Killing the Strikers

3 Texts from the "Land of the Free"

West Virginia's mine wars, 1920-1921

A short historical account and background of the often violent conflict between workers and employers in West Virginia's mines in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, compiled by the West Virginia State Archives.

On March 12, 1883, the first carload of coal was transported from Pocahontas in Tazewell County, Virginia, on the Norfolk and Western Railway. This new railroad opened a gateway to the untapped coalfields of southwestern West Virginia, precipitating a dramatic population increase. Virtually overnight, new towns were created as the region was transformed from an agricultural to industrial economy. With the lure of good wages and inexpensive housing, thousands of European immigrants rushed into southern West Virginia. In addition, a large number of African Americans migrated from the southern states. The McDowell County black population alone increased from 0.1 percent in 1880 to 30.7 percent in 1910.

Most of these new West Virginians soon became part of an economic system controlled by the coal industry. Miners worked in company mines with company tools and equipment, which they were required to lease. The rent for company housing and cost of items from the company store were deducted from their pay. The stores themselves charged over-inflated prices, since there was no alternative for purchasing goods. To ensure that miners spent their wages at the store, coal companies developed their own monetary system. Miners were paid by scrip, in the form of tokens, currency, or credit, which could be used only at the company store. Therefore, even when wages were increased, coal companies simply increased prices at the company store to balance what they lost in pay.

Miners were also denied their proper pay through a system known as cribbing. Workers were paid based on tons of coal mined. Each car brought from the mines supposedly held a specific amount of coal, such as 2,000 pounds. However, cars were altered to hold more coal than the specified amount, so miners would be paid for 2,000 pounds when they actually had brought in 2,500. In addition, workers were docked pay for slate and rock mixed in with the coal. Since docking was a judgment on the part of the checkweighman, miners were frequently cheated.

In addition to the poor economic conditions, safety in the mines was of great concern. West Virginia fell far behind other major coal-producing states in regulating mining conditions. Between 1890 and 1912,West Virginia had a higher mine death rate than any other state. West Virginia was the site of numerous dadly coal mining accidents, including the nation's worst coal disaster. On December 6, 1907, an explosion at a mine owned by the Fairmont Coal Company in Monongah, Marion County, killed 361. One historian has suggested that during World

War I, a U.S. soldier had a better statistical chance of surviving in battle than did a West Virginian working in the coal mines.

In response to poor conditions and low wages in the late 1800s, workers in most industries developed unions. Strikes generally focused on a specific problem, lasted short periods of time, and were confined to small areas. During the 1870s and 1880s, there were several attempts to combine local coal mining unions into a national organization. After several unsuccessful efforts, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) was formed in Columbus, Ohio, in 1890. In its first ten years, the UMWA successfully organized miners in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Attempts to organize West Virginia failed in 1892, 1894, 1895, and 1897.

In 1902, the UMWA finally achieved some recognition in the Kanawha-New River Coalfield, its first success in West Virginia. Following the union successes, coal operators had formed the Kanawha County Coal Operators Association in 1903, the first such organization in the state. It hired private detectives from the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency in Bluefield as mine guards to harass union organizers. Due to these threats, the UMWA discouraged organizers from working in southern West Virginia.

By 1912, the union had lost control of much of the Kanawha- New River Coalfield. That year, UMWA miners on Paint Creek in Kanawha County demanded wages equal to those of other area mines. The operators rejected the wage increase and miners walked off the job on April 18, beginning one of the most violent strikes in the nation's history. Miners along nearby Cabin Creek, having previously lost their union, joined the Paint Creek strikers and demanded:

-the right to organize

-recognition of their constitutional rights to free speech and assembly

-an end to blacklisting union organizers

-alternatives to company stores

-an end to the practice of using mine guards

-prohibition of cribbing

-installation of scales at all mines for accurately weighing coal

-unions be allowed to hire their own checkweighmen to make sure the companies' checkweighmen were not cheating the miners.

When the strike began, operators brought in mine guards from the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency to evict miners and their families from company houses. The evicted miners set up tent colonies and lived in other makeshift housing. The mine guards' primary responsibility was to break the strike by making the lives of the miners as uncomfortable as possible.

As the intimidation by mine guards increased, national labor leaders, including Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, began arriving on the scene. Jones, a native of Ireland, was already a major force in the American labor movement before first coming to West Virginia during the 1897 strikes. Although she reported the year of her birth as 1830, recent research indicates she was probably born in 1845. As a leader of the UMWA's efforts to organize the state, Jones became known for her fiery (and often obscene) verbal attacks on coal operators and politicians.

Not only did the UMWA send speechmakers, it also contributed large amounts of weapons and ammunition. On September 2, Governor William E. Glasscock imposed martial law, dispatching 1,200 state militia to disarm both the miners and mine guards. Over the course of the strike, Glasscock sent in troops on three different occasions. Both sides committed violent acts, the most notorious of which occurred on the night of February 7, 1913.

An armored train, nicknamed the "Bull Moose Special," led by coal operator Quin Morton and Kanawha County Sheriff Bonner Hill, rolled through a miners' tent colony at Holly Grove on Paint Creek. Mine guards opened fire from the train, killing striker Cesco Estep. After the incident, Morton supposedly wanted to "go back and give them another round." Hill and others talked him out of it. In retaliation, miners attacked a mine guard encampment at Mucklow, present Gallagher. In a battle which lasted several hours, at least sixteen people died, mostly mine guards.

On February 13, Mother Jones was placed under house arrest at Pratt for inciting to riot. Despite the fact she was at least sixty-eight years old and suffering from pneumonia, Governor Glasscock refused to release her. On March 4, Henry D. Hatfield was sworn in as governor. Hatfield, a physician, personally

examined Jones, but kept her under house arrest for over two months. During this same period, he released over thirty other individuals who had been arrested under martial law.

On April 14, Hatfield issued a series of terms for settlement of the strike, including a nine-hour work day (already in effect elsewhere in the state), the right to shop in stores other than those owned by the company, the right to elect union checkweighmen, and the elimination of discrimination against union miners. On April 25, he ordered striking miners to accept his terms or face deportation from the state. Paint Creek miners accepted the contract while those on Cabin Creek remained on strike. The settlement failed to answer the two primary grievances: the

right to organize and the removal of mine guards. After additional violence on Cabin Creek, that strike was settled toward the end of July. The only gain was the removal of Baldwin- Felts detectives as mine guards from both Paint and Cabin creeks.

The Paint Creek-Cabin Creek strike produced a number of labor leaders who would play prominent roles in the years to come. Corrupt UMWA leaders were ousted and a group of young rank- and-file miners were elected. In November 1916, Frank Keeney was chosen president of UMWA District 17, and Fred Mooney was chosen secretary-treasurer.

Following the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek strike, the coalfields were relatively peaceful for nearly six years. U.S. entry into World War I in 1917 sparked a boom in the coal industry, increasing wages. However, the end of the war resulted in a national recession. Coal operators laid off miners and attempted to reduce wages to pre-war levels. In response to the 1912-13 strike, coal operators' associations in southern West Virginia had strengthened their system for combating labor. By 1919, the largest non-unionized coal region in the eastern United States consisted of Logan and Mingo counties. The UMWA targeted southwestern West Virginia as its top priority. The Logan Coal Operators Association paid Logan County Sheriff Don Chafin to keep union organizers out of the area. Chafin and his deputies harassed, beat, and arrested those suspected of participating in labor meetings. He hired a small army of additional deputies, paid directly by the association.

In late summer 1919, rumors reached Charleston of atrocities on the part of Chafin's men. On September 4, armed miners began gathering at Marmet for a march on Logan County. By the 5th, their numbers had grown to 5,000. Governor John J. Cornwell and Frank Keeney dissuaded most of the miners from marching in exchange for a governmental investigation into the alleged abuses. Approximately 1,500 of the 5,000 men marched to Danville, Boone County, before turning back. Cornwell appointed a commission whose findings did not support the union.

A few months later, operators lowered wages in the southern coalfields. To compound problems, the U.S. Coal Commission granted a wage increase to union miners, which excluded those in southwestern West Virginia. Non-union miners in Mingo County went on strike in the spring of 1920 and called for assistance from the District 17 office in Charleston. On May 6, Fred Mooney and Bill Blizzard, one of the leaders of the 1912-13 strike, spoke to around 3,000 miners at Matewan. Over the next two weeks, about half thatnumber joined the UMWA. On May 19, twelve Baldwin-Felts detectives arrived in Matewan. Families of miners who had joined the union were evicted from their company-owned houses. The town's chief of police, Sid Hatfield, encouraged Matewan residents to arm themselves. Gunfire erupted when Albert and Lee Felts attempted to arrest Hatfield. At the end of the battle, seven detectives and four townspeople lay dead, including Mayor C. C. Testerman. Shortly thereafter, Hatfield married Testerman's widow, Jessie, prompting speculation that Hatfield himself had shot the mayor.

On July 1, UMWA miners went on strike in the region. By this time, over 90 percent of Mingo County's miners had joined the union. Over the next thirteen months, a virtual war existed in the county. Non-union mines were dynamited miners' tent colonies were attacked, and there were numerous deaths on both sides of the cause. During this period, governors Cornwell and Ephraim F. Morgan declared martial law on three occasions.

In late summer 1921, a series of events destroyed the UMWA's tenuous hold in southern West Virginia.

On August 1, Sid Hatfield, who had been acquitted of his actions in the "Matewan Massacre," was to stand trial for a shooting at the Mohawk coal camp in McDowell County. As he and a fellow defendant, Ed Chambers, walked up the steps of the McDowell County Courthouse in Welch, shots rang out. Hatfield and Chambers were murdered by Baldwin-Felts detectives.

As a result of the Matewan Massacre, Hatfield had become a hero to many of the miners. On August 7, a crowd varyingly estimated from 700 to 5,000 gathered on the capitol grounds in Charleston to protest the killing. Among others, UMWA's leaders Frank Keeney and Bill Blizzard urged the miners to fight. Over the next two weeks, Keeney travelled around the state, calling for a march on Logan. On August 20, miners began assembling at Marmet. Mother Jones, sensing the inevitable failure of the mission, tried to discourage the miners. At one point, she held up a telegram, supposedly from President Warren G. Harding, in which he offered to end the mine guard system and help the miners if they did not march. Keeney told the miners he had checked with the White House and the telegram was a fake. To this day, it is uncertain who was lying.

On August 24, the march began as approximately 5,000 men crossed Lens Creek Mountain. The miners wore red bandanas, which earned them the nickname, "red necks." In Logan County, Don Chafin mobilized an army of deputies, mine guards, store clerks, and state police. Meanwhile, after a request by Governor Morgan for federal troops, President Harding dispatched World War I hero Henry Bandholtz to Charleston to survey the situation. On the 26th, Bandholtz and the governor met with Keeney and Mooney and explained that if the march continued, the miners and UMWA leaders could be charged with treason. That afternoon, Keeney met a majority of the miners at a ballfield in Madison and instructed them to turn back. As a result, some of the miners ended their march. However, two factors led many to continue. First, special trains promised by Keeney to transport the miners back to Kanawha County were late in arriving. Second, the state police raided a group of miners at Sharples on the night of the 27th, killing two. In response, many miners began marching toward Sharples, just across the Logan County line.

The town of Logan was protected by a natural barrier, Blair Mountain, located south of Sharples. Chafin's forces, now under the command of Colonel William Eubank of the National Guard, took positions on the crest

of Blair Mountain as the miners assembled in the town of Blair, near the bottom of the mountain. On the 28th, the marchers took their first prisoners, four Logan County deputies and the son of another deputy. On the evening of the 30th, Baptist minister James E. Wilburn organized a small armed company to support the miners. On the 31st, Wilburn's men shot and killed three of Chafin's deputies, including John Gore, the father of one of the men captured previously. During the skirmish, a deputy killed one of Wilburn's followers, Eli Kemp. Over the next three days, there was intense fighting as Eubank's troops brought in planes to drop bombs. On September 1, President Harding finally sent federal troops from Fort Thomas, Kentucky. War hero Billy Mitchell led an air squadron from Langley Field near Washington, D.C. The squadron set up headquarters in a vacant field in the present Kanawha City section of Charleston. Several planes did not make it, crashing in such distant places as Nicholas County, Raleigh County, and southwestern Virginia, and military air power played no important part in the battle. On the 3rd, the first federal troops arrived at Jeffrey, Sharples, Blair, and Logan. Confronted with the possibility of fighting against U.S. troops, most of the miners surrendered. Some of the miners on Blair Mountain continued fighting until the 4th, at which time virtually all surrendered or returned to their homes. During the fighting, at least twelve miners and four men from Chafin's army were killed.

Those who surrendered were placed on trains and sent home. However, those perceived as leaders were to be held accountable for the actions of all the miners. Special grand juries handed down 1,217 indictments, including 325 for murder and 24 for treason against the state. The only treason conviction was against Walter Allen, who skipped bail and was never captured. The most prominent treason trial was that of Bill Blizzard, considered by authorities to be the "general" of the miners' army. In a change of venue, Blizzard's trial was held in the Jefferson County Courthouse in Charles Town, the same building in which John Brown had been convicted of treason in 1859. After several trials in different locations, all charges against Blizzard were dropped. Keeney and Mooney were also acquitted of murder charges.

James E. Wilburn and his son were convicted of murdering the Logan County deputies. Both were pardoned by Governor Howard Gore after serving only three years of their eleven-year sentences.

The defeat of the miners at Blair Mountain temporarily ended the UMWA's organizing efforts in the southern coalfields. By 1924, UMWA membership in the state had dropped by about one-half of its total in 1921. Both Keeney and Mooney were forced out of the union, while Blizzard remained a strong force in District 17 until being ousted in the 1950s. In 1933, the National Industrial Recovery Act protected the rights of unions and allowed for the rapid organization of the southern coalfields.

Blair Mountain stands as a powerful symbol for workers to this day. The miners who participated vowed never to discuss the details of the march to protect themselves from the authorities. For many years, the story of the march was communicated by word of mouth as an inspiration to union activists. It serves as a vivid reminder of the deadly violence so often associated with labor-management disputes. The mine wars also demonstrate the inability of the state and federal governments to defuse the situations short of armed intervention.

Workers giving up their weapons after the Battle of Blair Mountain

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Ludlow Massacre 1914

Issues concerning labour had dogged the United States for many years preceding World War I and had resulted in widespread strike action, especially in the West of the country. Tensions rose to a melting point when a union activist was killed in late 1913 resulting in workers at the Rockefeller family owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Corporation's (CF+I) going on strike. Miners evacuated the coal camps on September 23rd in protest against low wages, poor working conditions and continued victimisation of union activists. This was to mark the beginning of what was to be a harsh seven months of continued brutality and repression at the hands of their bosses.

Miners of the CF+I were paid $1.68 a day and were forced to work in extremely harsh conditions, this was particularly true for the Colorado miners, where fatality rates were often double the national average. What little wages the miners earned were paid in scrip, which was redeemable only at the company store where prices were high.

Attempts of unionisation by the Colorado miners dated back to the first strike of 1883 in which they tried to join the Western Federation of Miners, in 1913 they were attempting to organise into the United Mine Workers of America. (They later joined the Industrial Workers of the World in 1927.)

Demands of the UMWA to the CF+I were as follows:

"…Recognition of the United Mineworkers of America as the bargaining agent for workers in coal mines throughout Colorado and northern New Mexico, an effective system of checkweighmen in all mines, compensation for digging coal at a ton-rate based on 2,000 pounds, semi-monthly payment of wages in lawful money, the abolition of scrip and the truck system, an end to discrimination against union members, and strict enforcement of state laws pertaining to operators' obligations in supplying miners with timbers, rails, and other materials in underground working places."

The demands of the union and the continuing strike action enraged the Rockefeller family, which through mine ownership effectively ruled the region. They evicted striking workers from their company owned homes leaving them (along with their families) to face the harsh Colorado winter months without shelter. Assisted by UMWA groups across the US, the strikers organised 'tent cities' close to canyon mouths which lead to coal camps (in an attempt to block strike-breakers replacing them) and continued their strike.

Through various agencies the company was able to hire men to take a more aggressive stance against the striking workers, armed guards were supplied to harass strikers and union organisers. An armoured car with a

mounted machine gun was even built which was appropriately named the ‘Death Special’ by the company guards. As tensions escalated between CF+I and the strikers, miners dug protective pits beneath their tents to shield themselves and their families against random sniping and machine gun fire from the company guards.

On October 17th the ‘Death Special’ was used to attack the Forbes tent colony resulting in the death of one miner. A young girl was shot in the face and another boy’s legs riddled with machine gun bullets also.

Confrontations between striking miners and scab workers were also resulting in additional deaths. On October 28th the Governor of Colorado, Elias M Ammons called out the National Guard to take control of the situation.

The miners however, persevered. Union members and organisers were kidnapped and beaten, shots being fired into the camps from strike-breakers and the National Guardsmen were a constant occurrence and the harsh winter was taking its toll. Worried about the continuing cost of keeping the National Guard in the field, Governor Ammons accepted an offer from the Rockefeller family to put their men in National Guard uniforms.

On March 10th the body of a strike-breaker was found near railroad tracks near the Forbes tents and the National Guard’s General Chase ordered the colony to be destroyed. The strike was reaching a climax, and National Guardsmen were ordered to evict the remaining tent colonies around the mines, despite them being on private property leased by the UMWA.

Ludlow was the largest of the colonies, and on the morning of April 20th 1914, troops fired into the camp with machine guns, anyone who was seen moving in the camp was targeted. The miners fired back, and fighting raged for almost fourteen hours.

In the afternoon, a passing freight train stopped near the camp and allowed many miners and their families to escape to east to an area known as the ‘Black Hills’. After many hours of exchanging fire with the militiamen, the camps main organiser, Louis Tikas met with Lieutenant Linderfelt (the officer in charge of the National Guard assault on the Ludlow camp) to arrange a truce.

Linderfelt hit Tikas with the butt of his rifle and soldiers fired several times into his back as he lay on the ground, killing him outright.

That evening, under cover of darkness, the militiamen entered the camp and set fire to tents, killing two women and eleven children who were sheltering from the shooting in a pit below a tent, thirteen other people were also shot dead during the fighting.

As news of the massacre spread, workers from around the country went on strike to show solidarity with the remaining miners on strike in Colorado and to express sympathy for those who had lost loved ones in Ludlow. Several cities in the state were taken over and occupied by

miners and some National Guard units even laid down their arms and refused to fight.

However, the workers failed to obtain their demands along with union recognition and many were replaced with non-union workers. No National Guardsmen was ever prosecuted over the killings, even though sixty-six people had been killed by the time violence ended.

In 1918 a monument was erected to commemorate those who died during the strike. These individuals all died in the Ludlow Massacre, and are inscribed on the monument as follows:

Louis Tikas, age: 30 years

James Fyler, age: 43 years

John Bartolotti, age: 45 years

Charlie Costa, age: 31 years

Fedelina Costas, age: 27 years

Onafrio Costa, age: 4 years

Frank Rubino, age: 23 years

Patria Valdez, age: 37 years

Eulala Valdez, age: 8 years

Mary Valdez, age: 7 years

Elvira Valdez, age: 3 months

Joe Petrucci, age: 4 ½ years

Lucy Petrucci, age: 2 ½ years

Frank Petrucci, age: 4 months

William Snyder Jr, age: 11 years

Rodgerlo Pedregone, age: 6 years

Cloriva Pedregone, age: 4 year

Colorado strike of 1927

On October 18 the Great Colorado Coal Strike of 1927 began. Despite being one of the most important and dramatic industrial struggles of the 20th Century chances are that you never heard of it even if you are fairly well versed in labor history.

That's because it doesn't fit tidily into the grand narrative that has been constructed for labor history which says that the great period of industrial upheaval which began roughly about the time of the Great Railway Strike of 1877 ended in the wave of patriotism caused by America's entry into World War I and the glittering era of universal prosperity ushered in with the Roaring Twenties. In this account, labor agitation does not resume on a wide scale until the Depression when it finally succeeds due to the beneficent support of the New Deal. Moreover the organization which successfully called over 8,000 miner across the state out on strike was supposed to have been crushed to insignificance by the post war Red Scare prosecutions which had jailed literally the entire leadership of the union on Federal charges and under various state criminal syndicalist statutes.

Here is the forgotten story:

The Colorado coal fields had been a particularly vicious labor battle ground since the 1890's because the industry was largely under the control of a handful of powerful corporations instead of multiple local operators as was common in the eastern coal fields. Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, owned by Rockefeller interests, and Rocky Mountain Fuel Company were the largest of these companies and often were in virtual control of the state government. The use of state Militia to support the company's own large security force and local sheriff's posses composed of gun thugs selected by the company, resulted in repeated and brutal suppression of organizing efforts and strikes.

The United Mine Workers (UMW) made the Colorado mines a major target in the early 20th Century. Legendary agitator Mother Jones was active there including her famous recruitment of striker's wives to replace their jailed husbands on the picket lines. But despite years of effort, the mines remained un-unionized. The struggle came to a head in a 1914 strike at Ludlow. Strikers and their families, evicted from company housing set up a tent and shanty town. The town was attacked by Colorado National Guard troops using machine gun fire and grenades. It was burned to the ground. Two women and 11 children died in the flames. Three union leaders, two rank and file members, one child, a bystander, and a Guardsman (killed in the cross fire) were killed by bullet wounds. Scores more were injured. After a spasm of retaliation attacks on mines and more battles with the Guard, the strike petered out and the UMW mostly withdrew from the state and turned its attention eastward.

But the conditions that had led to earlier conflicts had not changed.

Miners still worked up to 12 hours a day, six days a week. They were required to buy their own tools and even their own blasting powder. They were not paid for time in the mine not directly related to the extraction of coal, which included not only the frequently long trips to the mine face from the surface by tram, but also necessary safety work like installing and maintaining shoring timbers. In the most isolated mines, workers were paid in script redeemable only in company stores that offered shoddy goods at inflated prices. The familiar company town system kept most workers perpetually in debt to the companies and thus virtual serfs. Safety was also an issue. In addition to almost daily fatal accidents the region had seen several major disasters including 121 miners killed in an accident at a mine in Hastings in 1917, 31 miners were killed in explosions at the Oakdale and Empire mines and in 1922, and 27 were killed in mines in Sopris and Southwestern in 1923.

The Industrial Workers of the World had supposedly been smashed when the government launched nation-wide raids in 1919. 101 union leaders in Chicago, including General Secretary William D. “Big Bill” Haywood, the secretaries of most affiliated Industrial Unions and the entire General Executive Board were sentenced to prison. Another 48 leaders were tried and convicted in Kansas. Hundreds of others were tried and convicted in state courts.

But the Feds misunderstood the rank and file nature of the organization. With their big name leaders in jail and Haywood fled to the Soviet Union, ordinary delegates, un-jailed local leaders, and rank and file members stepped up. The union actually grew in numbers and continued significant organizing drives in the woods of the Pacific Northwest, on railroad and other mass construction projects, among both dock workers and seamen for the IWW’s Marine Transport Workers Union, and among California migrant workers. It was a 1924 internal split that actually did more damage than the raids and imprisonment. Membership fell and gains in most of the battle ground industries were lost. But the union was not dead yet and turned to new ground.

When the state of Idaho released A. S. Embree from prison after a criminal syndicalist rap, the veteran organizer relocated to southern Colorado. Embree had a long record as an organizer of hard rock miners, particularly in the copper industry and had made a name for himself in campaigns in Butte, Montana and Arizona. He was a survivor of the Bisbee Deportation and one of the most respected Wobblies.

Embree started slowly at first working with veterans of the 1914 strike and some long time Colorado Wobs. He soon had a network of stationary delegates throughout all three of the state’s big coal fields. He started with general educational work, circulating copies of the IWW newspaper Industrial Solidarity, pamphlets, and tens of thousands of “silent agitator” stickers which were soon found at mine heads, on tram cars, and in any place miners gathered.

Particularly important were copies of literature and periodicals in

several different languages because the miners were largely immigrants from eastern and southern Europe or were Spanish speaking recruited both from the large local population and from Mexico. Slowly a network with contacts in every mining community and most mines in the state was built up.

Still, given the violent history of the region, there was a reluctance to move too soon against the mine owners. But Embree noticed that material circulated by the IWW's General Defense Committee in support of Sacco and Vanzetti struck a genuine note of sympathy and solidarity. On August 21 the IWW called for a general strike against the executions of the Italian Anarchists. Response in Colorado exceeded beyond anyone's expectations. More than 10,000 miners went out in all sections of the state, virtually closing down the industry. To prevent retaliatory firings workers at many mines stayed out for three days.

Clearly the time was ripe for action. The IWW called representatives of all mines to a conference at Agular on September 8 to iron out demands —a daily wage of $7.50, union check weigh men [1] , payment for "dead work" [2] and recognition of pit committee at each mine. To comply with the rules of the Colorado State Industrial Commission a strike date was set with more than the required 30 day notice. The workers offered to allow the Commission to conduct elections at each mine to ascertain that the action had the support of members. The commission refused to act and when the strike began as scheduled on October 18 ruled that it was illegal and declared any meetings or picketing by miners to be illegal and subject to being broken up by the Colorado Rangers, state police usually called the militia by strikers.

Although the strike was led by the IWW, pit committees were open to all miners who supported the goals of the strike including remaining members of the UMW and members of independent and company controlled unions at Colorado Fuel and Iron mines concentrated in the southern field.

About 8,400 miners walked out and 113 mines across the state were closed and only 13 still running were still running with scabs. The majority of miners in the state were on strike, about 8,400. In the northern field only the Columbine located just north of Denver remained open, limping by with limited production by 150 scabs. In the southern field frequent mass gatherings on the coalfields called more and more of the miners still at work out to join the strike despite inducements to join the scabs by offers of premium pay and improved conditions. Picket lines were almost constantly harassed by the police, and arrests were frequent. Union halls were raided and smashed. Strikers were arrested in mass and moved from one jail to another to prevent access by IWW lawyers. Others were deported to the state line and told that they would be shot on sight if they returned. But the strike held and expanded.

Workers fought back with ingenuity. In one country jail, miners refused to be released when their terms expired to prevent more strikers

from being imprisoned. In the southern fields the 19 year old daughter of a Croatian miner, Amelia Milka Sablich gained fame as Red Milka. After the arrests of her father and older sister she donned a bright red dress and with fiery rhetoric led marches against scab mines. She was jailed twice herself and physically fought a policeman to a draw.

In November the IWW dispatched a squad of “singing agitators” south from Lafayette to Walsenburg by car caravan—a new tactic. Despite being harassed by mounted Ranger and buzzed by state owned airplanes, the squad held successful meetings in several towns and camps, reviving sprits and leaving behind miners who could sing the anthem Solidarity Forever in a dozen languages.

The Columbine Mine, the lone operating mine in the north, became a focus of attention. It was operated by Rocky Mountain Fuel Company. Josephine Roche, a well known liberal with strong sympathy for unionism had just inherited the firm from her father but did not yet exert total day-to-day control. She told reporters that she would welcome union representation at the mine, but not the IWW.

For two weeks strikers had been rallying daily outside of the Columbine gates in the town of Serene. On earlier marches Roche had ordered that the picketers be served coffee. Other mine owners, however, were determined to break the strike at Columbine. They induced Governor Billy Adams to reactivate the Colorado Rangers, who had officially been disbanded before the strike largely due to their reputation for being used as an employer’s armed force. With questionable legal authority the Rangers under the command of Louis Scherf arrived sometime in the night of October 17/18. They were heavily armed with rifles, hand grenades, and three 50 caliber machine guns which they deployed at the mine tipple where coal was loaded onto railroad cars and on trucks including one near the water tank. Together the guns commanded an enfilading field of fire.

Just before dawn 500 miners and many of their wives and family members arrived at the shut gates of the town of Serene. They marched behind three U.S. Flags and as usual were under orders to carry no weapons. They were surprised to find the Rangers out in force and heavily armed, although not in uniform. As the marchers neared Scherf announced that they would not be admitted to town and that their gathering was illegal. He demanded to know, “Who are your leaders.?” The crowd responded with cries of “We’re all leaders!” After some discussion Adam Bell was selected to go forward with a flag bearer to ask that the gates be unlocked because the town was public and the strikers had children in the school and business at the Post Office.

Bell was struck in the head by a baton and a guard tried to seize the flag from its 16 year old bearer. As a struggle for the flag ensued, a volley of tear gas was fired one striking a Mrs. Kubic in the back as she tried to get away. Miners began heaving the teargas grenades back into the town and the injured Bell let up a cry, “Let’s Go!” leading an assault on the gate. Bell was soon surrounded and beaten unconscious.

Mrs. Elizabeth Beranek, mother of 16 children and one of the flag-bearers, tried to protect him with her flag. The police turned on her, beating her severely.

Wave after wave or enraged strikers scaled the gate to be met with truncheons and lengths of iron pipe in a desperate hand to hand battle. Despite inflicting severe injuries, the outnumbered police retired to a line at the mine gate 150 yards inside the town.

21 year old Jerry Davis grabbed one of the fallen flags and led hundreds of angry miners through the smashed gate. Others scaled the fence east of the gate. As the miners closed in Scherf fired twice with his .45 automatic signaling a volley of rifle fire. At least two of the machine guns opened up a withering crossfire. The miners and their families ran leaving scores of bodies on the ground both dead and wounded.

John Eastenes, a 34 year old of six children and Nick Spanudakhis, 34, both of Lafayette, died at the scene. Frank Kovich of Erie, Rene Jacques, 26, of Louisville and Davis died hours later in the hospital. The American flag Davis carried was riddled with seventeen bullet holes and stained with blood. Mike Vidovich of Erie, 35, died a week later of his injuries. The total number of injuries may never be known because many miners were afraid to seek medical attention.

Despite the bloodshed, the strike continued. And so did daily violence against strikers and their families both on picket lines and in towns. On January 12, 1928 the IWW hall in Walsenburg was attacked and riddled with bullets. Wobblies Chavez and Martinez were killed.

The strike petered out in February when owners granted significant concessions, but not recognition of the IWW. In the southern fields dominated by the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company wages were boosted by a dollar a day. Increases of 50 cents were won in the north. In all parts of the state pit committees were recognized, weigh men elected, and some grievance procedures were adopted—at least temporarily.

In the southern fields the CF&I announced that in the elections that it supervised, miners voted not to allow IWW members back on the job. In the North Josephine Roche announced her intention of eventually recognizing the UMW, which had taken no part in the strike. But even this was not followed up on until 1929. The willingness of the UMW to “scab” on the IWW led to bitter feelings between the two unions that would only intensify as both contended in the Illinois coal field wars later in the decade.

Roche later ran unsuccessfully for Governor of Colorado as a labor Democrat and served as Assistant Secretary of the Treasury under Franklin Roosevelt. She continued to be associated with the UMW as one of three directors of its welfare and retirement fund until forced from office amid charges of mismanagement and corruption in 1968.

Although the IWW valiantly led the strike, it ended with no on the job representation. A few locals hung on for a few years and had some influence in the non-union pit committees and Wobblies were frequently trusted and elected as weigh men.

The Rocky Mountain Fuel Company went bankrupt in 1944. The Colorado Fuel and Iron business records were donated to the Steelworks Museum of Industry and Culture. The records conclusively proved, as if anyone ever doubted it that the company had systematically spied upon, disrupted, and sought to discredit the IWW during the 1927 strike.

On a personal note Red Milka, the young heroine of the southern coal fields, went on to study at the IWW affiliated Work People's College in Duluth, Minnesota where one of her instructors was the young Canadian Fred W. Thompson. He would go on to be a legendary IWW organizer, officer, editor, labor historian and my personal mentor. He was the principal co-author of our 1975 book The IWW: Its First Seventy Years and was the best man at my wedding in 1981.

Taken from http://patrickmurfin.blogspot.co.uk/2013/10/blood-on-coalcolorado-strike-of-1927.html

[1] Coal miners were normally paid according to the amount of coal they dug out, and companies would regularly swindle workers by lying about the weight of coal. The law allowed for workers to appoint check weigh men, however in most mines any worker requesting a check weigh man would be fired or worse.

[2] We assume this means work which miners have to do, but during which no coal can be extracted, for example digging through areas without coal etc.

So we're in a War — a Class War

There is no set of ideas, proposals, and organizational strategies that can bring victory. There is no solution outside of winning the war.

So long as they have the initiative, we are separated, and passive. Our response to the conditions of our lives is individual: quitting our jobs, moving to neighborhoods with cheaper rent, joining subcultures and gangs, suicide, buying lottery tickets, drug abuse and alcoholism, going to church. Their world looks like the only possibility. Any hope for change is lived on an imaginary level—separated from our everyday lives. It's business as usual, with all the crisis and destruction that this implies.

When we go on the offensive we begin to recognize each other and to fight collectively. We use the ways that society depends on us to disrupt it. We strike, sabotage, riot, desert, mutiny and take over property. We create organizations in order to amplify and coordinate our activities. All kinds of new possibilities open up. We grow more daring and more aggressive in pursuing our own class interests. These do not lie in forming a new government, or becoming the new boss. Our interests lie in ending our own way of life—and therefore the society that is based on that way of life.

We are the working class who want to abolish work and class. We are the community of people who want to tear the existing community apart. Our political program is to destroy politics. In order to do that, we have to push the subversive tendencies that exist today until we have completely remade society everywhere.

This has at times been called "revolution".

Further Reading:

Anarcho-Syndicalism - Rudolf Rocker

Unions: A revolutionary critique - Red and Black Notes

The Lordstown struggle and the real crisis in production - Ken Weller

Anarcho-Syndicalism in the 20th Century - Vadim Damier

Syndicalism and Anarcho-Syndicalism in Germany - Helge Döhring

Anatomy of an industrial struggle: Chrysler factory at Tonsley Park in Adelaide 1976-1978 - Garry Hill

Office worker's survival guide - Steven Johns

The American Worker - Paul Romano and Ria Stone

Faceless resistance: Everyday resistance at a Swedish bakery - Kämpa Tillsammans