

Reframing the Lupeni Strike of 1929: State Intervention and Organized Labor in Romania's Jiu Valley

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Abstract

The article examines the Lupeni strike action of 1929. While Communist-era historiography exalted the strike as a political action led by party members, the strike was atypical for local labor organization. Placing the strike in the wider context of 1920-1931, the article traces the interaction between local organized labor, the coal companies of the Jiu Valley, and state agents, both locally and in Bucharest. In the post-1918 period, the unions pressed for miners to receive reasonable compensation; given the state's demand for coal and the companies' need for labor, this initially fostered compromise. The Romanian state was willing to tolerate local labor unions led by Social Democrats, while using repression — including the army — to suppress strikes and ensure an uninterrupted coal supply. Shifts in the market and coal production, however, reduced the need for miners — resulting in the fragmentation of local unions. In 1929 the combination of a relatively liberal regime, coal companies seeking rationalization of their work force, and a radicalized fringe group resulted in the strike. While rejecting pre-1989 depictions of the strike, the text argues that labor history helps to reveal the limits of Romanian interwar democracy in ways that political and legal approaches may not.

Keywords: Labor organization, coal miners, Jiu Valley, state intervention, Social Democrats

The Romanian Communist Party (*Partidul Comunist Român*—PCR) co-opted the 1929 Lupeni miners' strike, as it did the country's wider history of organized labor. Lupeni played a particular mythological role, represented, for instance, by the 1963 film *Lupeni 29*. Starring Lica Gheorghiu (daughter of then-General Secretary Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej), the film's tragic love story is set against the backdrop of the strike, as a group of miners demand “justice and bread,” only to be shot down by the gendarmerie. Lupeni represented “the growth in the combative spirit of the working class.” The strike became a staple event in Communist-era political speeches as proof of the radicalization of industrial workers.¹ Such use of Lupeni also reflected how the party successfully wrote

¹ Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, *30 de Ani de Luptă a Partidului sub Steagul lui Lenin și a lui Stalin* (Bucharest: Editura Partidului Muncitoresc Român, 1951), 17; Nicolae Ceaușescu, “Rolul istoric al Clasei Muncitoare,” *România pe Drumul Construirii Societății Socialiste Multilaterale Dezvoltate* (Bucharest: Editura Politică, 1977), 548.



itself into the past as the leader of organized labor — and, in utilizing Lupeni as a symbol of labor activism, of the miners' labor unions of the Jiu Valley.

Communist historiography between 1948 and 1965 went through several stages, all rooted in Marxism-Leninism, but ending with some ideological flexibility regarding the broader history of Romanians.² Twentieth century labor history had less flexibility: the core theme was the rise in labor militancy and class struggle under communist leadership, culminating in the 1945 rise to power of the Communist Party. After the shift to nationalist communist history in the 1970s, labor history (and the history of Lupeni 1929) lost some of its importance, but continued to be interpreted as part of the teleology of the Communist revolution.³ While the most egregious fabrications of the early period were quietly dropped, the simple progression of increasing oppression and corresponding labor radicalization remained central to the party's view of its history.⁴ The simplification of labor history in the interwar period means that the rich tradition of labor activism that characterized the 1920s, as well as the unions' reasons for emphasizing cooperation with the interwar state after 1929 were completely obscured in the process. Labor activism in Transylvania had a long history of organization, and unions associated with the Social Democratic Party continued (with changed names) through the 1920s in Romania. These unions focused on using strikes and negotiation to secure a working relationship with the state and the mining companies. The Romanian state sought to nationalize and modernize. The companies sought increasing profits and depended on the state as their main client for coal through the national railways. Casting labor militancy as inherently opposed to the state obscures one of its main purposes: to draw in state actors on the miners' side during labor negotiations. In this context, the strike of Lupeni 1929 was not a culmination of organized labor in the Jiu Valley: it was the effect of increasing union fragmentation and the failure of the social democratic unions to secure the expected state cooperation.

² Vlad Georgescu, *Politică și istorie. Cazul comuniștilor români 1944-1977* (Bucharest: Editura Humanitas, 2008), 17.

³ Looking at the full run of *Studii*, the main journal of the Romanian Academy, bears out this contention: there are several studies of the Lupeni 1929 strike setting up the thesis of communist leadership and increasing labor oppression during the 1950s and 1960s. Starting with the 1970s the strike is simply mentioned, together with the strikes of Grivița 1933, in various lists whenever the author needs examples of increasing labor unrest and the rise of the party.

⁴ In the case of Lupeni and wider Jiu Valley history, the continuity between its labor movement and the communist party is established both in *Studii* in local history, and in references in party speeches. See for instance Ion Lungu, Vasile Radu, Mircea Valea, Ion Poporogu, *Valea Jiului – File de Istorie* (Petrosani: Muzeul Mineritului Petrosani, 1968), 174 and M.C. Stănescu and M. Silvan, *Lupeni Ieri și Azi* (Bucharest: Editura Politică, 1983), 94-121.

Romanian historiography since 1989 has dismantled much of the Communist Party's historical narrative. However, there has been relatively little attention towards reinvestigating interwar labor history, perhaps unsurprisingly, given that the PCR's prolific and bombastic engagement with the topic closely affiliated the study of the labor movement with the party. Just as Adrian Grama and Alina-Sandra Cucu have used labor history to shed novel light on our understanding of the early Communist era, so too can this field deepen our understanding of interwar Romanian politics and society.⁵ Successive governments between 1918 and 1938 sought to actively foster economic modernization, creating tensions between state policy, industrial workers, and the peasantry. If this encouraged labor organization (usually under the auspices of the Social Democrats), unions were systematically undermined by state elites. This highlights the limits of interwar Romanian democracy and the parties' use of the state apparatus to cement their positions through violence, intimidation and patronage networks. Re-examining provincial labor organizations and their relationships with local institutions highlights the sometimes-stark difference between laws as they were applied in the rest of the country and the administration of politically suspect areas — leading to better understanding of National Liberal economic policies. Finally, labor history can begin to address the issue of the extent to which we can speak of a communist revolutionary movement in interwar Romania: were *Siguranța* efforts enough to ensure that communism remained, at best, a fringe option, or was it always a realistic possibility for increasingly embittered socialist organizers?

Recently, there has been some discussion of the interwar Romanian state's use of emergency legislation to curtail political participation by the fascists and the communists and to control border areas.⁶ Jiu Valley labor history suggests that the state had tested these policies in parts of Transylvania beforehand, at least for a decade. Possibly due to the simplification of labor history before 1989 and its association with the communist party, studies looking at interwar democracy and political systems do not engage significantly with strikes or industrial action as a test of civil rights or of the inclusivity of the political system. The breakdown of order and the increasing uncertainty of local and union politics in the Jiu Valley during 1928-1929 highlights the importance of

⁵ See Adrian Grama, *Laboring Along: Industrial Workers and the Making of Postwar Romania* (Oldenburg: De Gruyter, 2018); Alina-Sandra Cucu, *Planning Labor: Time and the Foundations of Industrial Socialism in Romania* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019).

⁶ See Corneliu Pintilescu, "Fetișizarea siguranței statului, starea de asediu și ascensiunea autoritarismului în România interbelică," *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie »George Barițiu« - Series HISTORICA* 59, (2020), 219-235 and Cosmin Sebastian Cercel, "The 'Right' Side of the Law. State of Siege and the Rise of Fascism in Interwar Romania," *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 2, (2013), 205-233.



state agents in maintaining local cooperation, as well as the extent to which the state had previously resorted to a combination of coercion and economic incentives to maintain coal production and calm.

In engaging these questions, I argue that the Lupeni Strike was far more complex than depicted in Romanian Communist historiography: namely, as a heroic strike by the local party leadership. In fact, the strike was atypical for local labor organization and reflected emerging cleavages within the ranks of the local working class. The Jiu Valley saw frequent (often illegal) strikes in the interwar period that spanned multiple mines and towns and reflected a high degree of labor solidarity in the face of repression by the Romanian state.⁷ Such strikes might touch on political issues, but they more frequently reflected the miners' anger over wages and living standards. While officially repressed, organized labor in the Jiu Valley was able to secure a seat at the negotiating table, albeit one continually contested by an ongoing declared state of emergency. The 1929 strike, in contrast, reflected a reality of disunion: a newly founded "independent" mining union in Lupeni declared a wildcat strike. Not only did the established mining unions in other towns refuse to join, but some crossed picket lines — an unprecedented act. This article examines the 1929 miners' strike in Lupeni, seeking to move beyond the Communist narrative claiming that labor in the Jiu Valley was a revolutionary force and instead placing the strike in the context of local traditions of labor activism, the role of mining unions, and economic insecurity within the coal market.

Struggles to define labor activism, 1919-1927

The Kingdom of Romania unified with Transylvania on 1 December 1918, and among the opportunities and challenges for the government in Bucharest was the Jiu Valley. Starting in the 1850s, the Austrian Empire had begun to exploit the high-grade coal in the valley, with control shifting to Budapest after the 1867 *Ausgleich*. To expand production, Budapest both opened state-owned mines and supported private companies.⁸ This support included both state planning and funding to build the seven coal towns in the valley, incentives to encourage skilled miners to move from across the Empire (in the process, creating a multiethnic workforce), and a willingness to act as a broker between the companies and

⁷ There are seven towns in the Jiu Valley, with nineteen mines. However, not all mines operated throughout the interwar period — in 1929, there were only 18 as Petroșani Vest closed in 1928 — and in 1931 the merger of the coal companies consolidated and closed additional mines.

⁸ For convenience, the term "coal companies" is used throughout the text, since the companies involved evolved over time. Under Hungarian administration the Salgótarján and Urikány companies were key, along with the small Felso-zsilvölgyi Company and a single state mine at Lonea. The state mine was privatized after 1918, while Salgótarján's holdings later spun off into the Petroșani Company (though Salgótarján owned half of the stock) and Urikány's would similarly become the Lupeni Company. In 1931, the Petroșani and Lupeni companies merged.

the workforce.⁹ After 1918, Jiu offered the promise of coal to power Romania's railways, industry, and heat urban homes, but it also posed the threat of labor organization.

Communist-era historiography argued for the party's leading place in national labor organization after 1921, after a firm break with the Social Democrats. However, after 1965 this position softened to a claim that Communists provided leadership within Social Democratic organizations.¹⁰ For the Jiu Valley (and much of Transylvania), such a claim neglected the local development of union chapters starting in the 1880s and their connections to a broad Social Democratic network of union activity across the Kingdom of Hungary. Unionization ensured that Jiu coal miners could negotiate a joint collective labor contract with the coal companies annually.¹¹ The miners, over time, secured subsidized food, clothing, and other goods to be provided by the companies, free workers' housing, and free schools for their children. In November 1918, the miners responded to the uncertain future of Transylvania by declaring a "socialist revolution" to press these claims and thus guarantee that this system would continue. The government in Bucharest responded in December by sending in the army to forcibly suppress these revolutionary sentiments.

State agents, directors of the coal companies, and the mining unions alike thus sought in the postwar years to define what forms of labor organization would be allowed in the Jiu Valley.¹² The March 1920 Jiu miners' strike emphasized the importance of establishing a working relationship between the unions, the

⁹ The 1910 Hungarian census mentioned Hungarians (47%), Romanians (38%), Germans (7.5%), Slovaks (1.6%), Ruthenes (1.2%), Serbs (.2%), and Croats (.1%) (by "mother tongue") in the coal towns, among others; in addition, the confessional questions referred to Jews as well (4.4%). In contrast, the villages were predominantly Romanian (85%).

¹⁰ See Mircea Rusnac, "Modalități de prezentare a trecutului social-democrației românești în istoriografia comunistă," in *Fenomenul Muncitoresc și Social-Democrația din România* (Reșița: Editura Intergraf, 1997), 72-75; Nicolae Ceaușescu, *Istoria poporului român* (Bucharest: Editura Politică, 1983), 326-332.

¹¹ Communist-era historiography was critical of this issue, suggesting that Social Democrats short-sightedly sought immediate advantages for the workers, rather than systemic change. See Stănescu and Silviu, *Lupeni*, 60.

¹² This definition was complicated by the fact that the labor organization in Jiu, as across Transylvania, had been tied, as noted, to the efforts of the Hungarian Social Democratic Party (*Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt*) to organize workers in industrial sites across the pre-1918 Kingdom of Hungary. This raised a dual specter: organized labor was both better developed than in Wallachia and Moldavia and tied to what many in Bucharest saw as a hostile ethnic minority and a foreign power. The fact the broad patterns established by Irina Livezeanu in *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).



companies, and the state. When the companies first jointly proposed to increase prices at their company stores (*Consum*) and subsequently failed to make payroll, the miners went on strike and demanded better salaries and working conditions.¹³ The Romanian military intervened, provoking further unrest that was put down by force.¹⁴ Minister of Labor Grigore Trancu-Iași intervened, ordering arbitration meetings at the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection in Bucharest, held between 21 June and 10 July. The miners secured a collective contract that addressed salaries and prices at *Consum* stores.¹⁵ The companies received state assistance in finding food, negotiating prices with local merchants, and obtaining preferential freight space on the carriages of the Romanian Railways (*Căile Ferate Române*—CFR).¹⁶ The state secured a fixed price on roughly 80 percent of the companies' coal output. More importantly, Bucharest had secured a position from which it could not just arbitrate but dictate to the companies and the miners. The state would tolerate the “red” unions so long as those chapters agreed to negotiate alongside the newly-established “yellow” chapters of the *Sindicatelor Naționale Române* (Romanian National Unions—SNR) and accept a uniform labor contract.¹⁷ The state's position was reinforced after the 1920 general strike in Romania. During the 1920 general strike in Romania, which took place from 21 to 23 October, a state of emergency was declared. The army again intervened, and union activity was briefly banned by the People's Party (*Partidul Poporului*) government of Alexandru Averescu.¹⁸

Although the state seemed to have the upper hand, it also needed the long-term skilled labor of the coal miners. By the mid-1920s, Prime Minister Ion Brătianu and his National Liberal Party (*Partidul Național Liberal*, or PNL) sought to promote domestic industry, in a drive to modernize the country. The Jiu Valley was the only significant source of high-grade, bituminous coal, and the PNL worked closely with the coal companies to increase production. Prominent members of the PNL were granted stock in coal companies on preferential terms or were offered positions on company boards in return for excluding foreign

¹³ Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale (hereafter, ANIC), Fond 2886, Mișcarea Sindicală din Regiunea Valea Jiului (colecție), Folder 1/1920, 209-225.

¹⁴ ANIC, Fond 2952 Uniunile Profesionale ale Lucrătorilor din Industria Minieră, Folder 3/1920, 5-9.

¹⁵ Serviciul Județean al Arhivelor Naționale Hunedoara (hereafter, SJANH), Fond 144 Societatea “Petroșani” Direcția Muncă și Salarii (hereafter, SPDMS), Folder 1/1920, 1-15, 46.

¹⁶ SJANH, Fond 144 SPDMS, Folder 1/1920, 99.

¹⁷ See the memoranda sent to the ‘coal companies of the Jiu Valley’ SJANH, Fond 86 Inspectoratul general al minelor de cărbuni din Valea Jiului, Document 331/1922.

¹⁸ Ion Aldescu, *Armata Română în Valea Jiului: Repere istorice 1916–1999* (Bucharest: Editura Militară, 2001), 232.

capital and erecting high tariffs to protect domestic industry. Thus, the 1925 crisis of European coal over-production¹⁹ meant only that the Jiu companies had to send a memorandum demanding the increase of coal tariffs by at least 400 lei per ton, which the Council of Ministers acceded to.²⁰ Until 1927 the companies expanded exponentially, aided by the fact that both their investments in equipment and purchases of other companies' shares were included *within* the cost of coal. Thus, between 1921 and 1927, over 560 million lei were invested in repairing the mines, new technology and over 1,000 workers' houses, built by 1923.²¹ Total Jiu Valley coal production expanded from 1,028,934 tons in 1919 to 1,691,366 tons in 1925, or to a proportion of 58 percent of national production.²²

The expansion of production meant increased demand for skilled underground miners. Although thousands of ethnic Romanian miners were encouraged to move to Jiu, the companies and the Brătianu government still had to forge a working relationship with the existing Social Democratic unions, which in 1921 had joined the *Uniunea Muncitorilor din Industria Minieră din România* (Union of Mining Industry Workers in Romania—UMIMR). Something of the older, Habsburg-era pattern was in effect re-created, and this relationship — not the Lupeni strike of 1929 nor Communist agitation — defined interwar labor relations in the Jiu region. The state guaranteed the miners' unions a certain standard of living, in return for stability, and was willing to tolerate the “red” unions if they avoided politics.²³ The companies enjoyed state contracts and protective tariffs, in turn providing coal to the CFR at guaranteed prices. Finally, the Social Democratic

¹⁹ The 1924 Dawes Plan meant that the Ruhr basin began producing again, and Germany could pay part of the war reparations in coal. The British and Romanian coal mines had expanded during 1923-1924, partially as a result of the vacuum left on the coal market by the French occupation of the Ruhr, so the abrupt drop in the price of coal, coupled with the increase in supply, caused a shock to both industries. See John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, “Industrial Politics and the 1926 Mining Lockout: The Struggle for Dignity” in *The Struggle for Dignity: Mining Communities and the 1926 Lock-Out*, ed. John McIlroy, Alan Campbell and Keith Gildart (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), 63.

²⁰ Ludovic Báthory, *Societățile Carbonifere și sistemul economic și politic al României (1919-1929)* (Cluj: Presa Univeritară Clujeană, 1999), 198.

²¹ Mircea Baron, *Cărbune și societate în Valea Jiului, perioada interbelică* (Petroșani: Editura Universitas, 1998), 177.

²² SJANH, Fond 133 “Salgó-Tarján” Societate pe actii maghiare; Folder 22/1911-1918 f.4; percentage calculated based on Victor Axenciuc, *Evoluția Economică a României: Cercetări statistico-istorice, 1859-1947. Industria*, vol. 1 (București: Editura Academiei Române, 1992), 218.

²³ SJANH, Fond 29 Comisariatul de Poliție Petroșani (hereafter, CPP), Folder 10/1923, 4; Folder 16/1922, 100-118. Such toleration was fragile, however: state agents often seemed to have trouble distinguishing between a Social Democrat and a Communist, and a miner showing “the instigation to strike” was sometimes taken to be synonymous with “communist agitation.” See SJANH, Fond 299 Parchetul Tribunalului Hunedoara-Deva, Folder 24/1922, f. 1-34; Folder 6/1923, f.1-20; Folder 11/1927, 8-15.



unions represented the most leftist political position acceptable to Bucharest, and cooperation was an acceptable price to successive governments in power if it checked the spread of Communist ideas.

In addition to favorable collective contracts, the state and companies took on the responsibility of providing the miners with subsidized food and goods: the new public *Consum* stores created in addition to company-run suppliers were established in 1923 by the General Director of the Petroșani Company, Nicolae Theodorescu, with the support of minister Tătăărăscu and director Bujoiu.²⁴ These stores were in addition to (but named in the same fashion as) the *Consum* of the mining companies. The state collective stores were mandated by the collective contract and, in a continuation of previous workers' demands and the policies of the Habsburg era, provided six basic necessities at indexed prices and forty-three products at lower prices, generally adding about 15 to 20 percent to cover transportation and storage costs.²⁵ The *Consum* company stores only served employees, their dependents, and parish and school officials. The state *Consum* stores, in contrast, were public and open to all.²⁶ The other major difference between the company collective stores and the public *Consum* was that the company stores sold on credit (the next salary of the miner would cover his tab), while the state stores only sold based on cash and, later, company scrip.²⁷

The Petroșani Company would subsequently detach its *Consum* stores into a different corporation, the *Asociația de Consum* (Consumer Company), contributing 99 percent of the 1 million lei starting capital, provided an initial credit of 3 million lei, and allowed the use of Petroșani Company staff, buildings and administration by the new retail company.²⁸ The initial project focused on slaughterhouses and meat distribution, and in July 1923, four slaughterhouses and accompanying retail centers were opened in the Jiu Valley.²⁹ By September, at the miners' request, the *Asociația de Consum* expanded its total capital to 3 million lei, 75 percent of this increase being supported by subscription from miners' salaries. General stores were also opened alongside the slaughterhouses, carrying both basic necessities and luxuries.³⁰ The propaganda value of these stores was not lost on the Liberal Party — indeed, *Gazeta Jiului* ran features on the stores' success several times.³¹ By September 1924, the *Consum* had sold merchandise

²⁴ "Consumul Muncitorilor din Valea Jiului," *Gazeta Jiului*, March 2, 1924, 1.

²⁵ SJANH, Fond 69 Intreprinderea Minieră Lonea, Folder 2/1926, f.54-60.

²⁶ SJANH, Fond 83 Consumul Muncitorilor din Valea-Jiului Petroșani, (Henceforth CMVJP) Folder 1/1923, f. 18.

²⁷ SJANH, Fond 86 Inspectoratul general al minelor de cărbuni din Valea Jiului, document 598/1920; Fond 255, Societatea "Petroșani" Confidențiale, (hereafter SPC) Folder 1/1925, 29.

²⁸ SJANH, Fond 83 CMVJP, Folder 1/1923, f. 23-26.

²⁹ SJANH, Fond 83 CMVJP, Folder 1/1923, 5.

³⁰ "Consumul Muncitorilor din Valea Jiului," *Gazeta Jiului*, March 9, 1924, 3.

³¹ The articles at the end of 1924 emphasized the alliance between the Company and the Liberal Party in defending the locals from the exaggerated prices and the predation of local merchants. See "Consumul Muncitorilor din Valea Jiului," *Gazeta Jiului*, August 2, 1924, 2; *Gazeta Jiului*, September 20, 1924, 2.

valued at over 7 million lei, at a 3.5 percent profit.³² The stores sold most of their inventory below market prices, sparking increasing complaints from local businesses.³³

Not unexpectedly, during the period of massive hires, good collective contracts,³⁴ and good consumer prices (after mid-1923), the number of union members paying their dues and remaining in good standing dropped dramatically.³⁵ However, a report by the *Siguranța* during the same period pointed out that most of the workers supported the Social-Democratic union, even if they were not officially contributing to the union coffers. The *Siguranța* estimated that 7,000 workers could be considered “unionized” (including the pro-Liberal SNR), in terms of their willingness to aid union representatives.³⁶

The Social Democratic unions, however, faced two sources of pressure. First, the coal cartel created a framework where the mining directors could more easily work together to pressure the local labor market.³⁷ From 1925 on, the companies increasingly invested in mechanization to extract and wash coal, reducing the need for miners — nearly half of the miners and support staff would retire or lose their jobs over the following six years.³⁸ This encouraged miners to support union efforts — but which unions? The fragmentation of labor representation was the second source of pressure, and this factor is critical in understanding labor relations in the Jiu Valley after 1918. Most miners continued to adhere to the UMIMR chapters, but ethnic Romanian miners new to the valley and workers in support industries supported the SNR chapters in increasing numbers. The Habsburg-era tradition of a single, Social Democratic union had fragmented, and

³² “Consumul Muncitorilor din Valea Jiului,” *Gazeta Jiului*, September 20, 1924, 2.

³³ SJANH, Fond 83 CMVJP Folder 1/1926, 31.

³⁴ See, for instance, the discussions of collective contracts in the National Union newspaper, “Hotărârea adusă de Tribunalul Deva asupra arbitrajului,” *Graul Muncitorimei*, February 29, 1924, 5.

³⁵ “Înainte și după organizarea muncitorilor,” *Minerul*, January 31, 1925, 2. “Darea de seamă morală și materială a Uniunii pe anii 1923 și 1924,” *Minerul*, June 30, 1925, 3.

³⁶ SJANH, Fond 29 CPP Folder 12/1924, 15-17.

³⁷ SJANH, Fond 814 Întreprinderea Minieră Lupeni (hereafter ÎML), Folder 3/1926 3. For Lupeni Director Ion Bujoiu's support of this and further collaboration see Folder 21/1925, 77; and for the feasibility studies on how to develop coordination between the companies at all levels, see SJANH, Fond 252, Societatea “Petroșani” D.M., Serviciul Tehnic, Folder 21/1926, f.1-5. Ion Bujoiu would later serve as a Liberal minister of industry and as a director of several of these companies over the next twenty years, as well as the General Director of the coal companies after their restructuring in 1931.

³⁸ Baron, *Cărbune și Societate*, 275; SJANH, Fond 250, Societatea “Petroșani” Direcția Serviciul Producție, Folder 10/1940; SJANH, Fond 80, Inspectoratul Geologic și Minier Deva. Secția Petroșani, Folder 22/1931, 4.



relations between the two labor groups were often openly hostile and sometimes violent. Communist-era scholars presented the interwar Communist Party as leading an overarching group of mass organizations, rather than struggling with the reality of a limited group of “a few hundred members with multiple affiliations.”³⁹ This approach occluded the significant role that Communist organizers played in Jiu in opposing both the UMIMR (seen as the key rival of the Communist organization) and the SNR and helping to destabilize existing patterns of labor organization further.⁴⁰ Even if the UMIMR unions still predominated, they could not preserve workers’ jobs, as the companies mechanized and rationalized their production process. Before the signing of the 1926 collective contract, there were increasing calls within their ranks to take action. Such bitterness was reinforced by police arrests of miners’ representatives in 1926, before they could submit lists for the local elections — ensuring that the PNL faced no opposition.⁴¹ Arrests and interrogations of Communists ensued, as the gendarmerie and the *Siguranța* were increasingly concerned that the loss of jobs would provoke strike actions.⁴²

The breakdown of working-class solidarity in Jiu, 1927-1929

Organized labor in the Jiu Valley came under further strain after a crisis of overproduction in 1927. The Jiu mines had steadily expanded coal output after 1919 to supply the Romanian Railways, which purchased over two-thirds of production through state-negotiated annual contracts. This insulated the Jiu mining companies from international price fluctuations, but left them vulnerable when, in 1927, the CFR reduced its purchases.⁴³ In response, the companies cut costs by closing less productive mines and shafts and dismissing personnel.⁴⁴ Mindful of labor militancy, the coal companies worked with Romanian officials in an attempt to offset layoffs. Some provisions were made for social aid, and state and company funds supported a new workers’ home for the unemployed.⁴⁵ Starting in 1928, Bucharest funded local road improvements to employ former miners.⁴⁶

³⁹ See Francesco Zavatti, “Between History and Power. The Historiography of Romanian National-Communism (1964-1989),” *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea* 42 (2020), 48.

⁴⁰ ANIC, Fond 2914 Comitetul Regional Valea Jiului al PCR, Document 2/1924; Document 3/1924.

⁴¹ SJANH, Fond 29 CPP, Folder 10/1926, 25, 43, 50.

⁴² “Verték-e a munkásokat a petrosenyi-i Sigurancán,” *Zsilvölgyi Napló*, March 28, 1925, 1; SJANH, Fond 29 CPP, Folder 22/1925, 26-31.

⁴³ SJANH, Fond 81 Societatea “Petroșani.” Direcția Generală, Consiliul de Administrație, Folder 1/1927, f.6.

⁴⁴ See SJANH, Fond 80 Inspectoratul Geologic și Minier Deva. Secția Petroșani, 68/1931, f. 5-18; Folder 99/1931, f. 13-30; and Folder 111/1931, f. 1-6.

⁴⁵ “Căminul Muncitorilor,” *Gazeta Jiului*, February 13, 1927, 1.

⁴⁶ “Pentru Ajutorarea Șomerilor din Valea Jiului,” *Avântul*, January 13, 1929, 3.

At the same time, the state cracked down on the UMIMR chapter activity. Directors of the mining companies informed the *Siguranța* about workers' meetings, and union members who raised funds for the Social Democratic Party were arrested and prosecuted.⁴⁷ In April 1927, the prefect's office went further and banned all union meetings, whether of the UMIMR or the SNR.⁴⁸

UMIMR's union leadership urged miners to aid each other — collecting funds for the less fortunate — and negotiated with the directors of the coal mines to cut work hours for all instead of layoffs. When the mining companies dismissed miners instead and reduced the remainder's shifts, the union appealed to the government in Bucharest.⁴⁹ As the scale of the crisis became apparent, the dues-paying membership of both unions grew dramatically, and the UMIMR and SNR chapters became closely cooperative — all SNR chapters would be integrated into the UMIMR by 1931.⁵⁰ The UMIMR leadership successfully negotiated salary increases in early 1928, but the situation remained tense.⁵¹ By this point, miners and industrial workers largely abandoned their support for the National Liberals and, by late 1927, shifted support to the National Peasant Party (*Partidul Național Țărănesc*, or PNTȚ).⁵²

The PNTȚ, formed by a 1926 merger of two existing parties, promised an alternative to the postwar dominance of the National Liberals and the People's Party — castigating both of them as focused on elite interests and hostile to labor organization.⁵³ Ideologically, the PNTȚ promised democratization, civil rights, and decentralization. In practical terms, it represented an opportunity to shift power locally, within the Jiu valley. As it was a mono-industrial region, the state could apply extraordinary pressure through the CFR coal contracts. This factor led to a workable alliance between the coal companies and the National Liberals after 1918. The ministries in Bucharest had significant power over local matters, given continued centralization and the widespread use of patronage. A PNTȚ regime thus promised to decisively shift power within the valley — exacerbating local tensions, which came to a head in May 1928.

⁴⁷ SJANH, Fond 29 CPP, Folder 6/1927, 52; Folder 8/1926, 1-23.

⁴⁸ SJANH, Fond 255, SPC Folder 3/1928, 13; "Jandarmii din Lupeni descarcă armele în muncitori," *Minerul*, May 1, 1927, 3.

⁴⁹ "Mari concedieri de muncitori la minele de pe Valea Jiului," *Minerul*, September 30, 1927, 1.

⁵⁰ SJANH, Fond 29 CPP, Folder 16/1927, 1-10.

⁵¹ "Pe Valea Jiului," *Minerul*, May 1, 1928, 4.

⁵² SJANH, Fond 29 CPP, Folder 1/1927, 76.

⁵³ Not unreasonably; note Keith Hitchins' description of the PNL as oligarchic and the People's Party as largely continuing PNL policies in *Rumania, 1866-1947* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 369, 390, 404.



The PNȚ announced its first national congress at Alba-Iulia on 6 May. When hundreds of miners requested days off at the Lupeni mine to attend the meeting, Uricani Company Director Francisc Frey refused: “This is a company concerned with taking out coal, not politics.”⁵⁴ Over 10,000 miners subsequently walked out—in this case, walking 40 kilometers north to catch freight trains to Alba-Iulia.⁵⁵ The directors of the mining companies conferred with Minister of the Interior Gheorghe Tătărăscu, and when the miners returned to work on 7 May, they filed past the watchful eyes of 500 gendarmes and a company of the Târgu Jiu 18th Infantry Regiment.⁵⁶ Despite this show of force, the union chapters jointly requested negotiations over salaries and over the method of recording the length of miners’ shifts.⁵⁷ The miners at Lupeni went farther: hundreds refused to enter the mine until confronted by a group of armed infantry, demanding that Petroșani Company Director Bujoiu, Royal Labor Inspector Popescu, and Colonel Milincescu of the 7th Army Corps renegotiate the labor contract immediately.⁵⁸ When this demand was rejected, thousands of miners began wildcat strikes the following week, while others took up pickaxes on 14 May and tore apart first Frey’s office and later, his home.⁵⁹ In response, the gendarmerie arrested the union leadership participating in negotiations, while the miners *en masse* threatened a general strike.

When Milincescu ordered the company officials to take control of the situation, the miners heckled them.⁶⁰ Exasperated, Milincescu ordered Frey to compromise.⁶¹ But General Clemente Davidoglu, national commander of the gendarmerie, now declared a state of emergency: there could be no meetings of more than three persons, whether “under a roof or under the sky,” and a curfew would be imposed from 9 pm.⁶² Bujoiu confidentially ordered his staff in Lupeni to compile lists of the “guilty parties”, together with the *Siguranța*, and ensure these men would be fired.⁶³ One week after the first outbreak of the strikes, the three members of the negotiating team were arrested and sent to the military tribunal in Sibiu for investigation. On this issue, both the Social Democrats and the Communists agreed: the miners would not go back to the mines until

⁵⁴ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, f.336.

⁵⁵ “Pe Valea Jiului după plecarea minerilor la Alba Iulia,” *Dimineața*, May 11, 1928, 2.

⁵⁶ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, f.341; “Informațiuni,” *Avântul*, May 13, 1928, 3; *Avântul*, May 20, 1928, 4.

⁵⁷ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, f.331.

⁵⁸ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, f.308.

⁵⁹ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, f.322, 320, 326.

⁶⁰ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, f.323.

⁶¹ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, f.315.

⁶² “Înăsprirea Stării de Asediu,” *Avântul*, May 20, 1928, 4.

⁶³ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, f.297.

the detained representatives were freed.⁶⁴ Miners physically assaulted the royal commissioner, the gendarmes, and several engineers and (except at the Lonea mines) refused to begin their shifts or enter the mines until their demands were met and their negotiating team released.⁶⁵ Between 27 May and 1 June, the mines stood mostly idle. The army compelled miners to return to work by going house-to-house with the gendarmerie and escorting workers to the mines.⁶⁶ There, the miners refused to begin their shifts — again seeking to negotiate lower prices at the company stores, to change the method of how the companies calculated salaries, and to secure the freedom of all those arrested during the unrest.⁶⁷ The miners' representatives were beaten, and the miners were informed that the gendarmerie would eject anyone who refused to work the next day from their company housing. This, finally, broke the miners' resistance. While the state of emergency and the deployment of additional army units rendered the Jiu Valley outwardly quiet, the mining directors did not believe the situation had improved, or that the workers would be quiescent for long.⁶⁸

They were proved correct: Iuliu Maniu of the PNTȚ was sworn in as prime minister on 10 November. The death of National Liberal leader Ion Brătianu in November 1927 had left the Liberals both internally fractured without his guiding hand and under increasing pressure from the PNTȚ. The Maniu government immediately abolished the state of emergency in the Jiu Valley. On 11 and 12 November, the UMIMR union chapters organized rallies, drawing at least 4,000 people into the street and convening meetings in order to reorganize.⁶⁹ Soon, a newly-appointed county prefect promised to find help for the unemployed, so that “those without bread would receive help.”⁷⁰ The trade unions and the Romanian Social Democratic Party (*Partidul Social Democrat Român*, or PSDR) allied with the PNTȚ, which recognized the existence of class struggle (though prioritizing that of the peasantry) and advocated a platform of social justice.⁷¹ The new Maniu

⁶⁴ ANIC, Fond 2914 Comitetul Regional Valea Jiului al PCR, Document 4/1928.

⁶⁵ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 6/1928, 45-46.

⁶⁶ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, 291-3; 48.

⁶⁷ Police records suggest that rumors among the miners alluded to further demands — Transylvanian autonomy or independence, for example: see SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, 279-280; 6/1928, 48-49. PNTȚ officials later argued this was only speculation or disinformation by the police: “Adevărul asupra faptelor din Valea Jiului,” *Dreptatea*, July 29, 1928, 2.

⁶⁸ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 6/1928, 3-4.

⁶⁹ “Adunări,” *Minerul*, October 31, 1928, 4.

⁷⁰ “Megkezdődtek a választási harcok” and “Az új prefektus a zsilvölgyében,” *Zsilvölgyi Napló*, November 28, 1928, 1.

⁷¹ Ioan Scurtu, *Din viața politică a României: întemeierea și activitatea Partidului Țărănesc (1918-1926)* (București: Editura Litera, 1975), 62. On the underlying ideas behind the National Peasant economic policies, see Hitchins, *Romania*, 319-334.



government called for parliamentary elections, subsequently taking nearly 80 percent of the vote and firmly displacing the National Liberals from power.

With the PNT's victory, the miners now demanded a renegotiation of their collective contract. In December 1928, the mining directors of the Jiu Valley sent a joint memorandum to Bucharest stating that "the situation is becoming worse day by day." Bearing axes, staves and knives, groups of unemployed miners first appeared at the mines and moved from there to cause repeated confrontations and skirmishes at the mining offices. The directors begged the authorities to deal with the anarchic state of the Jiu Valley, and a stream of complaints were issued until August 1929.⁷² In particular, the miners targeted the foremen who had supported the National Liberals as "traitors" to the working class.⁷³ Similarly, there was growing alarm at the return of Communist agitators, who had been expelled in 1928 and now began to take up positions in the trade unions.⁷⁴ Formal negotiations began in January 1929, and the miners fully expected — and directly petitioned — the Maniu government to actively support these efforts.⁷⁵ In this hope, they would be disappointed; although Labor Minister Ion Răducanu expanded support for the unemployed and the existing efforts to provide jobs through road building, the PNT did not intervene in the negotiations, referring them to arbitration.⁷⁶

The miners' rapid disappointment with the PNT would prove a key destabilizing factor in the valley. The more militant miners at Lupeni and Vulcan in 1928 had launched wildcat actions, clashing with a union leadership they saw as conciliatory. This provided an opportunity for radical organizers like Teodor Munteanu. A new, highly radical Independent Union (*Sindicat Independent*) was launched in 1929 at Lupeni. The communist affiliation of its membership is at best unclear — UMIMR claimed that the leadership were communist agitators and that Munteanu was a *Siguranța* agent and a communist agitator that sought to entrap workers. Still, relations between the UMIMR unions and their former membership were highly acrimonious.⁷⁷ The Independent Union both attempted to put pressure on contract negotiations through physical coercion and fought in the streets with UMIMR loyalists.⁷⁸ Rumors swept the valley, hinting that if the contract negotiations failed, the Communists would turn to violence and kill

⁷² SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, f. 272-277; 205-250.

⁷³ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 6/1928, 5-8.

⁷⁴ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, f. 160; Fond 29 CPP, Folder 16/1928, f. 3-7.

⁷⁵ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, 190.

⁷⁶ Stănescu and Silvan, *Lupeni*, 75.

⁷⁷ "Masacrul dela Lupeni" *Minerul*, September 1, 1929, 1.

⁷⁸ Jos cu trădătorii clasei muncitoare!" *Minerul*, July 1, 1929, 1.

company administrators.⁷⁹ Munteanu, in fact, sanctioned attacks with explosives on the house of Frey in early July, an attack repeated later that month by another band of miners; in addition, at least one sub-director was attacked at gunpoint.⁸⁰ The Independent Union further demanded that the former president of the UMIMR chapter in Lupeni, Petru Mihăilă, be fired from the mine and forbidden access to the Jiu Valley. Otherwise, the Independents claimed, they could not guarantee his safety.⁸¹

The Independent Union provided Communist-era historiography with the opportunity to align the unions with contemporary political movements — e.g., assigning the leadership of the looming strike of 1929 to the Communists by drawing on the other leaders. However, accounts from the period do not mention Munteanu by name.⁸² Even more confusingly, some scholarship in both the Communist and the post-1989 era argued that the National Peasants protected the Independents.⁸³ The origin of this allegation reflects the wealth of conflicting information about Munteanu — both a known Communist (central in the 1924 scandal during which eleven Communists were arrested) and, at least according to contemporary Social Democrats, allegedly also a member of the National Liberal Party.⁸⁴ Without further investigation, it is uncertain if this strike represented the skilled work of a Communist political operative or if Munteanu was willing to seek a variety of partners to achieve his goals — something one can see in the case of other local agitators as well.⁸⁵ Pre-1989 historiography that sought to establish a clear Communist pedigree for labor organization thus obscures the complexity of the profile of labor radicals who might draw on multiple sources of support.

By August 1929, the situation in the Jiu Valley was tense. Although a collective contract was finalized in July 1929, many miners were unhappy that the wage raises

⁷⁹ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, 143.

⁸⁰ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, 150-155; 139.

⁸¹ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, 160-1.

⁸² Lungu, et. al., 174. Stănescu and Silvan, 71-72; 81.

⁸³ Stănescu and Silvan, 84; Marin C. Stănescu, *Stânga politică din România din anii crizei 1929-1933* (București: Editura Mica Valahie, 2007), 43. This assertion stems from the fact that Munteanu was reportedly on good terms with PNT County Prefect Ștefan Rozvan, who was attempting to create National Peasant-aligned unions, and that Munteanu had participated in contract negotiations with the PNT. Such allegations may be the result of hostility from both the heads of other union chapters and from company officials; the latter detested Rozvan, and reported to Bucharest on his relationship with Munteanu — see SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML Lupeni, Folder 9/1929, 111.

⁸⁴ “Jos cu trădătorii clasei muncitoare!” *Minerul*, July 1, 1929, 1. This may, of course, have merely been a slur against Munteanu.

⁸⁵ Vasile Sârb, for example, served as a secretary in a Social Democratic union — but simultaneously founded the Lupeni Communist Party organization. ANIC, Fond 2914 Comitetul Regional Valea Jiului al PCR, Document 3/1924.



were not larger, that miners at different mines would receive different raises, and that the PNTȚ — and even the PSDR — were not providing sufficient support.⁸⁶ The coal companies felt abandoned by a seemingly hostile Maniu government.⁸⁷ Finally, the unified front of mining unions had been shattered, being divided between Independent and UNIMR chapters, with the *Siguranța* reporting that the Communist threat in the region was rapidly growing.⁸⁸ The local elections of April 1929 had seen a Communist electoral list submitted in Vulcan. Worse still, it went on to defeat both the PSDR and the National Liberal lists handily.⁸⁹

The Strike of 1929

Despite the rising tensions, the Lupeni strike of 5-6 August 1929 was largely unexpected. True, the companies were concerned — sending repeated appeals to the Ministry of Labor for aid and arguing that the region was growing unstable.⁹⁰ But PNTȚ-appointed County Prefect Ștefan Rozvan had promised state support for the mining unions and blamed the companies.⁹¹ In this light, it seemed likely that the workers would be willing to negotiate rather than strike.⁹² The government's support, however, was half-hearted at best. While the PNTȚ regime was unwilling to send in the army to repress the miners — even when the Independent Unions had started a campaign of violence — it was also unwilling to intervene and force the companies to provide further salary increases or to introduce any serious alternative employment program in the valley.⁹³

Salary increases were one element of the contract negotiation (the unions pressing for 10 percent, the companies sticking to 6 percent). Another element was the companies' attempt to redefine the eight-hour shift as starting not upon *entry* into the mine (as in past contracts), but as starting when miners began work underground at the face. Workers were being asked to add one to two additional unpaid hours per shift.⁹⁴ But the key sticking point was whether the companies should pay the miners in the Independent Union their wages during

⁸⁶ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, 133.

⁸⁷ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, 125.

⁸⁸ SJANH, Fond 29 CPP, Folder 2/1930, 26-9.

⁸⁹ "O lecție," *Avântul*, 2:14 (14 Apr 1929), 1.

⁹⁰ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, 108-113.

⁹¹ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, 126.

⁹² ANIC, Fond 2937-2943 Procese Întocmite de Organele Justiției, Siguranței și Jandarmeriei pentru Comuniști, Militanți ai Mișcării Muncitorești și ai Organizațiilor de Masa (hereafter, PÎOJS), Folder 2642/1929, f. 2.

⁹³ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, 108-115; "Iparos. Mit várhatunk a tavaszi szezontól?" *Zsilvölgyi Napló*, April 18, 1929, 1. "Nyit levél Madgareu kereskedelmi minister urhoz," *Zsilvölgyi Napló*, July 26, 1929, 1.

⁹⁴ SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, 124.

a union-mandated strike — as the companies did for UMIMR actions.⁹⁵ As the negotiations dragged on, some miners at the Elena and Victoria mines in Lupeni refused to report to work on 5 August, and instead proceeded to the shaft head to stop any other miners from beginning work. Amid heated debate between miners from different union chapters, a group of 3,800 protesters marched towards the Lupeni power plant.⁹⁶

The power plant not only provided electricity to the town but powered the water pumps that prevented the mine from flooding — and, critically, also powered both the ventilation system that ensured miners at work had breathable air and the elevator system that allowed movement between the underground galleries and the surface. If the power plant was attacked, the mines could be shut down for months to remove floodwater — which, in turn, created the risk that the coal veins would emit methane and create the potential for an explosion in a gallery. Nicolae Radu, the chief mechanic of the plant, begged the strikers not to turn the plant off, because fellow miners were deep in the mines and could die. He was stabbed several times in the resulting mêlée while engineer Ion Socolescu was “savagely beaten.”⁹⁷ The power plant was shut down, trapping hundreds of miners belowground, with a limited supply of breathable air. In the subsequent trial, state prosecutor Marin Condeescu argued that the striking miners, armed with staves, iron bars, axes and revolvers, refused to allow the power plant to operate, despite being informed about the dangers to their fellow workers.⁹⁸ Communist-era historians argued that in 1929, Communist leadership was successful in convincing miners that “solidarity is necessary to win the fight for their demands” and drew Social Democrats and the non-politically minded miners in to support the strike.⁹⁹ In fact, miners from Vulcan, Lonea, Petroșani, and Petrila refused to join the strike. The action remained isolated and confined to the four mines in Lupeni alone.

On the morning of 6 August, under the orders of county prosecutor Marin Condeescu, the gendarmes and a detachment of 80 Frontier Guards from the army ranged themselves in front of the strikers at the power plant. The strikers had nowhere to retreat: the walls of the power plant were high, the gate was blocked by the gendarmerie and the guard, and the only possible exit was by shoving alongside the flanks of the police.¹⁰⁰ According to the official trial depositions,

⁹⁵ “Masacrul de la Lupeni,” *Minerul*, September 1, 1929, 1. SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 9/1929, 82.

⁹⁶ SJANH, Fond 299 Parchetul Tribunalului Hunedoara-Deva, Folder 4/1929, 3-7.

⁹⁷ ANIC, Fond 2937-2943 PÎOJS, Folder 2641/1929, f.325. Both survived their injuries: see SJANH, Fond 814 ÎML, Folder 7/1929, 88.

⁹⁸ ANIC, Fond 2937-2943 PÎOJS, Folder 3642/1929, f.56.

⁹⁹ Lungu, Radu, Valea, Poporogu, *Valea Jiului*, 174.

¹⁰⁰ “Masacrul de la Lupeni,” *Minerul*, September 1, 1929, 1



at 6 am, the gendarmes were ordered to clear a path to the power plant with the butts of their weapons, and the miners fought back.¹⁰¹ Hearing a shot, the guards opened fire on the workers — killing 13 miners and severely wounding 60 (seven of whom subsequently died). Strikers, including the more lightly wounded, fled to their homes or the mountains.¹⁰² With the strikers incapacitated or fleeing, the power plant was immediately restarted. The same day the army applied the same measures as during a state of emergency — all meetings were banned, and press censorship was strengthened.¹⁰³ The funerals of the miners took place on 7 August under military supervision, with only their immediate families allowed to participate.¹⁰⁴ Restrictions on assembly and the press were lifted by October, although the miners had already quietly met to discuss upcoming negotiations over the contract.¹⁰⁵ Despite their conflicts with the Independent Union, the Social Democratic union chapters gathered money for the legal defense of those miners who were under arrest for their actions during the Lupeni strike. The chapters also published a list of demands on behalf of all the miners regarding the new collective contract.¹⁰⁶

The miners themselves were shocked by the events of 6 August. While most had been horrified by the occupation of the power plant, the guards' shooting of the demonstrators led to the fear that this use of force represented the true outlook of the Maniu government.¹⁰⁷ The miners' fears were not alleviated by the fact that the company housed and fed the new army unit at its own expense, that Rozvan was only suspended for his part in the massacre (rather than fired or prosecuted), and that the trial of the miners who participated in the Lupeni strike was postponed several times.¹⁰⁸ What the miners termed the "Lupeni massacre" was a great blow to both the PNTȚ and the mining companies. The events of August 1929 significantly weakened the National Peasants' credibility: they had promised social justice and received, in return, a great deal of support from the Jiu Valley.¹⁰⁹ The national Romanian press depicted the companies as bloodthirsty Liberal oligarchs, who exploited the miners mercilessly for their own benefit.¹¹⁰

¹⁰¹ ANIC, Fond 2937-2943 PÎOJS, Folder 2642/1929, f. 70-71.

¹⁰² ANIC, Fond 2937-2943 PÎOJS, Folder 2642/1929, f. 42-50.

¹⁰³ "În Valea Jiului Teroarea Continuă," *Minerul*, November 1, 1929, 1.

¹⁰⁴ Stănescu, M. Silvan, *Lupeni Ieri și Azi*, 106.

¹⁰⁵ "Din Valea Jiului: Acțiunea de reorganizare a muncitorilor," *Minerul*, December 15, 1929, 4.

¹⁰⁶ "Conferința regională a sindicatelor din Valea Jiului," *Minerul*, November 1, 1929, 3.

¹⁰⁷ "Az édesanya..." *Zsilvölgyi Napló*, August 14, 1929, 1

¹⁰⁸ "În Valea Jiului Teroarea Continuă," *Minerul*, November 1, 1929, 1.

¹⁰⁹ Armin Heinen, *Legiunea Arhanghelului Mihail. O contribuție la problema fascismului internațional*, Cornelia Eșianu and Delia Eșianu trans. (Bucharest: Editura Humanitas, 1999), 138.

¹¹⁰ See Marian Boboc and Mihai Barbu, 6 August 1929 : Ziua de sânge de la Lupeni, vols. 1-3 (Deva: Editura Corvin, 2006-2007).

The PNT, in an effort to salvage the situation, intervened in the December 1929 joint contract negotiations in the Jiu Valley. Minister of Labor Ion Răducanu arbitrated between the companies and the unions in an unusually short series of meetings over six days. The miners secured most of their demands: an eight-hour workday, calculated from entry into the mine, overtime pay at 150 percent of the basic pay rate, the agreement that the *Consum* stores would continue to supply goods at low cost while some food would be further subsidized, and the assurance that free workers' housing would continue to be provided, along with free heating and electricity. Salaries were increased overall by 5 percent, and wages were further pegged to the prices of 36 products (food and clothing, plus soap) carried by the *Consum*.¹¹¹ The 1929 contract would remain in force until 1940, with minor across-the-board salary increases.¹¹²

Despite the PNT's intervention, the conflicts that provoked the 1929 protest continued through the 1930s. Bujoiu planned to continue restructuring the Lupeni Company's coal mining organization, presenting some of his ideas at the November 1929 conference of the *Institutul Românesc de Organizare Științifică a Muncii* (Romanian Institute for the Scientific Organization of Labor—IROSM).¹¹³ Rationalization, in the eyes of the Jiu Valley company administrators, meant mechanization, new techniques of extracting coal, and using the resulting layoffs as a way to break the back of radical labor organizers. Bujoiu's position to carry out this plan was increased after 1931, when the coal companies merged, and he became director general of the consolidated mines. Bujoiu's plan, as preserved in internal memos, emphasized that the first order of business was the "re-establishment of discipline" (a concept which would eventually be transformed into increased working hours) — a significant contributing factor to the unrest of 1928 and 1929. To prevent the recurrence of labor unrest, Bujoiu suggested a liberal use of the threat of dismissals: the loss of a mining job meant the loss of a miner's free housing. Since the company owned much of the housing in the coal towns, dismissed miners (particularly those with families) soon felt pressure to move and seek employment elsewhere in Romania. Using this threat, Bujoiu argued, would help remove the "agitators" from the workforce.

Further measures envisaged in the report emphasized "the rational use of unproductive workers, the elimination of the useless, undesirable and unskillful" — connecting the disciplinary aspects of the dismissals to the general improvement of the workforce. Bujoiu argued that dismissals would be extensive (and thus an even more efficient deterrent) as the companies should shift to "frontal exploitation faces," further concentrating the mine and thus requiring

¹¹¹ "Tratatavele pentru noul contract colectiv s-au încheiat cu succes," *Minerul*, January 1, 1930, 1.

¹¹² Baron, *Cărbune și Societate*, 305

¹¹³ Baron, *Cărbune și Societate*, 191



a smaller labor force. Finally, he argued for continued mechanization: “let us not allow a man to do what a machine can.”¹¹⁴ In carrying out these proposals in the 1930s, Bujoiu successfully stifled labor agitation. The company continued to provide education, housing, and subsidized goods to complying workers and “reliable” labor union members, while dismissing agitators — even while denying any such deeds.¹¹⁵ In this light, the 1929 strike provided a context in which labor in the Jiu Valley was *de*-radicalized for over a decade, as miners were reluctant to risk their standard of living by using their unions to press political points. This conclusion is the antithesis of the Communist myth of Lupeni ’29.

Conclusion

For the Romanian Communist Party, the 1929 Lupeni action demonstrated that the miners were radicalized and led by Communists, reflecting wider labor activism across the country.¹¹⁶ The Lupeni strike of 1929 made for good cinema — sufficiently so that *Lupeni 29* was followed by the 1966 *Golgota* (focusing on the widows of miners from the strike), and in 1981 by *O lume fără cer* (*A World Without Sky*), which reused footage from both. But the strike was not revolutionary, nor was it emblematic of labor organization during the interwar period. Politics were at the core of the strike only inasmuch as the miners had lost faith in the PNT to deliver on its electoral promises. This was not revolutionary communism, but frustrated anticipation that the ruling government was supposed to be on the side of workers. The Lupeni strike resulted from a coal industry in crisis and from unions that fractured in response — leading to two years of unrest and inter-union street brawls. When the new PNT government sought to put an end to the heavy use of the gendarmerie and army in support of the coal companies in the Jiu Valley in 1928, this meant that local state agents could not forcibly stop a union chapter from launching independent action — and turning on other miners in the process.

In fact, the strike of 1929 demonstrated to a generation of Jiu miners the futility of revolutionary politics and led to the reunification of the labor movement in the Jiu Valley. On the one hand, there seemed to be less need to strike: with the support of Bujoiu, the UMIMR unions could secure the miners’ core demands in their collective contracts. This did not stop the ongoing dismissal of miners, but the miners’ capacity to strike had diminished. Bujoiu’s policies to identify and dismiss labor agitators were broadly successful, and the remaining miners were well aware of the economic crisis of the Great Depression and the precarity of

¹¹⁴ Buttu, “Raționalizarea în minele de cărbuni,” 33-35.

¹¹⁵ SJANH, Fond 255, SPC, Folder 1/1931, f.10, 33.

¹¹⁶ On both points, see A. Simion, “Din luptele greviste ale muncitorilor mineri (1924-1929),” *Studii: Revista de Istorie*: no. 18:4 (1965): 856 and 867-868.

their situation. In addition, the PNT's fall from power in 1931 saw a succession of regimes that were inimical to organized labor, increasing the risks of industrial actions. At the same time, the Lupeni strike had been widely reported in the national press and garnered sufficient symbolic importance to remain relevant throughout the 1930s. It was deployed in various contexts, ranging from the Communist menace to the oligarchic nature of the Romanian state. As a result, successive state arbiters sought to ensure good collective contracts for the workers and, when necessary, pressured the companies for leniency in their policies to prevent a renewed political scandal.

What fresh perspectives on the interwar period does a re-examination of the 1929 Lupeni strike through the lens of labor history offer? Such local case studies are a way to reframe the understanding of how the Romanian political system functioned on the ground, of how it interacted with industrial concerns and of the degree of autonomy, it allowed for workers. The wider context of the events of 1929 emphasizes how successive regimes in Bucharest enacted policies of economic modernization and intervened in the national economy to achieve them. The Jiu Valley was important in providing high-grade coal for the CFR. Rather than relying on market mechanisms to ensure a steady flow of coal, the state resorted to frequent interventions to ensure that inputs like transportation and labor and outputs such as prices served the state's policies. This drew Bucharest into local disputes: the miners sought to organize and negotiate as the labor demand varied (whether due to waxing and waning CFR purchases or due to mechanization). For the companies, ensuring that they hired *the optimal number of miners* and kept the most skilled was difficult. When the miners struck in response, the state was willing to intervene through the armed gendarmerie or the military. But this did not solve the problem of labor militancy in the Jiu Valley; if Bujoiu was able as a company official to suppress labor activism in the 1930s, it would return during the Second World War, in the immediate post-war period, in 1977, and perhaps most famously in the *mineriade*¹¹⁷.

As Adrian Grama points out, the Romanian national economy of the 1930s turned inwards, as the Romanian state became the main buyer for the output of several industries which had previously operated on international markets. In this context, he highlights the 1930s as a period of increased state intervention in managing labor activism through collective contracts, through the state's legal right to be the arbiter of negotiations between unions and employers, and through

¹¹⁷The *mineriade* were a series of six violent protests in which miners from the Jiu Valley marched on Bucharest between January 1990 and February 1999. The first three of these protests, including the most infamous in June 1990, were at the behest of the leadership of the ruling *Frontul Salvării Naționale* (National Salvation Front, or FSN). During the 1990 *mineriade*, Jiu Valley miners (and other workers in smaller numbers) were brought to the capital to suppress anti-government protesters. The later *mineriade* were against the ruling government.



the state's ability to put pressure on both through its outsized role as the primary employer. Ultimately, Grama argues, the labor legislation of the 1920s, in concert with the economic nationalism and import substitution of the 1930s, resulted in quiescent unions, relatively low labor costs, and social welfare legislation.¹¹⁸ The economic nationalism of the Romanian state in the 1930s, however, continued certain policies that had been previously used in Transylvania to shift local industry, at least partially, into ethnic Romanian hands: using the economic clout of the state as the main buyer and legislator to leverage ownership, labor relations and local politics.¹¹⁹ In this sense, the labor militancy of the Jiu miners during the 1920s highlights how the Romanian state developed its ability to intervene in the economy and the labor market, whether through legislation, market pressure (as an economic actor) or the monopoly of legitimate violence, applied through the use of emergency legislation, the gendarmerie and the military. A comparative approach to labor action in Transylvania and the rest of Greater Romania during the 1920s and 1930s could give us a better perspective both on the ability of the Romanian state to curtail labor unrest as well as on the reasons behind the unions' willingness to cooperate.

Examining the interwar Jiu Valley also emphasizes the limits of interwar Romanian democracy. The Romanian state imposed a nine-year state of emergency to regulate labor in the Jiu region, from 1920 to 1929. Though the PNTȚ government lifted this exceptional state, it reimposed it after only ten months — long before the dictatorships of Carol II or Ion Antonescu. The state took a dominant role in managing labor relations in the Jiu Valley to ensure coal production, maintaining an equilibrium in which most labor activity was monitored — sometimes accepted, and occasionally violently suppressed. Local state agents relied on the availability of gendarmes and military personnel to enact this strategy, and strike activity repeatedly ended with interventions by the army and verdicts handed down by military courts. If industrial workers were a small portion of the population — eight percent, clustered in cities and industrial areas — the state's actions are still striking, suggesting that labor history provides three important insights into the interwar period.¹²⁰ First, Romanian political parties envisioned a modernizing Romanian state, albeit with differences in achieving

¹¹⁸ Adrian Grama, "The Cost of Juridification: Lineages of Cheap Labor in Twentieth Century Romania," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 17:3 (Sept. 2020), 32-39.

¹¹⁹ See for instance, Anca Maria Glont, „*Nihil Sine Carbo*: Politics, Labor, and the Coal Industry in the Towns of the Jiu Valley, 1850–1999” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015), 145-202; Anders E. B. Blomqvist, “Economic Nationalizing in the Ethnic Borderlands of Hungary and Romania: Inclusion, Exclusion and Annihilation in Szatmár/ Satu Mare 1867-1944” (PhD diss, Stockholm University, 2014), 244-273.

¹²⁰ Sorin Radu, “‘Peasant Democracy’ or What it was Like to Practice Politics in Countryside Romania between the Two World Wars,” in *Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania: Perceptions, Mentalities, Propaganda*, Sorin Radu and Oliver Jens Schmitt eds. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 39.

this goal and in deciding which sectors should be predominant. Where did the ruling parties intervene, and why? In Jiu, the state's usual role was to suppress labor unrest — but a larger, comparative viewpoint would be revealing. Second, in what forms did this intervention take place? The Jiu valley case highlights that the role of state agents in the provinces was different from what political history might suggest — that, in addition to tariffs and state contracts, the state used its monopoly of violence whenever convenient. But the state could also be flexible — if the National Liberals preferred “yellow” unions that embraced Romanian nationalism, their practical actions in the Jiu Valley contradicted the primacy of ethnicity stated in their party platform. In other words, labor history helps to explore how state policy was undertaken “on the ground.” Finally, it underscores that in pursuing modernization, the ministries in Bucharest and the local state agents in Jiu repeatedly suspended or undermined civil rights — for example, by sending the accused strikers to be tried by military tribunals.

Rezumat

Articolul analizează greva de la Lupeni din 1929. În timp ce istoriografia din epoca comunistă a exaltat greva ca fiind o acțiune politică condusă de membrii de partid, greva a fost atipică pentru organizarea locală a muncii. Plasând greva în contextul mai larg al anilor 1920-1931, articolul urmărește interacțiunea dintre sindicatele locale organizate, companiile de cărbune din Valea Jiului și agenții statului, atât la nivel local, cât și la București. În perioada de după 1918, sindicatele au făcut presiuni pentru ca minerii să primească compensații rezonabile; având în vedere cererea de cărbune a statului și nevoia de forță de muncă a companiilor, acest lucru a favorizat inițial un compromis. Statul român a fost dispus să tolereze sindicatele locale conduse de social-democrați, în timp ce folosea represiunea - inclusiv armata - pentru a suprima grevele și a asigura o aprovizionare neîntreruptă cu cărbune. Cu toate acestea, schimbările pe piață și în producția de cărbune au redus nevoia de muncitori mineri, ceea ce a dus la fragmentarea sindicatelor locale. În 1929, combinația dintre un regim relativ liberal, companiile de cărbune care căutau să-și raționalizeze forța de muncă și un grup marginal radicalizat a dus la grevă. Deși respinge reprezentările grevei în istoriografia de dinainte de 1989, textul susține că istoria muncii ajută la dezvăluirea limitelor democrației românești interbelice în moduri în care abordările politice și juridice nu o pot face.

Cuvinte-cheie: organizarea muncii, mineri, Valea Jiului, intervenția statului, social-democrați

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