MEMORIES OF A MASSACRE

Jonathan Rees
Colorado State University - Pueblo,USA

Abstract
The Ludlow Massacre of 1914, in which at least 25 striking miners from the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company and their families died, was one of the bloodiest incidents in American Labor history. Immediately after the incident, the United Mine Workers of America, the union which had its organizing efforts thwarted at Ludlow, went about blaming the massacre on the primary stockholder of the firm, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. This paper examines this successful effort, focusing in particular on the Ludlow monument, erected in 1918 on the site of the massacre in memory of the victims.

"What can businessmen do to clean up the rot that these muckrakers and demagogues have dumped on our door?"
Colorado Fuel and Iron Company Vice President Lamont Bowers, 1914.[1]

On May 30, 1918, a chauffer-driven car carrying John D. Rockefeller, Jr., his wife and a future Prime Minister of Canada, William L. Mackenzie King, arrived at a gathering of approximately 3000 working people in southern Colorado. This multi-ethnic crowd had assembled for the dedication of a monument to the victims of the "Ludlow Massacre," which had occurred at that spot a little more than four years earlier. A few of the union leaders who had organized the dedication ceremony for the monument had learned the previous evening that Rockefeller planned on attending, but had yet to decide upon a response. What made Rockefeller's presence an issue at this gathering was that many people in the audience felt that he was responsible for the death of the people being memorialized. In his role as de facto owner of the Colorado Fuel and Iron company (CF&I), the employer of the victims, he had supported management's uncompromising refusal to bargain with the union during the 1913-1914 coal strike which culminated in the massacre at Ludlow. For that reason, union leaders were afraid that there would be an embarrassing or even dangerous incident if he attended, let alone spoke as Rockefeller had

[1] Bowers quoted in Priscilla Long, *Where the Sun Never Shines* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 242.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

hoped. They communicated this fear to Mackenzie King, who went back into the vehicle to explain the situation. The Rockefellers sped off without ever leaving the car.[2]

Howard Gitelman, who uses King's diary to tell this story in his book, *Legacy of the Ludlow Massacre*, argues, "Rockefeller never accepted responsibility for the Colorado strike's violence and deaths. Nor did he hold himself culpable for the massacre. He initially denied there was a massacre and subsequently could not bring himself to utter the phrase "Ludlow massacre", as if refusing to sound the name would erase the event. He admitted no error, no guilt."[3] Read enough of Rockefeller's correspondence and it is easy to agree with Gitelman's argument, but accepting this interpretation of John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s motivation still raises an important issue. If guilt did not bring him to the plains of southern Colorado for the dedication of the Ludlow Massacre monument, what did?

The answer is public relations. John D. Rockefeller Jr. had a huge public relations problem of his own creation even before gunfire broke out at the Ludlow Tent colony on April 20, 1914. For example, while testifying before a Congressional committee on April 6th, Rockefeller was asked if he would continue to insist upon maintaining the open shop at CF&I's coal camps even "if it costs all your property and kills all your employees?" "It is a great principle," he replied.[4] The U.S. Commission of Industrial Relations later discovered that despite public testimony to the contrary, Rockefellller kept in constant touch with CF&I management, and was, to quote Chairman Frank Walsh, "the directing mind throughout the struggle."[5] In short, while he might not have ordered the massacre at Ludlow, Rockefeller certainly understood that catastrophic violence was a distinct possibility.

What is less-recognized, are the efforts of the United Mine Workers of America and its supporters to hold Rockefeller personally responsible for the deaths at Ludlow. In the short term, the United Mine Workers hoped to fan the fires of resentment through its own public relations campaign, as well as

[2] H.M.Gitelman, *Legacy of the Ludlow Massacre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 242-43. See also the *Trinidad Evening Picketwire*, 31 May 1918, which confirms the account in Mackenzie King's diary.
[3] Gitelman, 243.
[4] U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Mines and Mining, *Conditions in the Coal Mines of Colorado*, vol. 2, 63d Congress, 2d Sess., 1914, 2874.
[5] *New York Herald*, 24 April 1915.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

through its actions in relation to multiple government investigations of the Coal strike and the massacre, especially the hearings of the United States Industrial Relations Commission, chaired by Frank Walsh. Although the company union at CF&I, known to history as the "Rockefeller Plan" did gather the company some good press, its long-term impact did little to remove the black stain that the Ludlow Massacre has placed on John D. Rockefeller's reputation. In the long term, the United Mine Workers and its supporters have essentially had a free hand in dictating how the Ludlow Massacre has been remembered by history. Interestingly enough, the best symbol of the UMWA's success in this endeavor is the Ludlow Monument itself.

Why Doesn't the Ludlow Monument Commemorate All the Dead?:

The Ludlow Massacre was the culminating event in one bloodiest strikes in American labor history. On the morning of April 20, 1914, gunfire broke out between striking miners and a battalion of the Colorado National Guard at the Ludlow tent colony, where striking miners and their families had gone to live after being kicked out of their company-owned houses the previous year. Nobody knows who fired the first shot, but as the Guardsmen had machine guns the other side took most of the casualties. Women and children fled in terror from the scene even before the Guardsman set fire to the tents. Eleven children and two women who were unable to escape the melee suffocated in a hole dug under one of the tents. These shocking casualties, as well as the deaths of three union leaders after they had surrendered, are the reason that this battle is known as a "massacre."

While John D. Rockefeller and the other managers obviously won the 1913-1914 coal strike, the most obvious evidence that they lost the battle for our collective memory of the Ludlow Massacre is the Ludlow Monument itself. The monument has 17 names on it. The web site of the United Mine Workers of America states that 20 died at Ludlow[6]. A ferocious contemporary report by UMWA District 15 Publicity Director Walter Fink mentions that at least 66 people died during the strike.[7] Just two weeks before the dedication, the United Mine Workers Journal wrote that "33 men, women and children were

[6] United Mine Workers of America, "The Ludlow Massacre," http://www.umwa.org/history/ludlow.shtml, Accessed December 12, 2005.

[7] Walter Fink, "The Ludlow Massacre," in *Massacre at Ludlow: Four Reports*, Leon Stein and Philip Taft, Eds. (New York: Arno and the New York Times, 1971), 5.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

brutally slain" at Ludlow.[8] Why did the designers of the monument lowball the number?

When the United Mine Workers of America designed the Ludlow Monument, the organization was not commemorating all the dead from the strike or even from the massacre. For example, it should come as no surprise that Private Albert Martin is not listed on the monument. As the future presidential candidate George McGovern explained in his 1953 Northwestern University Ph.D. dissertation, "Private Albert J. Martin, was critically wounded as he approached the strikers' position in the railroad cut. His comrades left him lying on the ground as they withdrew under a withering fire only to discover that Martin had been shot in the mouth at point blank range. His arms had been broken and his skull badly crushed.[9] Everyone knows the cliché that history is written by the winners, but in this case the losers of the battle set the terms of remembrance and Private Martin's death did not serve their cause.

The UMWA wanted the monument to focus primarily on the deceased women and children. 11 children and two of their mothers suffocated to death in the so-called death pit near where the Ludlow monument would later stand. The death of these innocents made the Ludlow Massacre a massacre instead of an all too common act of labor violence. The story not only got coverage, but sympathy, which stories about the labor movement generally lacked at that time. For example, the staunchly conservative *Rocky Mountain News* wrote, "The blood of women and children, burned and shot like rats, cries aloud from the ground. The great state of Colorado has failed them. It has betrayed them."[10] No wonder then did the *United Mine Workers Journal* write of the monument, "More eloquently than any spoken word it will tell the tragic story of the poor murdered women and the innocent babes of Ludlow who died for democracy."[11] It is as if the *Journal* expected the men who died there to be completely forgotten.

The overall design of the monument also forwarded the UMWA's goals. It is obvious that it is in some sense a grave marker for the victims who died there, but the decision to include alongside a statue of a miner, a non-

[8] *United Mine Workers Journal* 29 (May 16, 1918), 6.
[9] McGovern, George Stanley. "The Colorado Coal Strike, 1913-1914," Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1953, p. x.
[10] Rocky Mountain news quoted in Howard Zinn, *The Colorado Coal Strike 1913-1914*, in *Three Strikes* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001): 39.
[11] *United Mine Workers Journal*, June 6, 1918, 6.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

allegorical statue of a woman (a miner's wife) also honors the enormous contribution that women made to the strike effort. As Zeese Papanikolas explains, "[W]hen the scabs came into Ludlow on November thirteenth, it was the women who were in the fore of the mob, brandishing ball bats, clubs studded with spikes, jeering. It was women who rallied most at giving up guns at Ludlow, and it was they who gathered there along the wire fence beside the tracks to teach their children to curse the militia Tin Willies."[12] Women also led a march during the strike to protest the arrest of Mother Jones. The fact that that march was broken up by police foreshadowed the indifference towards their gender that the Guard would show at Ludlow.

The inclusion on the monument not only of names, but the ages of the victims clearly acknowledges the timeless feelings of both disgust and fascination that the American public has for the tragic death of children. As Mother Jones noted in her autobiography, "Little children roasted alive make a front page story. Dying by inches of starvation and exposure does not."[13] The last names of the victims engraved on the monument, [Costa, Petrucci, Tikas] are an indicator of the multi-ethnic labor force that worked together in the mines. Indeed, the names are a good indicator of the multi-ethnic population of southern Colorado even today. Their mutual sacrifice gave the union a way to bind their members together across these lines.

The most famous adult male victim of the Ludlow Massacre was the second-in-command of the strike effort, Louis Tikas. He died at the hands of Lieutenant Karl Linderfelt of the Colorado National Guard, who hit him in the head with a rifle butt despite Tikas having approached Linderfelt under a white flag of truce. After Tikas collapsed, guardsmen riddled his body with bullets. A poem in the United Mine Workers Journal published about a month after the tragedy depicts Tikas as the protector of the innocents whose deaths the union had chosen to emphasize:

> He braved the assailants' iron might,
> Their brutal hate, unbridled, wild;
> His trust, the miners' naked home;

[12] Zeese Papanikolas, *Buried Unsung: Louis Tikas and the Ludlow Massacre* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 161.
[13] Parton, Mary Field, Ed. *The Autobiography of Mother Jones*, (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1925), 191.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

His care, the mother and her child….
Oh, Louis Tikas, gallant soul,
Defender of the helpless, weak…[14]

And while other dead strikers might not evoked sympathy, by the time of the dedication of the monument after years of investigation and a court-martial which acquitted the Lieutenant, countless Americans believed Tikas to be a martyr to labor's cause. That was, in part, due to the Mine Workers' successful campaign to place the blame on John D. Rockefeller Jr., and the Guardsmen who acted in his interests. The union began its efforts while the embers of the tent colony still smoldered and it has continued ever since.

The UMWA's Campaign of Blame:

Even before the 1913-1914 strike had ended, Colorado Fuel and Iron had begun to lose the battle for public relations. As Priscilla Long explains, "During the Great Coalfield war, Colorado operators won the battle on the ground but lost the propaganda war. Repeatedly, Colorado miners had put forward their view of the coal firms as undemocratic and un-American, seeing themselves as embodying American values….Ludlow exploded the strikers' view of the company across the United States."[15] When Ivy Lee, Rockefeller's public relations advisor and widely known as the father of corporate publicity, visited Southern Colorado in August 1914, he reported back, "The people of this state have been led to believe by the hostile press that you and your friends are exploiting the state. From friendly sources, I gather that opinion is still widely held."[16] This was the natural byproduct of management's refusal to take any of the miners' demands seriously, instead blaming the entire dispute on outside agitators.

The initial coverage of the massacre bordered on the hysterical, and eventually proved to be wildly wrong. This is from the *Telluride Daily Journal* :

THE LEADERS OF THE STRIKING COAL MINERS HERE TODAY SAID THAT AT LEAST 50 PERSONS WERE DEAD AS A RESULT OF

[14] "Louis Tikas, Ludlow Martyr," *United Mine Workers Journal*, May 28, 1914, http://members.fortunecity.com/folkfred/louistik.html, Accessed December 12, 2005.
[15] Long, 306.
[16] Ivy Lee to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., August 16, 1914, Ivy Lee Papers, Box 3, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

THE LUDLOW BATTLE. FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS INTO THE BATTLE ONLY INCREASES THE HORROR OF IT ALL.

THE LABOR LEADERS HAVE ALREADY NAMED THE BATTLE "THE SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS" IT IS BELIVED THAT MORE THAN TWO-THIRDS OF THOSE SLAIN WERE WOMEN AND CHILDREN. [Emphasis in original.][17]

Much of the coverage not only blamed the Colorado National Guard for the tragedy focused on the plight of the women and children. Here is the new *York Times*, "Women ran from the burning tents, some with their clothing afire, carrying their babies in their arms. Many, in order to save the babies at their breasts, were forced to abandon their older children to their fate." Once CF&I became associated with images like this, it would be very difficult for management to create a response.

Union opponents blamed the UMWA for spreading lies abut the tragedy. In fact, the term "Ludlow Massacre" was coined in an April 23rd editorial in the *Rocky Mountain News.*[18] Nobody could get a good number on the dead and injured since the wires were down at Ludlow after the violence, and the official union estimate of the dead (as opposed to that which came from the strike leaders in the camp) was more conservative than many other sources.[19] Nevertheless, Colorado Governor Elias Ammons claimed that the union's lies about the massacre netted them $250,000 in donations in its wake. In a special report for the *Pueblo Chieftain* on July 28, 1914, called "The Truth About the So-Called War in Colorado," Alva A. Swain wrote, "[A]dvantage was taken of the death of eleven children and two women that occurred by suffocation under one of the tents where they had been placed by the Greeks in a stuffy cave and from which the soldiers were unable to rescue them to claim that the Colorado soldiers had murdered women and children."[20] To the public, Swain's logic seemed as tortured as the structure of that sentence. Her complaint about the deaths being exploited was really an admission that the UMWA's successful public relations campaign had made whatever the *Pueblo Chieftain* wrote about

[17] *Telluride Daily Journal*, April 22, 1914.
[18] Kirk Hallahan, "Chaos and Controversy Followed the 'Ludlow Massacre,'" April 2004, at http://lamar.colostate.edu/~hallahan/publications.htm, accessed December 31, 2005.
[19] *Telluride Daily Journal*, April 21, 1914.
[20] Alva A. Swain, "The Truth About the So-Called War in Colorado," *Pueblo Chieftain*, July 28, 1914.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

Ludlow ultimately meaningless. By the time Swain wrote her expose, the public's impression of the tragedy had already become fixed.

To make matters worse for management, the United Mine Workers made sure that this impression lived on in the public mind whenever Ludlow was mentioned. Journalism professor Kirk Hallahan aptly suggests the effect of this campaign, "Historians can only speculate whether the 'Ludlow Massacre' would be such a celebrated event if it had not been for the effectiveness of the union in promoting its cause and bumbled manner in which the coal operators and John D. Rockefeller Jr. initially responded."[21] When Walter Fink's report came out shortly after the tragedy, it was obvious that the union wanted to pin blame for the tragedy on John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Besides referring to the Colorado National Guard as "the hired murderers of Sunday school teacher and 'philanthropist' John D. Rockefeller," Fink quotes then-jailed UMWA lead John Lawson drawing the same argument. "John D. Rockefeller, Jr., may ease his conscience by attending Sunday school regularly in New York," he writes, "but he will never be acquitted of committing the horrible atrocities that have occurred in a country such as America, and he will be convicted at the bar of public opinion for his part in the Colorado murders."[22]

These efforts continued in the weeks and months after the shock of the massacre had worn off. The UMWA sent one survivor, Pearl Jolly, to the White House to confer with President Wilson, "to keep aroused public sentiment."[23] The union sent women from the Ludlow colony, including Mary Petrucci who lost three children in the death pit, on a speaking tour around the country to reinforce its message.[24] Had Rockefeller attended the ceremony dedicating the monument, he would have heard exactly how the UMWA wanted Ludlow to be remembered. Union President Frank Hayes composed and read a poem for the occasion. It read in part:

> But alas! There came a day.
> Greed demanded: "Stalk your prey,
> Fire the tents and shoot to slay!"
> Here on Ludlow Field.
> In the embers grey and red,

[21] Hallahan.
[22] Fink, 5, 27.
[23] Swain.
[24] Papanikolas, 243.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

Here we found them where they bled,
Here we found them stark and dead,
Here on Ludlow Field.[25]

Nobody in the audience would have needed reminding of to whose greed Hayes was referring.

After America entered World War I, the UMWA rhetorically linked the struggle for industrial democracy in Colorado to the fight for democracy in Europe. "Let us keep their memory green," wrote the *Mine Workers Journal* shortly before the dedication, "these humble soldiers, who gave up their lives in the great struggle for industrial freedom. We can pay them no higher tribute than that of giving our best service to the movement for which they died."[26] As World War I was raging at that time, the connection would have been obvious to all the miners who read these words, especially as this was a common tactic for unions in the labor movement throughout the war. When Rockefeller declared on December 5, 1918, "Surely it is not consistent for us as Americans to demand democracy in government and practice autocracy in industry," he was in essence conceding this argument to the union.[27]

The union was assisted in its campaign of blame by the muckraking author Upton Sinclair, who had visited the site of the massacre shortly after it happened and concluded that John D. Rockefeller deserved to be publicly shamed for his role in the tragedy. Sinclair was arrested for protesting silently outside of Rockefeller's business offices wearing a black armband. That attracted publicity. Sinclair addressed a series of meetings in Tarrytown, New York near Rockefeller's mansion at which hundreds of locals signed a petition asking President Wilson to nationalize the Colorado coal fields. That attracted more publicity. He organized a petition among intelligentsia that read in part, "We hold you, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., guilty of murder in the first degree, and

[25] Frank J. Hayes, "On Ludlow Field," *United Mine Workers Journal* 29 (June 6, 1918): 4.
[26] *United Mine Workers Journal* 29 (May 16, 1918): 6.

[27] Rockefeller quoted in Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor's Great War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 214.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

we here indict you before the bar of humanity."[28] That attracted still more publicity.

In 1917, Sinclair published a novel entitled *King Coal*. In a postscript, he wrote about his research in the third person, "Most of the details of his picture were gathered in [Colorado], which the writer visited on three occasions during and just after the great coal-strike of 1913-14. The book gives a true picture of conditions and events observed by him at that time. Practically all the characters are real persons, and every incident which has social significance is not merely a true incident, but a typical one."[29] The Rockefeller character is named Percy Harrigan. He gets to utter such lines as, "'The world can't stop moving just because there's been a mine-disaster,' said the Coal King's son. 'People have engagements they must keep.'"[30]

Rockefeller's Failed Response:

There is no doubt that some of the damage Rockefeller's reputation took after the Ludlow Massacre was self-inflicted. Most notably, Rockefeller hurt himself by his testimony before the United States Industrial Relations Commission in January 1915. "I have never had the personal handling of labor questions," he admitted under the blistering questioning of Chairman Frank Walsh. "I have had such matters before me, but beyond making what I have tried to have a very complete statement of my position, I do not feel sufficiently qualified to discuss intelligently and usefully the details relating to the matter [of whether workers should join unions]."[31] Walsh had actually picked New York City's City Hall as the site for his testimony in order to maximize publicity of the event, so that the world would see him pick Rockefeller apart.[32]

[28] The Jungle Publishing Company, "A Proposition for the First Serial Rights of a New Novel "King Coal" by Upton Sinclair," Rockefeller Family Archives, Business Interests, series 2, Box 20, Rockefeller Archives Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY.
[29] Upton Sinclair, *King Coal: A Novel* (Published by Upton Sinclair, 1930), Originally published by Macmillan, 1917, 384.
[30] Sinclair, 265.
[31] "Testimony of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Given Before the United States Commission of Industrial Relations," privately published, 1915, 67-68; CF&I Archives, Pueblo, CO.
[32] McCartin, 28.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

The trap worked. The reaction of the press to this profession of ignorance went straight for the jugular. For example, the journalist Walter Lippmann wrote:

> I should describe Mr. Rockefeller as a weak despot governed by a private bureaucracy which he is unable to lead. He has been thrust by the accident of birth into a position where he reigns but does not rule . . . .The failure of the American people to break up his unwieldy dominion has put a man who should have been a private citizen into a monstrously public position where even the freedom to abdicate is denied him.[33]

To fight this image, Rockefeller needed to look both competent and compassionate.

Rockefeller created a public relations campaign spearheaded by Ivy Lee, whom he had hired shortly after the massacre. "The use of your own name in this affair has been most unfortunate," wrote Lee to Rockefeller during a Colorado fact-finding visit that August. "It is important, in my judgment, that [the public's bad impression of you] be vigorously combated."[34] At the beginning of the campaign, Lee designed a series of leaflets issued under the auspices of the Colorado Coal Mine Managers. However, obvious distortions and errors in these bulletins (such as wildly inflating the salaries of UMWA strike leaders) backfired both on the company and on Lee himself when his authorship became public knowledge during hearings of the United States Industrial Commission in January 1915. "Ivy L. Lee – Paid Liar," wrote the poet Carl Sandburg in response.[35]

Despite these sophisticated image restoration efforts, the impression left in the public mind by the Ludlow Massacre was so bad that it was impossible to rectify. In July 1914, Lee wrote a bulletin headlined "NO 'MASSACRE' OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN COLORADO STRIKE" because "**BOTH SIDES AGREE THAT NO WOMAN WAS STRUCK BY A BULLET**

[33] Lippmann quoted in Gitelman, 75.
[34] Ivy Lee to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., August 16, 1914, Ivy Lee Papers, Box 3.
[35] Gitelman, 33. 59. For more on the controversy surrounding Lee, see Kirk Hallahan, "Ivy Lee and the Rockefellers' Response to the 1913-1914 Colorado Coal Strike," *Journal of Public Relations Research* 14 (4, 2002): 301-03.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

FROM EITHER SIDE."[36] By focusing the operators' defense on the women and children, Lee was actually reinforcing the union's public relations strategy. Besides that, with pictures of the death pit having been splashed on front pages throughout the country, Lee's premise was simply beyond belief. Similarly, when confronted directly about Ludlow in front of the US Commission on Industrial Relations on May 21, 1915, Rockefeller protested, "The emphasis had always been put upon the women and children killed in the ground…[T]hey were smothered, and not struck [by bullets]." [37] It didn't matter that Rockefeller was actually right; this kind of nitpicking just looked callous. Indeed, his statement only gave Walsh another opportunity to beat up on Rockefeller. "I am glad to note that the Rockefeller defense to the Ludlow massacre is that the two women and eleven children who met their deaths on that awful occasion were not shot," but merely smothered in a pit," he told the press. "Entire candor, however, should have moved Mr. Rockefeller to add the additional detail that his mine guards in the guise of state militiamen burned down the tents and looted the victims before and after their deaths."[38] Walsh was, in essence, reinforcing the union narrative, just like Upton Sinclair had the previous year.

The Origins of the Rockefeller Plan:

In 1926, Ernest Richmond Burton "broadly defined" employee representation as "any established arrangement whereby the working force of a business concern is represented by persons recognized by both the management and the employees as spokesman the latter in conferences on matters of mutual interest."[39] Because employee representatives had to rely on the largesse of management in order to affect change, these arrangements were immediately dubbed "company unions" by critics. Company unions had been around for about two decades. The first company union in U.S. history is a matter of

[36] Coal Mine Managers, "Facts Concerning the Struggle in Colorado for Industrial Freedom," Series I, Bulletin No. 8, July 25, 1914.
[37] "Testimony of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.…," 267; CF&I Archives, Pueblo, CO.
[38] *The Evening Telegram* (city unspecified), 27 April 1915, Clipping Scrapbook in the Jesse Welborn Papers, Box 2. Colorado Historical Society, Denver, CO
[39] Ernest Richmond Burton, *Employee Representation* (Baltomore: The Williams & Wilkins Company, 1926), 19.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

dispute,[40] but it is widely acknowledged that the one at CF&I is the most important. Its historical importance derives from a variety of factors: the attention it drew because of the prominence of the Rockefeller family; the career of its primary author, Mackenzie King; the influence it had on subsequent company unions at other firms.

However, the plan's importance at the time of its inception derived from its connection to the Ludlow Massacre. The employee representation plan at Colorado Fuel and Iron was a direct result of the bad publicity the company received in the wake of the 1913-1914 strike. As George West explained in the Industrial Relations Commission's report, "The plan first took form in Mr. Rockefeller's mind, when, after the Ludlow massacre, aroused public opinion frightened him into a realization that something must be done."[41]

One possible bad effect of aroused public opinion would have been the end of CF&I's control of southern Colorado politics. "[P]ublicity will create a sentiment among the American people which will prevent a recurrence of the Ludlow horror," mused Rockefeller nemesis Frank Walsh in a newspaper interview, "and perhaps go a long way toward re-establishing a republican form of government in those communities controlled by the Rockefeller interests."[42] CF&I's stranglehold on local and state politics in Colorado came up often during Walsh's hearings. In the years leading up to the strike, the Colorado state legislature had passe many laws designed to improve the lives of miners such as the eight-hour day and other legislation. According to West, the operators, led by CF&I, were able to defy those laws because of their influence in Governor's office.[43] Indeed, the company's influence upon the governor was what brought the state militia to Ludlow in the first place. Losing that influence due to bad publicity would have cost the firm money and a valuable tool against future strikes.

---

[40] Bruce E. Kaufman, "Accomplishments and Shortcomings of Nonunion Employee Representation in the Pre-Wagner Act Years: A Reassessment," in *Nonunion Employee Representation: History, Contemporary Practice, and Policy*, Bruce E. Kaufman and Daphne Taras, eds. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000): 22

[41] George P. West, "Report on the Colorado Strike," Washington, D.C., 1914, 155 in *Massacre at Ludlow: Four Reports*, Leon Stein and Philip Taft, eds. (New York: Arno and the New York Times, 1971).

[42] *The Evening Telegram*, 27 April 1915.

[43] West, 63-64.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

More importantly, aroused public opinion also inspired the federal government to get involved in labor relations at CF&I. An anonymous late 1914 memo reviewing events of the strike to that point in Jesse Welborn's papers shows what management feared most. "The operators did not appreciate that politics, a new factor was being injected into the controversy," the author wrote. He continues:

The refusal of the Colorado operators to accept the proposition of the federal government to settle the Colorado strike, immediately presented the opportunity for the demagogues of the country to raise the cry "That Rockefeller was bigger than the Government."

The American Federation of Labor adopts resolutions, urging the President of the United States to take over the mines of Colorado (which is impossible) and operate the mines.[44]

But in fact it was possible. Woodrow Wilson not only used the military to seize industrial plants during World War I, he seized the entire national railroad system.[45] Management had to cultivate good public opinion in order to prevent such an outcome.

Early in his presidency, Woodrow Wilson showed a tendency to favor mediation of industrial disputes. In May 1914, the President privately proposed a strike settlement board to bring the Colorado Coalfield War to a close. It would have included members of the federal judiciary and the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court.[46] This, of course, was unacceptable as an impartial board might not protect management's interests. In July 1914, the United Mine Workers proposed settling the strike by waiving union recognition for three years, but establishing some formal machinery to insure that miners' grievances would be addressed.[47] While there was some discussion of creating a formal procedure for miners to bring grievances to management before the massacre, the origins of CF&I's company union can be found in the company's efforts to find a substitute for plan like these that would not carry the risk of

[44] "Review," c. Dec. 1914, Jesse Welborn Papers, Box 1, Colorado Historical Society, Denver, CO.
[45] Chief Justice Vinson, "Dissenting Opinion," *Youngstown Sheet & Tube Co. v. Sawyer*, 343 U.S. 579.
[46] Gitelman, 27.
[47] Ivy Lee to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., August 16, 1914, Ivy Lee Papers, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, Box 3.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

forfeiting management's power to control the terms and conditions of employment.

Rockefeller and his advisors worked on the plan between May 1914 and its formal introduction in October 1915. Although CF&I's company union has come to be known as the Rockefeller Plan, the plan's primary author was Mackenzie King. You can see Kings' thinking clearly in an August 6, 1914 letter to Rockefeller:

Between the extreme of individual agreements on the one side, and an agreement involving recognition of unions of national and international character on the other, lies the straight acceptance of the principle of Collective Bargaining between capital and labour immediately concerned in any group of industries, and the construction of machinery which will afford opportunity of easy and constant conference between employers and employed with reference to matters of concern to both, such machinery to be constructed as a means on the one hand of preventing labour from being exploited, and on the other, of ensuring cordial cooperation which is likely to further industrial efficiency.[48]

The fact that the employer and the employees would not have the same power in this arrangement appears not to have entered his mind.

When Rockefeller forwarded King's initial thought on a company union to the CF&I management in Colorado, they advised against it. The Chairman of the Board of directors, Lamont Bowers, wrote back on August 16, "For us to take steps at the moment, to form such a board, would be regarded by the public as an admission on our part, that some such committee or board was lacking prior to the strike and might perhaps have prevented it." [49] Company President Jesse Welborn responded on August 20, "It seems to me…that the adoption at this time by the Colorado operators of such a plan as Mr. King suggests, would weaken us with our men; would tend to strengthen the organization [the UMWA] with our employes not now members of it; and would, in the minds of the public, be an admission on our part that a weakness, the existence of which we had previously denied, was being corrected." [50] Rockefeller came to agree, responding to Welborn on August 28, "I fully

[48] King, excerpted in West, 162-63. I have seen originals of some of these letters in the Welborn Papers and the Records of the Rockefeller Business Interests. Because the excerpts in West are easier to access, I will cite them here.
[49] Bowers, excerpted in West, 169.
[50] Welborn excerpted in West, 171.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

understand your point of view, and quite agree with your conclusion that, however desirable some such plan as suggested by Mr. King may be for future consideration, in order to give additional assurance that any just cause of complaint by an employe can be brought to the attention of the officers, it is not desirable for to take the subject up at this time."[51] In other words, Rockefeller feared that creating an ERP would lead the public to support the union cause.

That would soon change. On September 5, President Wilson issued a statement repeating his suggestion of a federal mediation board, but this time he did it publicly.[52] Jesse Welborn, in a public letter to the White House, politely refused, citing threats of violence from the UMWA and alleged inequities in the proposed settlement.[53] This was the act that made the public believe "That Rockefeller was bigger than the government," (to quote the anonymous memo above), and, at least in the eyes of Rockefeller's advisors, turned public opinion against management. On December 1, President Wilson issued a statement that blamed the Colorado Coal operators for the failure to settle the strike. At the same time, he appointed a grievance commission headed by National Civic Federation president Seth Low, popularly known as the Low Commission. The next day, the US Commission on Industrial Relations renewed hearings into the strike.[54] Now, when it appeared that failing to offer an alternative to unionization might help the union gain public support to establish a foothold in its camps, management took up King's proposal in earnest.

Even though the UMWA formally ended the strike on December 10, 1914, the company appointed former Mine Inspector of the State of Colorado, David Griffiths, as a mediator, and the administrator of the incipient ERP on December 16. According to Welborn, Griifiths "is probably better known to coal miners in the state than any other man and enjoys their confidence to a degree not equalled [sic] by any other man in the state. He has always been the friend of the mine workers, and will stand out for them and their interests."[55] But this was just a stopgap measure until the final plan was ready. It gave Welborn something to point to when the Low Commission offered its services

[51] Rockefeller, excerpted in West, 173-74.
[52] West, 94-97.
[53] Jesse Welborn to Woodrow Wilson, September 18, 1914, Welborn Papers, Box 1.
[54] Gitelman, 64.
[55] Welborn excerpted in West, 182.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

to settle the issues remaining from the strike.[56] As board member and Rockefeller staffer Starr Murphy had written to Rockefeller back on September 16, "It seems clear to me that public opinion will demand either the acceptance of the President's proposition, or some constructive suggestion from the operators. A mere refusal to do anything would be disastrous."[57]

There is a tendency in short depictions of the Rockefeller Plan to see it solely in terms of public relations. Joseph McCartin, for example, writes that Rockefeller had Mackenzie King create the Rockefeller Plan "[t]o refurbish his name."[58] Such a view obviously has merit in light of the public outcry directed at Rockefeller in the wake of the Ludlow Massacre, but it also seriously underestimates the pressures under which Rockefeller and his company operated. The eyes of the world had been on CF&I since the Ludlow Massacre. To restore his reputation, the illusion of change simply would not do. Even if the public somehow stopped watching Southern Colorado, the United Mine Workers of America would not. As President Welborn wrote Rockefeller shortly after the strike ended, "I don't mean to paint a gloomy outlook; but I cannot believe that the strike leaders who have directed the vicious lawlessness, and their willing followers, will change in spirit merely through the calling off of the strike."[59] The persistence of the United Mine Workers in Southern Colorado is precisely why public opinion mattered. If the public pressured the government to help the UMWA, this would both violate Rockefeller's principles and hurt business. To keep them out, management felt compelled to offer what it thought to be real change, albeit in a closely controlled manner.

When World War I came along the Wilson administration provided a huge impetus for the spread of company unions through its wartime labor policies. The government's adjustment board for the shipyards mandated company unions in order to keep the peace in that vital industry. The U.S. Railroad Administration mandated employee representation arrangements in order to keep that vital mode of transportation from being shut down by strikes. Most importantly, the National War Labor Board (NWLB), which oversaw every war industry, actually devised a model company union based on the

[56] Jesse Welborn to Seth Low, February 1, 1915, Ivy Lee Papers, Box 57.
[57] Murphy excerpted in West, 174.
[58] McCartin, 28.
[59] Jesse Welborn to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., December 11, 1914, Jesse Welborn Papers, Box 1, Colorado Historical Society, Denver, CO.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)

Rockefeller Plan to impose on shops where it thought that might prevent labor strife.[60] Although the Rockefeller Plan came before the war, its creation was still the product of government pressure created by the public outcry over the Ludlow Massacre. During the war, companies ceded to pressure to try employee representation because they didn't want to be labeled unpatriotic. Before the war, John D. Rockefeller ceded to pressure to try employee representation because he was afraid government would force something worse upon the company. Damage inflicted upon his reputation by the United Mine Workers explains why that pressure lasted years after the battle at Ludlow had ended.

[60] Stuart Brandes, *American Welfare Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 126-27.

BDD-A3690 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:21 UTC)