

Labor History: The Battle of Blair Mountain

By Ed Leavy, SVFT Executive Union Representative

Quick: what is the largest armed rebellion in the United States since the Civil War? (No fair reading the title of the article.) Depending on one's age, most people would probably guess the riots of the late 1960's or the Los Angeles riot after the Rodney King verdict. In truth, by far the largest and most tragic rebellion occurred in 1921 in West Virginia, when 10,000 miners took up arms to fight for decent living and working conditions. They were opposed by local and state police, a private militia, and ultimately the Federal government. By the time the battle was over in ten days, over 100 people were dead.

In the first two decades of the 20th century, workers in the West Virginia coal mines lived in towns owned by the mining companies. This situation obliterated the distinction between the workers' private lives and their work lives. Exploitation was rampant; companies hired private security forces to police the towns and prevent union organizing. In addition, companies forced workers to sign contracts in which workers had to pledge not to join a union or forfeit both their job and their company housing.

Despite these obstacles, the United Mine Workers were able to organize the workers in the mines in the northern part of the state. The southern mine companies fought every attempt to unionize the mines; one company placed machine guns on the roofs to remind workers of the possible cost of joining the union. The problem came to a boil in Matewan. The company hired private security personnel, who were in fact little more than armed thugs, to evict workers who tried to organize. The company, Baldwin-Felts, had not bothered to get court authorization for the evictions, and the mayor and sheriff, Sheriff Hatfield, courageously confronted the thugs and told them they had to leave. Shots were fired, and nine people were killed. The State government sided with the company, and arrested Hatfield for murder. He was acquitted. He was then put on trial for allegedly dynamiting a non-union mine. As he walked with his wife to the courthouse, company security shot and killed him.

The incident sparked the uprising from the miners. Local authorities began indiscriminately arresting anyone in the area who was thought to have union sympathies, and every prison in the region was quickly filled. Among those arrested was Mother Jones. In response, approximately 13,000 miners took up arms and marched on two southern mines. They were met by a 2000 member militia hired by the companies. Battles broke out throughout the area. Company personnel was provided with Thompson machine guns, and had the advantage of Blair Mountain as a strong defensive position.

President Warren Harding sent troops and had Brigadier General Billy Mitchell set up a base for air operations. Initially, the miners were thrilled to see the presence of the military, believing that they were there to protect the marchers. They soon recognized that the government was siding with the company's interests. Reluctantly, the miners put down their weapons and returned home. Governor Morgan of West Virginia insisted that the union leaders be charged with treason, a nearly impossible charge to prove; all but one was acquitted. No one from the company side was arrested. Despite the acquittals, the labor movement was devastated by the financial cost. UMW nationally lost over 84% of its membership, and union membership in West Virginia went from half a million to a few hundred. Not until the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 did unions in the region begin to recover.

The story of the Battle of Blair Mountain brings home two points. One is the importance of the political process for workers. The actions of Warren Harding did damage to the lives of working people that were not undone until the election of Franklin Roosevelt. As we enter the election

season, we cannot underestimate the impact public officials have on our lives as working people. Secondly, the story reminds us of the necessity of having labor history taught in our schools. This very important moment in US history is now nearly forgotten. Students should know the courage workers have demonstrated, and have needed to demonstrate, to protect even basic rights.

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