BAS 046 WFM Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The Western Federation of Miners, was organized in Butte at a convention beginning May 15, 1893. Violent confrontations between unionized workers, mine owners, and the state at Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, where five miners were shot and 600 others were arrested without bail or trial in 1892, was the driving force behind the WFM’s formation.

The Butte Miners’ Union had supported the strike in Idaho with thousands of dollars in contributions, some of it raised by the Butte Miners’ Union mortgaging its Butte buildings.

Fifteen regional and local mining unions from South Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Utah, and Colorado, represented by 40 individuals, came together in Butte to create the umbrella organization, the WFM. The Butte Miners’ Union became Local #1 of the WFM, and the organization was headquartered in Butte for its first years. In the late 1890s its offices were in the Owsley Block at Park and Main (later the Medical Arts Center, which burned down in 1973, and today the site of the new NorthWestern Energy headquarters building). Among the members of the WFM executive board in the late 1890s was James B. Furey, president of the Butte Miners’ Union, also sheriff of Silver Bow County in the early 1900s. He lived at 78 East Woolman Street.

Long-time WFM leaders including Charles Moyer and “Big Bill” Haywood fostered a radical philosophy within the organization, contributing to the formation of the Industrial Workers of the World in 1905. The WFM constitution’s preamble began with the words, “we hold that there is a class struggle in society and that this struggle is caused by economic conditions, and the class struggle will continue until the producer is recognized as the sole master of his product.” That’s perhaps not quite as radical as the IWW constitution, which says “The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life.”

From the start the WFM was involved in politics, and even fielded candidates on its own “Miners’ Ticket” occasionally. It fought hard and violently for the 8-hour day and other benefits for mine, mill, and smelter workers, and was involved in many major and minor confrontational strikes across the region.

In 1916 the WFM changed its name to the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers. In Butte after the Anaconda Road Massacre in 1920, the union had little power until the middle 1930s when it was revitalized and expanded across the United States and Canada.

It remained a radical organization, with close ties to the U.S. Communist Party, and the WFM was expelled from the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) in 1950 for refusing to expel communist leaders. Increasingly isolated in its radical policies, the WFM ultimately merged with the United Steelworkers of America in 1967.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.