950s.

The undercover agent for CF&I said of Alvillar, “This Mexican is very smart and learned, and is an artist of some ability, but is the worst renegade and criminal that ever came out of the West.”

Such hyperbole aside, Alvillar’s role in the Colorado strike “was indispensable, even though he was in jail for much of the time,” Gonzales said. In addition to his drawings, he wrote articles in English and Spanish to rally the striking workers.

“It’s amazing his name is not anywhere” in the written histories about the 1927-1928 strike, Gonzales added. “Because when you look at the original source materials, he is everywhere.”

The strike itself has largely been ignored by historians. Despite the violence, it didn’t compare with the Ludlow Massacre of 1914, when at least 21 people, including women and children, were massacred by state militia.

Even so, one historian called it the most successful strike in Colorado history. Another said it was “one of the most important and dramatic industrial struggles of the 20th century.”

Labor unrest had been occurring in Colorado mining towns since the late 19th century, but things were relatively quiet in the early 1920s.

However, when CF&I began to cut miners’ pay in 1924 and 1925, the United Mine Workers declined to call for a strike. Enter the more radical IWW, which quickly attracted members.

Unlike the largely white, Protestant UMW, the IWW reached out to miners of all backgrounds and ethnicities. The Wobblies also used auto caravans to travel to different mining areas and

recruit members.

However, the IWW was deemed an illegitimate labor organization by the Colorado Industrial Commission. So, when the strike began on Oct. 18, 1927, state officials began to crack down by arresting people like Alvillar and harassing more well-known Wobbly leaders like A.S. Embree.

Still, miners were determined, and mines soon closed up and down the Front Range.

The Columbine Mine, in Serene, Colorado, in Weld County remained open, and the IWW began organizing regular marches to the mine, instructing picketers to commit no violence.

On Nov. 21, 1927, approximately 500 miners, women and children arrived at the gates of Serene before dawn and found them locked. When the march leader demanded the gates be opened, a policeman struck him with a club. Soon, tear gas was lobbed into the crowd of striking miners.

The miners rushed the wooden gate and began to climb over it. Members of a state police force known as the Colorado Rangers began firing into the crowd.

Five strikers died that day, and one died a week later of his injuries. Support for the strike plummeted. Slowly, strikers began returning to work at their mines.

Still, more violence occurred, including an attack on the Walsenburg IWW headquarters on Jan. 12 that left a 15-year-old youth and a 40-year-old miner dead.

When mine owners began offering some concessions in February 1928, including a \$1-a-day pay raise, the strike fizzled. It officially ended on Feb. 20.

Although it closed more mines than any previous Colorado strike, the 1927-28 strike proved to be a mixed blessing



COURTESY OF MICHAEL GONZALES

This photo appeared in the IWW publication “Industrial Worker” on Oct. 15, 1927. The caption with the photo said it showed “Conrad Alvillar, a blacklisted Wobbly miner. This man is one of the hardest fighting I.W.W. miners in Colorado.” It also said Alvillar was “facing eviction from a C.F. and I house simply because he takes the right of free speech seriously.”

for miners.

“The miners got a raise and certain of their demands were met,” said Gonzales. “But the IWW as a union was crushed. And most of the active union leaders, like Alvillar, were blackballed from working in the mines again.”

In fact, Alvillar had been fired from his CF&I mine job in September for his IWW activities. He and his wife, Juana, and their five children were evicted from their company-owned house, as were many other striking miners.

The IWW survived and still exists today. But it never regained the national prominence it had prior to the 1927-1928 Colorado coal strike.

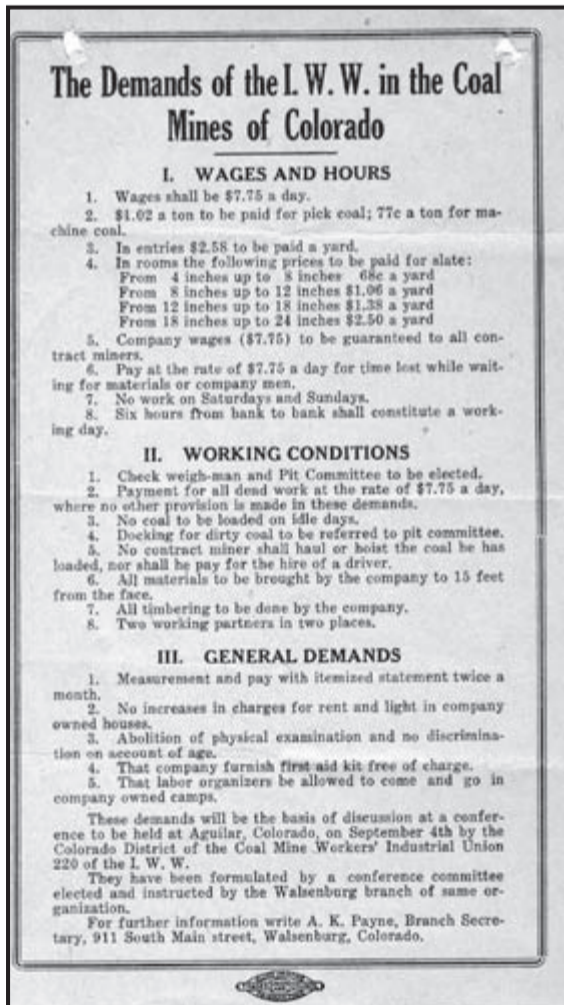
Alvillar took farming jobs, first in Idaho, and later in Colorado. He also was part of an unsuccessful IWW effort to organize sugar beet workers in Colorado and other states.

In 1940, he moved with his family to Texas, where he took the custodial job at the college. A profile in the student newspaper called Alvillar “a philosopher, artist, linguist and scholar ... carrier of the torch of knowledge.”

By the mid-1950s, Conrad and his family had moved to Los Angeles, California, where he died in 1956.

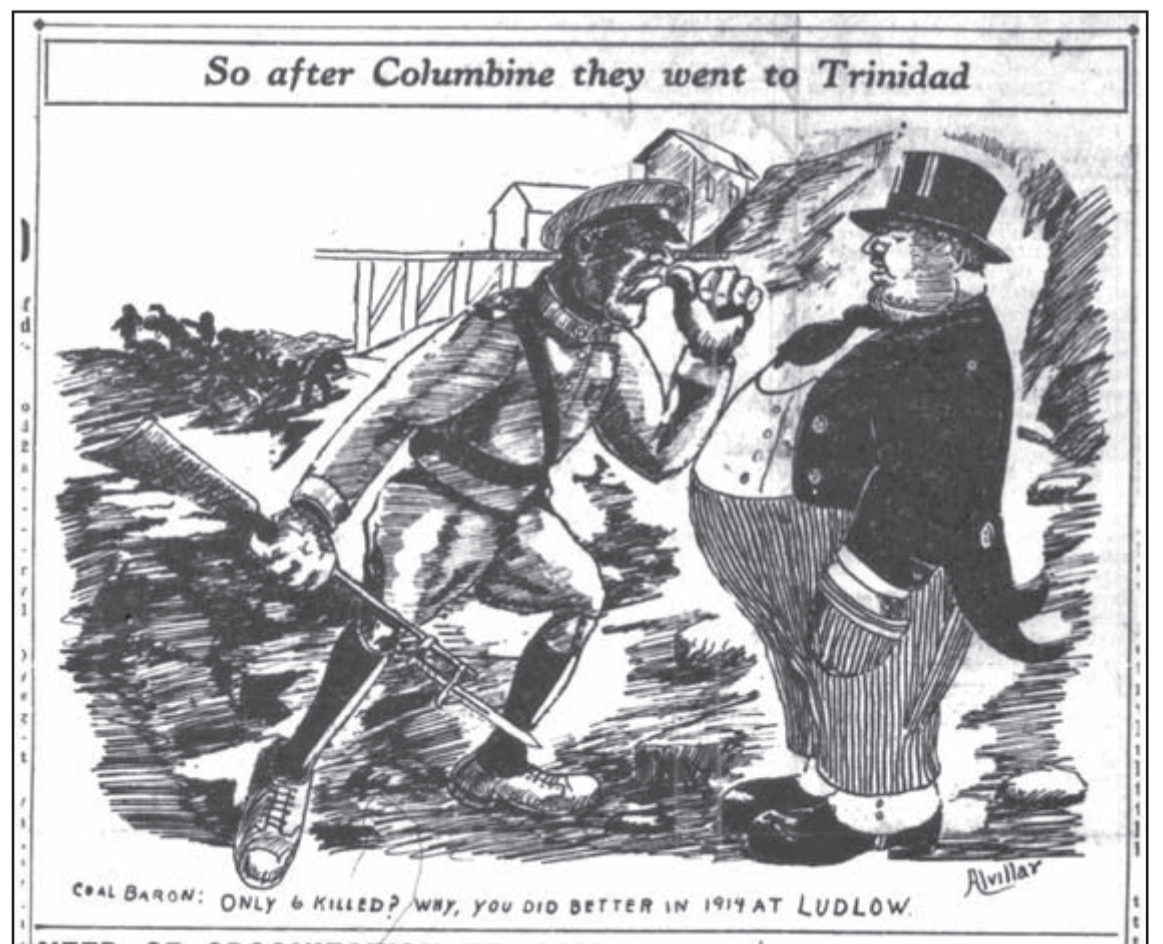
**Sources:** “As Dangerous to Society as a Rattlesnake: IWW Worker Intellectuals in Colorado’s Southern Coal Fields, 1926-1929,” by Michael Robert Gonzales; “Industrial Workers of the World,” by Hill Probasco, www.coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/industrial-workers-world; “Blood on the coal: Colorado strike of 1927,” by Patrick Murfin, www.lib.com; historic newspaper articles at www.newspapers.com.

Bob Silbernagel’s email is bobsilbernagel@gmail.com.



PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Posters listing the demands of the IWW and striking coal miners began appearing at mines and communities throughout Colorado coal country in the fall of 1927.



COURTESY OF MICHAEL GONZALES

This cartoon by Conrad Alvillar appeared in the IWW publication “Industrial Worker” on Jan. 7, 1928. It makes reference to the killings at the Columbine Mine in November of the previous year, and the Ludlow Massacre of 1914.