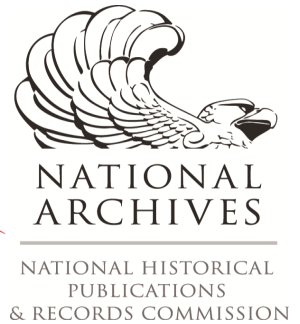


**Title:** Coal Creek and Prison Labor Reform

**Creator:** Staff at Tennessee State Library & Archives



## Standard

**US. 11:** Explain the rise of the labor movement, union tactics (e.g., strikes), the role of leaders (e.g., Eugene Debs and Samuel Gompers), the unjust use of prison labor (e.g., **Coal Creek labor saga**), and the responses of management and government.

## Materials

- Primary source
- Graphic organizer

## Primary Sources

1. Report and illustrations on “The Insurrection in Tenn.”: <https://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll18/id/2949/rec/1>

## Suggested Background Reading for Teachers:

- “Labor” by Joseph Garrison and James Jones, Jr. (Tennessee Encyclopedia): <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/labor/>
- “Convict Lease Wars” by James Jones, Jr. (Tennessee Encyclopedia): <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/convict-lease-wars/>

## Activity Instructions:

- This activity can serve as an introduction to a larger lesson/discussion of the Coal Creek labor saga and its place in the larger labor reform movement of the last nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
- Provide each student with a copy of the graphic organizer and excerpted portion of the *Harper’s Weekly* article “The Insurrection in Tenn.”
- Give the students time to read the article excerpts and complete the questions on the graphic organizer. Then have them come together either in small groups or as a whole class to discuss their answers.

Based on the text you read, explain what the convict leasing system was below.

<p>What group(s) of people were opposed to the convict leasing system? Why were they opposed to it?</p>	<p>What group(s) of people were in support of the convict leasing system? Why were they in support of it?</p>
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This article from *Harper's Weekly* discusses part of what would become known as the Coal Creek Labor Saga or the Coal Creek War, a violent dispute over the use of convict leasing that took place in the mountains of East Tennessee. **In approximately 25 words, describe the conflict between the coal miners and the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company.**





GOVERNOR JOHN P. BUCHANAN, OF TENNESSEE.

## THE INSURRECTION IN TENNESSEE.

It has been customary for a long time in Tennessee, as it has been also in some other States, to lease the State convicts out to private corporations and contractors. These lessees have used the convicts in coal and iron mines, in stone and marble quarries, and in grading railways. Pretty nearly wherever convicts have been put to such use the custom has been opposed by those interested in prison reform and more humane prison management. But the most vigorous and influential opposition has come from those free laborers with whom the convicts were brought into competition. These charged, and probably with entire truth, that the use of convicts as miners reduced the rate of wages that free miners could earn, and that in dull times the competition of convict labor prevented other miners from having the opportunity to make a living.

Last summer, in the section of the Tennessee mountains where the mines are controlled by the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company, there were serious labor troubles, and one of the most important questions at issue was whether convicts should be used in the mines. At that time there were collisions between the guards of the convicts and the striking miners. Last November the miners expressed their disapproval of what they regarded as a breach of faith by burning a stockade in which convicts were kept at Oliver Springs. Since then there has been a feeling of great uncertainty in the mining regions, and the managers of the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company have been kept in a continual state of anxiety.

Meantime the miners about Tracy City, Oliver Springs, Coal Creek, Inman, and Briceville were forming a secret organization to effectually test the power of the State in this matter of working convicts in the mines. How generally this organization was joined is not known, but it is likely that the large majority of all working in the mines except convicts became members.

Such preparations have been going on since last November, and the miners became very confident in their ability to defeat the guards, send the convicts out of the region, and overawe the Governor of the State. It has been confidently stated by the leaders of the miners that they did not expect Governor Buchanan would take vigorous action to suppress any insurrection they might raise, because they felt sure of his sympathy with their grievances. The Governor has unquestionably been outspoken in his opposition to the convict lease system. Probably the majority of the people in the State are also opposed to it. But to overthrow it by revolution is another matter.

On Saturday morning, August 13th, the miners at Tracy City held a mass-meeting and sent a committee to see the superintendent of the mines there to ask assurances that the free laborers should be given all the work they could do, independent of whether the convicts were employed or not. The superintendent asked until Monday, so that he might get orders from his superior officers. The committee so reported to the meeting. It was decided, however, not to wait, but, so soon as the convicts had entered the mines, to capture the stockade. Accordingly, at half past eight, four hundred men entered the stockade, and after clearing it of everything of value, set it afire, and it quickly burned to the ground. Then the mob went to the mines, where the prisoners were ordered out, and together with the guards put on a railway train. The engine of the train was instructed to take the train to Nashville. There were nearly four hundred convicts and twenty-five guards. Before the train arrived at Cowan the convicts cut the train, and some of them escaped. The guards fired upon the fleeing prisoners, and one was killed and one wounded. With about three hundred and sixty prisoners the train arrived in Cowan, where the prisoners were entirely under control. Later they were taken to Nashville.

The next day, Sunday, was one of great uneasiness in the State, as from previous experience the people did not have confidence in Governor Buchanan's capacity to act promptly and wisely in a serious emergency. About all that was done that day was to order an additional warden and guards to re-enforce the stockade at Inman, where was another body of convicts. But these extra guards never reached Inman. At eight o'clock Monday morning a body of miners captured the train upon which the warden and guards were, and forced them to return to Nashville. Having sent back the extra guards, the miners marched on the stockade and captured the sixty-five guards and three hundred convicts. These were loaded in coke-cars and sent to Victoria to await transportation to Nashville. They did not

burn the stockade, for fear that it might set fire to the railroad bridge, but tore down the building instead. The Governor is said to have been greatly disturbed at this fresh outbreak, which appears to have been anticipated by every other citizen in Tennessee. He called a meeting of the State Board of Prison Inspectors, and telegraphed to the sheriff of Marion County to know whether assistance was needed to preserve the peace. The Board of Prison Inspectors discussed the situation, and adjourned to see whether the Attorney-General by the next day could not discover some legal pretext under which the lease of convicts might be cancelled. The Governor recommended the cancellation of the lease without delay.

Before Monday night had come Governor Buchanan appears to have realized that the miners were in insurrection against the State authority. He apprehended a similar movement against Oliver Springs, and without waiting for official information, he telegraphed to the sheriff to summon a posse and protect the stockade, and also ordered military companies from Knoxville and Chattanooga to go to the sheriff's assistance. The sheriff, who was in sympathy with the miners, failed to obey the Governor's order, and the troops on the march to Oliver Springs were intercepted. The defences there consisted of a block-house and about forty guards. Early Tuesday morning the miners appeared in force before the stockade and demanded its surrender. "Come and take us!" was the response of Superintendent Farris. Fire was at once opened. Though the attacking force was thirty to one, the guards in the block-house returned the fire gallantly and with effect. Then the miners approached with a flag of truce. There was a parley, and Superintendent Farris surrendered. He took the convicts out, and marched to Clinton, the nearest railway station.

Meantime all eyes in Tennessee were turned on Coal Creek, where there was another stockade, and where Colonel Kellar Anderson had State soldiers to the number of one hundred and fifty encamped in a fortified position. The feeling was general that Colonel Anderson was too good a soldier to surrender to a mob on any terms whatever. There was a great desire on the part of all the militia-men of the State to hasten to the succor of this gallant officer and the men of his command. Troops from all near-by places were ordered to concentrate at Knoxville, under the command of Brigadier-General S. T. Carnes, of the Tennessee National Guard. All day Wednesday and Wednesday night the miners were gathering about Coal Creek. While these operations were in progress the rioters had destroyed the telegraph lines, and the little garrison at Fort Anderson, as the stockade has since been called, was entirely cut off from communication with the outside world. The first assault of the miners was made after repeated warnings. So severe was the return fire that the miners retired, though they carried several dead and wounded with them. Soon another attack followed, and there were casualties on both sides but the result was the same. Then there was a third attack, with a like result. This time a squad of miners got separated from the main body, and in a scuffle from the fort they were captured. Then there was a pause. A flag of truce was raised and a parley ensued. The miners said that they were ready for a compromise, and that if Colonel Anderson would bring the prisoners in person to the railway station and speak to the people, everything might be amicably adjusted. They promised him safe escort. Then Colonel Anderson, who up to this time had been the only man in Tennessee in the field who had stood up with uncompromising faithfulness and loyalty in favor of the law, mounted the ramparts and told the men that though he had wept over their grievances, he could make no compromise with them. "I will never surrender," he concluded. "I will make no compromise; but if you think I can help you, I will go with you."

Then, unarmed, he left the stockade alone with the prisoners, and accompanied the mob to the railway station. There he began a speech to the people, and pleaded with them to respect the law. The miners listened in silence and were very quiet. They were evidently waiting for something to happen. There was a burly ruffian approaching Colonel Anderson from behind. When he reached within arm's length of the soldier he shoved the muzzle of a revolver against Colonel Anderson's temple and shouted: "Surrender! Surrender, or I'll blow your brains out!"

Colonel Anderson slowly turned, lifted his eyes to the miner's, and dropped them in contempt. He drew back a step and extended his arm at full length. "Shoot, you d—d coward!" he said. "Shoot!"

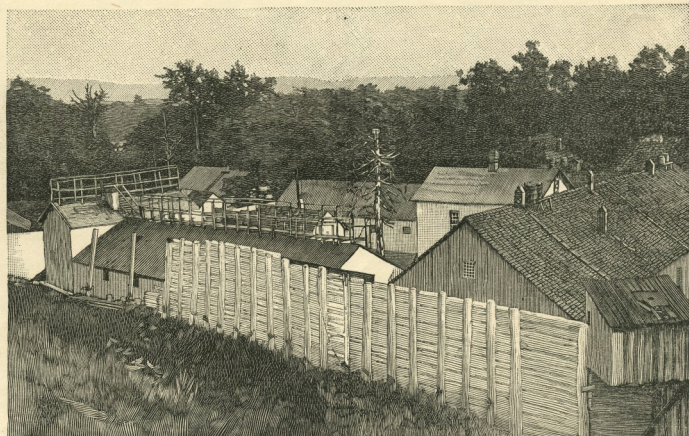
The ruffian with the pistol and the treacherous rioters who had with false promises enticed the gallant soldier from his command were awed. The pistol fell, and no shot was fired. It was evident even to these lawless and excited men that Colonel Anderson would sacrifice his life rather than betray his trust.

Two further attacks were made on the fort even after Colonel Anderson was in the hands of the mob. Lieutenant Fyffe, now in command, met the attacking force with stern resistance. Now they tried further intimidation on Colonel Anderson, and told him time and time again that he would be lynched unless he wrote an order to the garrison to surrender. They were always met with the same response, that they could do their worst, but that he would never surrender. He only made one request, and that was that when they got ready to kill him they would shoot him, as was befitting a soldier, and not hang him. His unflinching courage during the long weary hours in which he was in captivity alone saved his life. Had he weakened for one moment, probably that moment would have been his last.

While these exciting scenes were being enacted at Coal Creek, General Carnes was moving with his regiment on that place. He had been warned that the railroad tracks had dynamite mines beneath them, and his whole command would be destroyed by an explosion. But he went nevertheless. A few miles from Coal Creek he disembarked, and moved in line of battle against the village, which he found practically unoccupied. The insurrectionists were in the hills. He had heard of Colonel Anderson's capture through treachery, and demanded that he be brought into his lines. The insurrectionists asked time to consider whether to obey this order or not. General Carnes told them to take time, but also to be in a hurry. After several hours the general was informed that Colonel Anderson would not be released, but would be held as a hostage. General Carnes at once determined to defeat the rioters by strategy. He sent out squads of soldiers to arrest all the men that could be found. In a short while more than a hundred miners and their friends had been captured, and the general informed the miners who held Colonel Anderson that these prisoners would be held as hostages to guarantee Anderson's safety. The miners, recognizing that they had been outwitted, now released Colonel Anderson, and obeying the order of General Carnes, began to disperse. While these things were happening, Lieutenant Patterson, of Memphis, with a band of volunteers, made a rush across the defile to the stockade, and gained admission, so that now that garrison was considerably strengthened.

After General Carnes had left Knoxville for Coal Creek, another train of volunteers also left there to go to the relief of Colonel Anderson. These were under the command of Major D. A. Carpenter, and it was decided that they should leave the train at Offutt and go across Walden's Ridge by a circuitous route, so as to reach Fort Anderson from the point farthest removed from Coal Creek. Just as they started down the mountain on the north side towards Fort Anderson, three men in uniform appeared and offered to guide the little army. Without suspicion, these guides were followed into a well-prepared ambuscade. At a quarter of a mile from the fort, where the stars and stripes were flying in full view, the firing began from behind great ledges of sandstone on a spur of the ridge overlooking the valley where the men were marching. The fire was returned, but three men fell killed and four wounded. The insurrectionists seemed to rise from the ground and to shoot from behind every rock and tree in sight. Major Carpenter ordered a retreat, and his little army made its way back to Offutt. There they learned that General Carnes was master of the situation in Coal Creek.

When General Carnes had released Colonel Anderson and succored the gallant soldiers of that brave officer's command, he set about restoring order in Coal Creek and the region thereabout. He began by arresting all the rioters he could find. One of the first men arrested was Bud Lindsay, the ruffianly desperado who had held the pistol to Colonel Anderson's head. Lindsay was the terror of the mining region, and his arrest had a most excellent effect. It was soon made manifest that these captured men would be treated as criminals and not as prisoners of war. Then there was consternation among the miners, and great numbers of them tried to escape out of the State into Kentucky and West Virginia. A large number of them seized an engine belonging to the East Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia Railroad, and used it as a means to get out of Tennessee. After a week of turmoil and open rebellion in the fastnesses of the Tennessee mountains, law and order was restored.



THE STOCKADE AT INMAN, TENNESSEE, WHERE THE CONVICTS WERE LIBERATED, SHOWING THE BREACH IN THE FENCE.—FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY A. W. JUD.



**Transcription** of excerpts from the "The Insurrection in Tennessee," *Harper's Weekly* Vol. 36,  
Issue 1862 (August 27, 1892)

It has been customary for a long time in Tennessee, as it has been also in some other States, to lease the State convicts out to private corporations and contractors. These lessees have used the convicts in coal and iron mines, in stone and marble quarries, and in grading railways. Pretty nearly wherever convicts have been put to such use the custom has been opposed by those interested in prison reform and more humane prison management. But the most vigorous and influential opposition has come from those free laborers with whom the convicts were brought into competition. These charged, and probably with entire truth, that the use of convicts as miners reduced the rate of wages that free miners could earn, and that in dull times the competition of convict labor prevented other miners from having the opportunity to make a living.

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