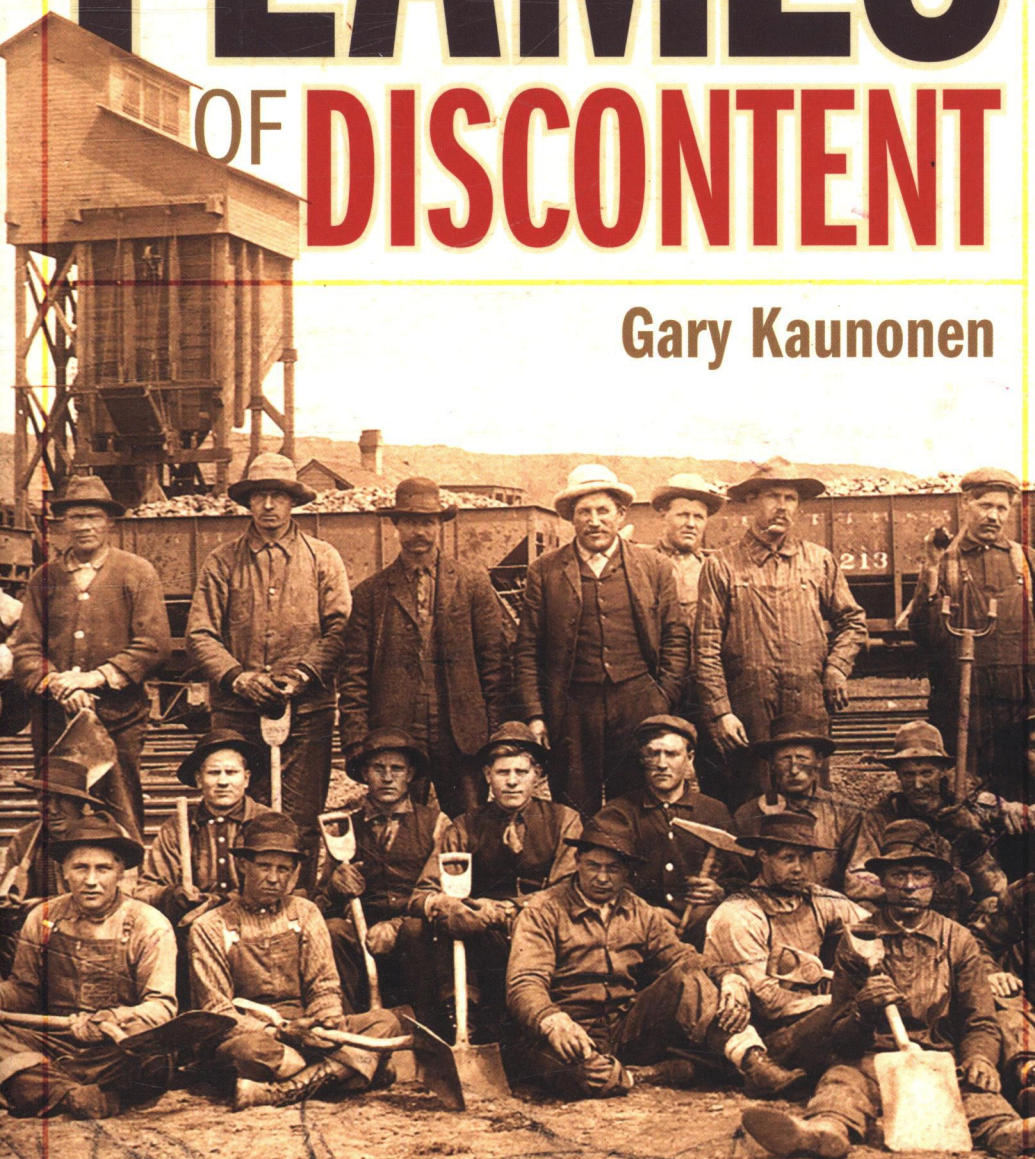


The 1916 Minnesota Iron Ore Strike

# FLAMES OF DISCONTENT

Gary Kaunonen





**"*Flames of Discontent* breaks significant ground in exploring one of the most important strikes in Minnesota history. Gary Kaunonen weaves his primary sources together so effectively that his readers are transported to 1916 and feel that we are listening in person to workers' meetings, picket lines, and tavern debates."**

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Aaron Brown, host of the Great Northern Radio Show

On June 2, 1916, forty mostly immigrant mineworkers in Aurora, Minnesota, walked off the job—a labor disturbance that mushroomed into one of the most contentious battles between organized labor and management in the early twentieth century. Drawing on previously untapped accounts from immigrant press newspapers, company letters, personal journals, and oral histories, historian Gary Kaunonen gives voice to the strike's organizers and working-class participants. *Flames of Discontent* tells the story of what this pivotal moment meant for workers and immigrants, and mining and labor relations, in Minnesota and beyond.

**Gary Kaunonen** is an independent historian of labor and immigration and a documentary filmmaker based in International Falls, Minnesota. He is author of three books, including the award-winning *Challenge Accepted: A Finnish Immigrant Response to Industrial America in Michigan's Copper Country*.

\$24.95

ISBN 978-1-5179-0268-1

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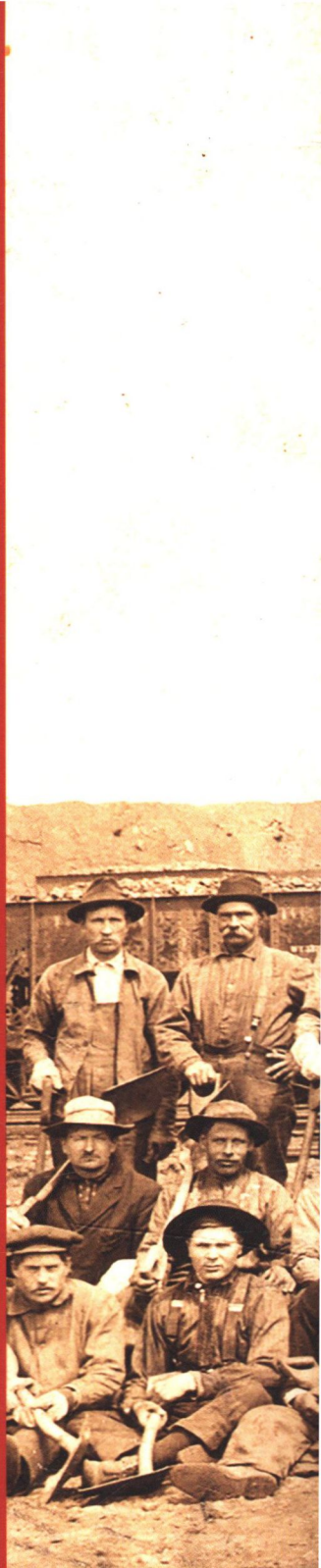
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University of Minnesota Press  
Printed in U.S.A.

Cover design by Jeenee Lee

Cover photograph courtesy

Immigration History Research Center  
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Kaunonen

# FLAMES OF DISCONTENT

## The 1916 Minnesota Iron Strike



MINNESOTA

# FLAMES OF DISCONTENT



THE 1916 MINNESOTA  
IRON ORE STRIKE

Gary Kaunonen

MINNE  
SOTA

University of Minnesota Press  
MINNEAPOLIS LONDON

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Published by the University of Minnesota Press  
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290  
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520  
<http://www.upress.umn.edu>

ISBN 978-1-5179-0267-4 (hc)  
ISBN 978-1-5179-0268-1 (pb)

A Cataloging-in-Publication record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

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# **FLAMES OF DISCONTENT**



To Grandma V







## PREFACE

### Kitchen Table Politics

AUGUST 2, 2016, WAS MY GRANDMA VIENA'S ONE HUNDREDTH BIRTHDAY. As I began thinking about this milestone, it dawned on me, about halfway through the writing of this book, that she was born in 1916—admittedly, I was never very good at math. Her family lived in the shadows of the Vermilion and Mesabi iron ranges, tucked down into the swampy, subsistence farming–based valley of the Embarrass River in northeastern Minnesota. The family homestead was located within the boundaries of Waasa Township (named for a province in Finland), which was settled by Finnish immigrants, many of whom were refugees from former industrial lives on the Mesabi and Vermilion iron ranges. Embarrass was the closest thing to a town by her home, and it had an auxiliary local of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the union that organized thousands of workers on the ranges to incite the massive 1916 strike. In a way, my Grandma Viena was born into this struggle—into a family eking out an existence on a subsistence farm during one of Minnesota's most contentious labor upheavals, which was occurring less than ten miles from her home.

She went to high school in Aurora during the Great Depression, daily passing the location where the 1916 strike began. Later, on November 23, 1935, she married a Finnish immigrant named Niilo Kaunonen and settled closer to Embarrass proper. She worked on the family farm, for the local cooperative, and at the Cluett-Peabody Arrow Shirt factory in Virginia. But that little farmhouse surrounded by animal barns, a summer kitchen, a warehouse, hay fields, and, of course, a sauna was her home for decades. She and Niilo, who later Americanized his name to Neal, had made a great but arduous life for themselves and their two

children. Her husband was a jack-of-all-trades: he labored on the farm and supplemented the family's income by logging, working on area railroads, and eventually by making his way into the mines. Neal worked for twenty years at the Reserve Mining Company, a short drive from the family farm. Although they both worked outside jobs to support the family and farm, that swampy land tucked down into the Embarrass River valley meant the world to them.

As a kid, I began spending time on that homestead during summers, weekends, and holidays. It was a magical place, though I did not understand how significant it was at that time. Under the house's clapboard siding were the original hand-hewn logs of an immigrant homestead. The warehouse contained the clothes and artifacts of immigrant journeys to America from Finland, and the fields I ran through as a boy were cut by hand out of the dense forests of northern Minnesota. On cold, still nights, the clanging of heavy industrial machines run by unionized mine workers could be heard in the distance. The entire homestead was a museum to my grandparents' determined efforts to make a better life for themselves and their children and grandchildren.

I would learn about and come to understand this struggle as I grew older, especially on Saturday nights in the sauna. I can close my eyes now and remember smoke pouring from the sauna's chimney and the smell of birch wood stoking the fires. Oftentimes, relatives and friends would come over and sauna became a multifamily affair. As a young kid, I took sauna with my dad and younger brother. When I was feeling brave, I would jump from my giant metal wash bucket of tepid, soapy water, scurry up the three steps to the top flight of the tiered benches, sit for a second, feel the immense heat wrap around me, and then head for cover in my bucket of lukewarm water, which sat on the sauna's cool concrete floor.

In that sauna, I learned a valuable rudimentary lesson regarding thermodynamics—hot air rises, cold air sinks—but it was after sauna, when I was supposed to be in bed, that I learned a lot about life. For the adults, time after a sauna was spent sitting around the kitchen table telling stories, discussing current events, and talking politics. I desperately wanted to be a part of these discussions. From my bed, I would quietly dig myself out from under the covers and lie down in front of the

heat-exchange register, which looked down onto the kitchen table below. There, in secret, I became a part of those conversations, and it was there that I began to understand what it meant to be “working-class.”

Although I do not remember specifics, I do remember that these after-sauna political deliberations were not about Marx, the Industrial Workers of the World, or industrial revolution per se—those were conversations had a couple of generations before—but there were conversations about income inequality, the “bosses,” and crooked politicians, along with similarly impassioned discussions about the Minnesota Twins, hunting, and fishing. Later, after Grandpa Neal had died, I remember Paul Wellstone’s picture hung with pride, attached by magnets, to Grandma’s small refrigerator. That immigrant homestead, and the working-class heroes who lived there, were an introduction to class consciousness that was palpable, raw, and unfiltered. It was working-class politics from working-class people. This emerging perspective was authentic, it was real, and it began to shape the way that I saw the world.

After high school, I went to college, played baseball, dropped out, worked several industrial and service industry jobs (I was escorted off company property from one job at a factory in Mankato after I was found to have passed along a pro-labor political cartoon), and then went back to school. My interest in “labor history” was piqued at Minnesota State University–Mankato when I began reading about the generation of Finnish immigrants who had come before Viena and Neal and organized the Finnish Socialist Federation. I read Marx, the anarchist Peter Kropotkin, and works by organizers of the Industrial Workers of the World. In most cases, these readings were not assigned in classes, but I read them to understand the roots of those kitchen-table political discussions in Embarrass.

After reading Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* and presenting a controversial interpretation of the paradox of Marxist scholars administering very hierarchical (some might argue exploitative) academic programs during a faculty–student meeting, I found myself in the office of a professor who bluntly asked me, “Where did you get your Marx from?” I paused, not too long, and replied, “From my grandparents.” (In addition to Viena and Neal’s class consciousness, my mother’s side of the family had known Gus Hall, longtime former General Secretary of the

Communist Party–USA.) I was about to launch into an explanation of how I became interested in studies of the working class via my relatives when the professor interrupted and said, “You should talk to [the department head]. He has used Marx in his literary analysis and you should begin to understand Marx in terms of the academy.” My mind began to drift at that point because I was certain that I had little interest in academic readings of Marx.

It was, instead, the real, concrete events and the people who had lived through them that interested me. British working-class historian E. P. Thompson described this idea as “bottom-up history” or “history from below.”<sup>1</sup> In the midst of my research and writing on the 1916 strike, I began to think about what had brought me to this point. Reflecting on the warm memories of those working-class voices talking politics around a kitchen table, I began to understand that the historical project to capture and chronicle the voices of our working-class past began with Grandma Viena and others in Embarrass—in a little immigrant homestead surrounded by an amazing past. Grandma Viena died on December 17, 2016, her one hundred years a testament to an extraordinary life, lived exceptionally well.



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# INTRODUCTION

## Workers' Rights, Immigrant Voices

ON JUNE 2, 1916, FORTY MOSTLY IMMIGRANT MINE WORKERS FROM THE St. James Mine in Aurora, Minnesota, walked off the job. This seemingly small labor disturbance would mushroom into one of the region's, if not the nation's, most contentious and significant battles between organized labor and management in the early twentieth century. By mid-June, the forty disgruntled mine workers had turned into a hundred, then a thousand, and by July, ten to fifteen thousand mine workers on Minnesota's three iron ranges were idled. The strike had been waged against one of the most powerful and wealthiest corporations in the United States—the Oliver Iron Mining Company (OIMC, or “the Oliver”), a subsidiary of the United States Steel Corporation—as well as several independent mining operations. Unskilled, immigrant mine workers had brought billionaire J. P. Morgan's legacy corporation to an unwelcomed reckoning with organized labor. This stark reality was the truly remarkable feat of the strike, and a testament to the developing class consciousness of exploited immigrants, many of whom had been in the United States for less than a decade, working in and around the open pits and underground shafts of Minnesota's iron ranges.

The strikers' grievances—low wages, long hours, and abhorrent working conditions—were the standard complaints of many industrial workers who had previously engaged in labor disputes throughout the United States. More uncommon was the revolutionary industrial union the immigrant mine workers chose to represent them in this contentious clash between labor and management. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) rushed to the Minnesota iron ranges to rapidly organize the striking workforce. Agitating, organizing, and unifying the ranges'

multiethnic population in this David versus Goliath industrial battle was the anarchist-branded, somewhat infamous revolutionary industrial union known as “The Wobblies” to their members, and the “I.W.W.s” or “I Won’t Works” to mining companies and their industrial cohorts. The Oliver’s absolute control on the Minnesota iron ranges was all the more notable given the extreme repression meted out by company guards, police, and vigilantes before, during, and after the strike. Although their efforts were widely considered a defeat, when the dust had settled in September 1916, workers returned to the mines with the promise of a 10 percent pay increase and an eight-hour workday.

The strike was the third, and last, of three major industrial disputes in the Upper Midwest’s mining industry during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Unlike the 1907 Mesabi Iron Range Strike in Minnesota and the 1913–14 Copper Strike in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula—both led by the Western Federation of Miners (WFM)—the 1916 upheaval was administered by the Wobblies and can be understood as a radical extension of the WFM’s prior organizing efforts. Previous pitched battles between organized immigrant workers and management had brought labor relations to a tense stalemate, but the disgruntlement of northern Minnesota’s immigrant mine workers finally reached critical mass in the summer of 1916. The ranges would never be the same. The efforts of the Wobblies helped to lay the foundation for a sustained class consciousness in northern Minnesota and surrounding environs, especially among the region’s Finnish immigrant workers. The strike also saw labor conscious Finns’ onetime foil, strikebreaking South Slavic immigrants, joining forces with their immigrant fellow workers to create a wellspring of union sentiment across the ranges.

This immigrant solidarity, fostered before and during the 1916 strike, frustrated many in Minnesota, especially mining company managers. Craft and trades unions, such as those in the fold of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), balked at the IWW’s efforts to extend union membership to immigrant radicals and offered little help to such workers. Progressive politicians such as Hibbing, Minnesota, mayor Victor L. Power saw the IWW as an unorganized nuisance and attempted to steer striking workers toward affiliation with the AFL through the United Mine Workers of America. As the strike raged on