

# “Dyin’ to Make a Livin’ ” <sup>1</sup> : The Battle of Blair Mountain- Appalachia’s Moment in the Labor Movement

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Appalachian America has a relationship with the coal industry that is simultaneously embittered and cherished, with the state of West Virginia seeing some of the worst that coal mining has to offer. While it is certainly the case that coal mining has kept families fed and with a sense of financial security for generations, its sheer ruthlessness and often blatant disregard for human life has proven continuously fatal, leaving countless families with broken hearts and empty stomachs. While coal mining today is certainly no safe occupation, the levels of safety and security that are now in place were not always what one could expect when entering the industry. In fact, the decades of forbiddance from unionization, disturbingly hazardous work conditions, and incredibly fragile work security that miners faced gave birth to an unprecedented surge in support of labor rights, as well as against the exploitation that miners faced on a daily basis. The early twentieth century was certainly a time of mass labor struggles, and the mines of West Virginia finally came to experience the movement that had evaded them for some time, clashing intellectually and physically with mine authorities. The Battle of Blair Mountain, fought in Logan County, West Virginia in 1921 came to represent a stand against the historic mistreatment of miners, as well as a landmark event in the historic struggle of the labor movement, all fueled by a shared class and regional identity.

The United Mine Workers (UMW) Union was founded in 1890, and almost immediately mine companies in Appalachia began inserting non-union clauses in mineworkers’ contracts. Under these clauses, joining or forming a union or attempting to collectivize a labor struggle in any way was grounds

for the immediate termination of one’s employment. Mother Jones, a prominent labor figure and ever-notable in the history of labor in the U.S., came to West Virginia shortly thereafter, calling for immediate unionization. Subsequently, approximately 3,000 miners chose to unionize which led to the immediate termination of those answerable to the mines. A private detective agency was then hired by seniormost mine officials, who tasked detectives with overseeing the eviction of terminated miners and their families. However, once they began doing so, an armed struggle broke out in which seven detectives and three miners were killed, in what became known as the Matewan Massacre.

Immediate civil unrest followed the Matewan Massacre, and West Virginia State Police officials were consequently sent in to disarm, evict, and arrest miners who were continuing to strike against the mines, in what was a clear play to crush miners’ momentum and put a stop to unionization. The State Police, surprisingly, were sympathetic to the miners and took only those who were deemed responsible for the shootings. During criminal trial proceedings, however, detectives in the employ of the mining company enacted their own “justice” and gunned down local heroes Sid Hatfield and Ed Chambers, ending their lives right in front of their own families.<sup>2</sup> What followed was mass militarization in which 13,000 miners armed themselves and commandeered a freight train, which they used to move around fighters and supplies, aptly named the Blue Steel Special. In opposition to the miners, a coalition of police officials and deputized anti-union agents was formed, numbering around 2,000. Throughout the battle’s span leftover bombs and

poisonous gas from WWI, as well as homemade bombs, were dropped on the miners' forces. As these actions did not break the miners' armed coalition, President Warren G. Harding sent in military officials, troops, and threatened to send in MB-1 bombing planes which eventually led to the deescalation of the Battle.

While it can certainly be agreed upon that the history of labor movements is no stranger to bloody conflicts between laborers and labor authorities, the Battle of Blair Mountain is perhaps the most extreme case of such conflicts. Though only fought from August 25 to September 2, 1921, by the battle's end both sides had fought so intensely that one million rounds had been fired and an unconfirmed number of people had been killed, with an estimate of one hundred or more having been suggested.<sup>3</sup> The Battle of Blair Mountain has been referred to as the largest armed insurrection since the Civil War, and has been recognized as the largest armed labor uprising in U.S. history, as well. The story of the Battle of Blair Mountain lives on in Appalachian history and likely will for generations to come, as for many it is a story of class solidarity as mineworkers saw themselves as taking a clear stand against the source of their oppression. The Battle of Blair Mountain will also likely live on as for many it is representative of the unbreakable bond that is Appalachian identity, which all Appalachians share.<sup>4</sup>

Top Mountain Records, 2020.  
"The Battle of Blair Mountain." History, accessed January 07, 2021. <https://www.history.com/news/americas-largest-labor-uprising-the-battle-of-blair-mountain>

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Foddershock. "Dyin' to Make a Livin' " Black Lung & White Lightnin' . Inbred Outcast Records.

<sup>2</sup> "Inside the West Virginia Mine Wars Museum." West Virginia Mine Wars Museum, Accessed January 07, 2021. <https://wvminewars.org/inside-the-museum>.

<sup>3</sup> "The Battle of Blair Mountain." History, accessed January 07 2021. <https://www.history.com/news/americas-largest-labor-uprising-the-battle-of-blair-mountain>.

<sup>4</sup> The author of this essay is Appalachian, and was born in Charleston, West Virginia.

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