

## **Progress at Gunpoint: Struggle in the Coal Fields of Southern West Virginia, 1890–1920**

**Zack Fields**

As the year 1920 drew to a close, striking coal miners and their families in Mingo County, West Virginia, faced the winter from a tent colony. After thirty years of rapid industrial and population growth in Mingo and surrounding counties in southern West Virginia, many families had less economic power than when the coal boom had begun three decades earlier. Miners assertively deployed their union in the fight for decent wages and improved standards of living, but coal operators sponsored violence that turned back such efforts. Coal company-led industrialization brought violence and insecurity, not progress, for the citizens of Logan, McDowell, Mercer, and Mingo counties.

The Progressive era is generally understood as the period stretching from Theodore Roosevelt's becoming president in 1901 to America's entry into World War I in 1917, or even as extending out a decade in each direction. Citizens successfully lobbied for pure food legislation, state and national prohibition, and changes in the political process. Some scholars hold, and popular understanding tends to agree, that the Progressive era involved attempts by middle class activists to wrest control of state and federal government from the hands of corporate magnates — to curtail the power of “economic royalists” — so as to limit corporate control of the economy, reduce political corruption, and protect individual citizens from the excesses of industrialization. Other themes include middle-class concerns about being ground between the great power of the corporations above and potential violence from the underclass below. Yet another interpretation, also emphasizing public policy, especially economic policy at the federal level, attributes major changes during those years to the industrial elite, who attempted to use their power in the federal govern-

ment to consolidate monopolistic control of the economy and to deflect state efforts at economic regulation.<sup>1</sup> None of these interpretations emphasizes worker agency — the efforts by workers to achieve progress for themselves.

This essay argues that the miners of southern West Virginia acted and spoke for themselves. They struggled for a dignified existence for their families and attempted to organize themselves into powerful collective institutions, unions, to promote their common efforts. The miners' struggles between 1890 and 1920 laid the foundation for future change in their favor, but as of 1920 they were losing, not winning — and not for lack of effort or will, but because of the violence directed against them by the coal operators and their minions.

## I. Forced Industrialization

After the Civil War, tight-knit communities of subsistence farms dotted southern West Virginia, and most families owned their own land. In the years from 1890 to 1920, however, working-class families in Logan, Mercer, Mingo, and McDowell counties witnessed a transformation of their landscape.<sup>2</sup>

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, coal and railroad subsidiaries of corporations such as U.S. Steel followed the Norfolk and Western Railroad into the four counties and industrialized, by force, southern West Virginia. In 1894, Flat Top Coal claimed title to more than 30,000 acres of land in Mercer, Raleigh, and Wyoming counties. The *Washington Post* reported “the squatters, who possess the land now, claim it by right of possession.” At the coal company’s behest, the sheriff called in two squadrons of police and deputies. They prepared to displace the residents, who were armed and refused to budge. “Bloodshed,” the *Post* reported, “is almost certain.”<sup>3</sup>

Flat Top Coal had its way, part of a trend of rapid mine development in the area. Coal companies, often controlled by the Morgan or Standard Oil groups, developed the Pocahontas and Williamson coalfields. According to John Alexander Williams, “The overlapping claims and hazy surveys of earlier days,” in addition to a federal judge sympathetic to out-of-state claimants to land titles, meant that many small landowners sold their land because it would have been either impossible or too expensive to defend their titles. With small landowners in a weak bargaining position, large corporations quickly

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amassed vast acreage. U.S. Steel owned 53,736 acres of vein area in the Pocahontas field and 32,662 surface acres in Logan and Mingo counties. Its subsidiary, U.S. Coke and Coal, was the largest producer in the Pocahontas field.<sup>4</sup>

The Pocahontas Operators' Association, representing the new ownership class in southern West Virginia, produced a lavishly appointed map of their field, with rich color, gilded lettering, and lovely calligraphic pen work. The map shows the location of thirty-seven companies in the Pocahontas field, whose center was McDowell County, and notes that there were even more companies whose names were omitted for lack of space. The map speaks to the wealth of the operators and the encompassing nature of coal mining in the area.<sup>5</sup>

The men who brought the railroads and the coal mines to southern West Virginia had investments in coal and railroads across the United States and were part of a vast web of interlocking corporate directorships. Despite much political noise regarding trust busting and regulation of monopolies, corporations, including the coal operators in southern West Virginia, did not suffer from decentralization during the years 1890–1920. As the *New Republic* reported in 1923, “The report [of Senator Follette] finds that Standard Oil is just as much a unified monopoly as it was before its legal dissolution. Does anyone doubt it?”<sup>6</sup>

Even though individual coalfields were under the control of different companies, the operators collaborated to produce a hostile labor environment, precluding gains in working conditions that might have otherwise been realized from intra-field operator competition.

## II. Company Housing and Stores

Part of the transformation of the West Virginia landscape was a change in home ownership patterns and the increased incidence of company housing. Coal operators sent recruiting agents to spread exaggerated tales of miner prosperity in West Virginia; in response, thousands of workers came to the Williamson and Pocahontas fields, often from low-wage areas farther south. They joined displaced West Virginia families who were residing in company housing. In just the six months preceding May 1, 1917, more than 5,000 black workers from Bessemer, Alabama, came north with tickets paid for by coal operators in West Virginia and Kentucky. Coal companies provided on-site

company housing for most of these workers. Company housing consisted of low-slung clapboard structures with diminutive porches, if any, packed one next to the other along dirt roads. Photographs of West Virginia coal-company housing from this era show structures in advanced stages of decay; they appear to be hurriedly rejoining the earth. Barely one in seven units of company housing in the area had indoor running water; far fewer had sewage systems. While miners in other states often lived in privately owned homes, four out of five West Virginia miners lived in company housing.<sup>7</sup>

According to the coal operators, these new mine workers labored in an industrial utopia. An ornate history of the Pocahontas field, published by the Operators' Association, states:

As one travels through the Pocahontas Coal Fields, he is impressed by the character of the miners. No signs of poverty greet the eye — no unhappy, dissatisfied faces. Substantial buildings are scattered throughout the entire field. Schoolhouses and high schools dot the mountain sides. Clubs for miners are found everywhere. These excellently conducted clubs have billiard and pool tables, libraries, baths, etc., and are open to the humblest working man.<sup>8</sup>

In their benevolence, the operators also provided company stores where miners and their families could shop with convenience.

Miners told a different story, as high company-store prices encouraged them to shop elsewhere in secret. Miner W.E. Hutchinson of Mingo County testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Education and Labor that:

At the company store they charged 55 cents and 60 cents a pound for pork, and at the outside stores we could get it for 35 cents. For plain white meat the company stores wanted 40 and 45 cents. At the outside stores they charged 25 and 30 cents.

Miners failing to shop at the company store were punished. Frank P. Harman, secretary and treasurer of Turkey Gap Coal and Coke Company, wrote in a company-produced pamphlet, "woe unto the poor fellow who at the month's end has too much money coming to him and has not spent to the satisfaction of the company's storekeeper." Hutchinson recounted being sent to a particularly unproductive part of the mine as punishment for not patronizing the company store. He was sent "into a scrubby little place in the mine where I couldn't make

but three or four cars a day.” Retribution for inadequate spending at the company store was but one of many threats to a miner’s wellbeing. During the “Progressive” era, laborers in Logan, Mercer, Mingo, and McDowell counties faced increased economic insecurity and even corporate violence when they attempted to improve abysmal living standards.<sup>9</sup>

### III. Falling Real Wages

In 1920, citizens in southern West Virginia were less secure economically and physically than they had been thirty years earlier. Real wages for non-union miners in West Virginia fell dramatically in the early twentieth century because of a combination of price inflation and wage stagnation. Non-union miners also experienced declining purchasing power in comparison to unionized miners, whose organization provided some protection against national economic turbulence.<sup>10</sup>

Testifying before the U.S. Senate Committee on Education and Labor in 1921, Fred Mooney addressed the 1920 strike in Mingo County and the high cost of living versus low wages. Mooney was the Secretary and Treasurer of United Mine Workers (UMW) district 17, which encompassed West Virginia. UMW called the strike on June 1, 1920, after operators in Logan, Mingo, McDowell, and Mercer counties refused to recognize the union. While real wages were falling in fields around the Tug River in southern West Virginia, other miners in the state received raises of as much as 27 percent. Data from the U. S. Coal Commission show that nominal wages in union fields rose faster than nominal wages in non-union fields. In forty-nine union mines in the Kanawha, Fairmont, Coal River, and Junior Phillips fields, nominal wages for pick mining rose between 41.6 and 61.1 percent between January 1912 and January 1923. In contrast, nominal wages at non-union mines in Logan County only rose between 34.3 and 35.9 percent during this same time. Nominal wage increases for unionized machine cutters rose between 7.7 and 11.7 percent in forty-nine union mines between 1912 and 1923, but the increases ranged only from 5.4 to 6.2 percent in non-union Logan County.<sup>11</sup>

If the cost of living were constant, even a relatively small wage increase of 5.4 percent would represent an improvement in the material quality of life. Unfortunately for union and non-union miners, the

cost of living increased dramatically during and after the war, eroding and in some cases reversing increases in nominal wages. Between 1913 and 1920, the cost of living in the United States more than doubled, and an acceleration occurred at the end of the war. A miner receiving a 5.4 percent nominal wage increase actually had his real purchasing power cut by about half. Neal J. Ferry, labor member of the Anthracite Coal Commission, reported:

the present wages of anthracite workmen were not sufficient to maintain an unimpaired family life, and free the children from the necessity of seeking employment in hosiery and silk mills or the shirt factories in order to supplement the inadequate earnings of their father in the mines.

Price increases occurred for a wide variety of products. Because coal prices also increased, wages could have increased as well. Yet UMW lawyer W. Jett Lauck reported that “between 1914 and 1918 the cost of labor increased \$1.38 per ton, while the corresponding increase in the wholesale price was \$2.69, approximately twice the labor cost.” So costs grew faster than compensation for coal miners, with increased coal revenues flowing to the companies rather than to the workers.<sup>12</sup>

As part of the reason for falling real wages, Mooney cited systematic underpay for carloads of coal, stating that men were receiving between sixty cents and a dollar instead of the three dollars stipulated in the contract. Senators on the committee before which Mooney testified demonstrated less interest in the economic origins of the strike than in divining a foreign influence in UMW leadership. Mooney repeatedly assured them that the majority of the men participating in the strike were locals, but this did not assuage Senators’ concerns about foreign infiltration. Senators also focused on the question of paramilitary gunmen. The operators accused the UMW of hiring foreign gunmen, a charge Mooney refuted and countered by stating that the operators hired Baldwin-Felts guards who terrorized the miners with impunity. Mooney cited a list of Mingo County members of a temporary military unit authorized by local authorities to oversee the strike. According to UMW testimony, 2,700 miners were on strike in order to realize labor rights equal to those of their peers in the rest of the state, and the operators were using any means to prevent them from achieving that goal.<sup>13</sup>

Colonel Z.T. Vinson, representing the operators, provided a different interpretation. Eight years earlier, at the Paint and Cabin Creek strikes, the UMW had brought in outside agitators to “shoot down the people who wanted to work” after the 1912 convention when it “changed its policy and its principles from that of a labor union into an organized band [of] robbers.” That militancy continued in 1920, Vinson asserted, when the UMW had “a regular organized army” of gunmen, most of whom were not from the area. Given this atmosphere of “fear” and “dread,” Vinson claimed the operators had “a moral and a legal right to say that we will employ no union men.” He also defended the use of Baldwin-Felts guards to evict miners and their families from their homes.<sup>14</sup>

Data from the Coal Commission illustrate that union militancy protected real wages where the union was strong. Because miners in the southern counties were slower to unionize and the operators there employed greater violence, real wages in the non-union fields fell both in real terms and relative to the wages in unionized fields.

#### **IV. Declining Rates of Home Ownership**

In this atmosphere of operator retribution for union activism, home ownership had the potential to insulate miners from the whims of management. Yet, when miners lived in company housing they could be thrown out legally within a week, as were Frank Ingham and his wife. Often miners received no notice of eviction, but returned home to find their belongings in a pile out in front of the house. Miner W. E. Hutchinson testified that he was thrown out of his home with three days notice when his boss found out about his union membership:

They forced their way in at the front door, went in and piled the contents, furniture and things, outside in front of the house....Then they...piled it up against the company store, and today it is laying there as it was, only rotten.

Heavily armed Baldwin-Felts guards carried out this and other evictions.<sup>15</sup>

In 1900, there were 1,201 homes in Logan County, of which 645 (or 53.7%) were for rent. Massive population growth occurred over the next twenty years: in 1920 there were 8,439 homes in Logan, of which 7,127 (or 84.5 percent) were for rent. This dramatic increase

in the percentage of rental homes indicates that residents of Logan County lost economic autonomy and security during these two decades as coal production expanded in the area. Expansion of the coal industry brought rapid population growth and an increase in the housing stock to Mercer, McDowell, and Mingo counties as well. In Mingo County the proportion of rental housing increased from 62.7 to 74.9 percent. In McDowell County it grew from 81.9 percent to 91.1 percent. The percentage of rental housing declined only in Mercer County, and only slightly, from 51.2 percent in 1900 to 48.3 percent in 1920. These data provide a glimpse of a rapidly growing region in which miners only rarely owned their own homes, and were thus under tighter control of the coal companies. The falling home ownership rates also paralleled falling real wages, making it impossible for most miners to leave the company town.<sup>16</sup>

## V. Labor Battles

**The 1894 Strike.** Coal operators in southern West Virginia held down wages principally through union-busting. On April 13, 1894, the *Washington Post* reported that 300,000 miners in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, and Kentucky would strike within the next couple of days. UMW president John McBride said the miners were being paid a barely subsistence wage and deserved better, considering the crucial role that coal played in the economy. The *Post* chided the miners for “following some bad advice” of the UMW and for planning to strike. By April 24, 50,000 miners in Pennsylvania and 27,000 miners in Illinois were on strike, but only 2,000 miners in West Virginia. Some operators began to call in strikebreakers. On May 21, the *Post* reported:

William H. Gorman, president of the Consolidated Coal Company, says he will engage colored men to work in the mines of his company if the coal strike does not collapse within a day or two.

Many operators in the Pocahontas field had already hired black miners as scabs in order to maintain production despite the strike.

When the strike first came on, the Pocahontas operators made a voluntary advance of 5 cents per ton to those negro miners, and this executed a flank movement on the agitators,

the *Post* reported. Despite this “flank movement,” nationwide output

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remained very low, causing the national press to panic about coal availability. The governors of West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Iowa formed an arbitration committee to settle the strike and get the mines running again. They won higher wages because McBride and the operators crafted the “Ohio Compromise” in mid June, ending the two-month strike. Miners in southern West Virginia, who were not unionized, did not benefit directly from the deal.<sup>17</sup>

**The 1897 Strike.** Three years later, thousands of Pennsylvania and Ohio miners went on strike again, initially without support from their West Virginia brethren. The *Washington Post* reported that the miners remembered the last strike, when some mines in Pocahontas kept running and made a great deal of money selling coal at inflated prices. Eugene V. Debs and Samuel Gompers were traversing West Virginia making speeches, however, and the *Post* reported that strikes around Fairmount appeared imminent. Shortly thereafter, miners in southern West Virginia decided to join the strike. The *Post* reported:

This afternoon, upward of 5,000 men employed in the lower coal fields on the Norfolk and Western Road threw down their picks and swore fealty to the cause of their Pennsylvania and Ohio brethren.

Despite this display of solidarity, thirty-five of thirty-six mines in the Pocahontas field continued to run at full output, as Debs frantically called for others to join the strike and the *Post* made dire predictions of an “industrial war.” According to the *Post*, “Debs has been shadowed by two Pinkerton men and has been threatened with death if he goes to [the] Kanawha [coal field].” Pocahontas operators kept the UMW at bay when “organizers Green and Wallace were compelled to leave Pocahontas at the points of revolvers.” Successful operator repression in Pocahontas was an obstacle to national UMW goals. The *Post* reported,

The failure to secure a general suspension in West Virginia has greatly interfered with the prospects of success, as the coal supplied from that and the few isolated districts is meeting the limited demand.

The failed efforts to unionize not only held down wages in southern West Virginia, but also hurt national prospects of improved working conditions.<sup>18</sup>

One cause of lower wages in southern West Virginia was the relative weakness of the UMW. While most operators in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and northern West Virginia recognized the UMW, the operators in the south obdurately resisted all attempts at unionization. They evicted miners who joined the UMW and created regional blacklists to ensure that anyone who joined the union could not find work in surrounding mines, including those in adjacent states. Baldwin-Felts guards and local sheriffs terrorized miners who tried to unionize their fields.

**The 1901 Strike.** Southern miners, however, continued their struggle for recognition of the UMW. In the Thacker-Matewan field, near Williamson, miners went on strike in 1901 to force the operators to recognize the union. A former West Virginia attorney general represented the coal operators in court, and won an injunction from the judge that restrained the miners from blocking entrances to the mines. Coal operators hired guards who fired upon the miners with impunity. After a couple of days, the miners, fed up with dodging bullets, started firing back. The *Post* reported that a “posse of United States deputy marshals, led by A.C. Hufford, of Bluefield,” faced off against the miners in an increasingly violent conflict. Overpowered, many workers fled across the Tug River into Kentucky, outside the jurisdiction of the West Virginia marshals. The *Post*, in a display of sympathy for the miners, noted, “The strikers have nothing but hatred and contempt for the marshals.”<sup>19</sup>

Both independent local operators and corporate subsidiaries vigorously fought the union in southern West Virginia. UMW vice-president Phillip McMurray noted:

Both the United States Steel Corporation and the Pennsylvania Railroad have long been conspicuous for their fight against trade unions and the denial to their employees of the right of collective bargaining.

Mr. Coolidge, representing the Logan Operators Association, concurred with U.S. Steel:

I believe we would be justified [in firing any union man] because we know that he would be like a man coming into your house — if that man told you...that before he got out he intended to rob your house, I do not care how pleasant he was when he came in;

you probably would exclude him the moment you found out that was what he intended to do.<sup>20</sup>

Because of their collusion with such local law enforcement agents as Marshal A.C. Hufford, operators had no difficulties removing union families from their homes and putting union men on blacklists.

**The 1902 Strike.** Southern West Virginia miners and UMW organizers were fighting for a union as forcefully as the operators were resisting it. The UMW held its thirteenth annual conference in January 1902. More than one thousand delegates attended, representing 232,329 miners nationwide, making this the largest convention yet. In a speech before the delegates, UMW president Mitchell said:

West Virginia — or properly speaking, district 17 — is now more thoroughly organized than at any other time in its history; there is a total of eighty local unions in that district, with a membership of approximately 5,000.<sup>21</sup>

Most new members came from the northern part of West Virginia; however, some new members in southern West Virginia — around Welch, Bluefield, and the Tug River — prepared to go on strike shortly thereafter. The operators got ready too, hiring scabs in order to avoid any pause in production. On June 7, 1902, miners throughout southern West Virginia went on strike as operators threw union families out of their homes. On the same day, two men from the Pocahontas field died under unexplained circumstances. Within three days, 95 percent of Flat Top miners had walked out. The workers prepared to defend themselves against operator violence, when “a greater number of strikers can be seen parading up and down the field with Winchester rifles and belts of cartridges buckled on, so the slightest provocation might cause serious trouble.” Within two weeks, however, many of these miners went back to work, although some remained on strike through August. In late August the operators, impatient with the ongoing strike, called on the constable, who tried to remove the miners by force. The workers held their ground by fighting back, but were unable to win concessions from the operators. On September 4, after three months on strike, the miners voted to return to work on the condition that the operators would not discriminate against formerly striking workers.<sup>22</sup>

**Gains Realized from Strikes.** Union organizing produced direct as well as indirect gains. In 1904 some West Virginia miners won minor concessions from the operators. The *Post* reported,

The settlement provides that engineers and firemen now members of the union shall have the check off applied to them, but those who may join the union later shall not.

Meanwhile the UMW built up a million dollar strike fund to permit it to carry through lengthier strikes and put greater pressure on operators. Perhaps in order to preclude mass union participation, Consolidated Coal Company granted a 5 percent pay increase to non-union members in 1910. Many other operators followed, benefiting 45,000 miners in West Virginia, Maryland, and southern Pennsylvania. These meager gains were not enough to content West Virginia miners north of Mingo County, who continued to press for unionization.<sup>23</sup>

Nearly all the operators from the New River, Pocahontas, and Virginia fields of West Virginia, who continued to resist unionization, convened and decided to reject recognition of the UMW as a representative of the miners working in their fields. Meanwhile, miners appeared to win more allies in the national government. Six months after the death in 1913 of four men in a battle between the Wake Forest Coal Company and miners in the Cabin Creek area, Senator William S. Kenyon of Iowa joined Senator Thomas Martin of Virginia in recommending nationalization of the coal mines of Paint and Cabin Creeks.<sup>24</sup> Senator Wayne Borah of Idaho made a speech in which he stated his "thorough" opposition to U.S. Steel's resistance to any union representation. Simultaneously, however, Senator Charles Thomas of Colorado proposed legislation authorizing the President to use troops to mine coal, which would have precluded the effectiveness of strike efforts. Relentless organizing by UMW appeared to have made a difference in the national political climate, yet that difference was not having an effect on the daily lives of miners in southern West Virginia.<sup>25</sup>

West Virginia Governor John J. Cornwell lauded the benefits in the non-union, low-pay mines of the south. At a Chamber of Commerce meeting, Cornwell praised the service provided by coal production in the non-union fields. During the last strike, these mines produced 2,500 tons of coal, which Cornwell said "had saved millions of people from cold and famine."

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**The 1920 Strike.** Miners in Mingo County were not thinking of the welfare of out-of-state consumers when they went on strike in July 1920. Mingo County workers remained on strike through November, when the Governor felt tensions had decreased enough to allow a federal battalion of soldiers to withdraw from the field. Less than a month later Cornwell desperately appealed to President Wilson to send the troops back in, as violence between operators' guards and miners escalated beyond the control of state police. By Christmas, dozens of men had died in the labor war and the operators were showing no sign of capitulating to union demands.<sup>26</sup>

## VI. Unionization and Operator Retaliation

Daily violence by police and private guards threatened miner safety during this time, a fact recognized by statewide politicians. Governor Cornwell stated: "I am now and always have been opposed to vesting the employees of a private company, whether a detective agency or a coal company, with police power. It is almost certain to be abused." E.T. England, West Virginia Attorney General, concurred in testimony before the Senate committee in October 1921, saying, "the mine guard system...is one, if not the greatest source of trouble" in Logan County. England added: "The main thing is to prevent organization." He recalled one recent instance of deputy abuse of power, when "a colored fellow named Omar came out [of the polls] and said he voted the straight Republican ticket, and one of the deputy sheriffs shot him down." The deputy was still employed at the time of England's testimony. In another instance, Baldwin-Felts guards murdered Logan Sheriff Sid Hatfield on the steps of the county courthouse after Hatfield refused to cooperate in their campaign against the union. A UMW brief presented to the committee detailed yet another instance of state-operator violence, again carried out by Baldwin-Felts employees:

The two cases of flagrant open-shootings and killings...were in connection with Baldwin-Felts operatives — the killing of eleven men at Matewan and the killing of Sid Hatfield and Ed Chambers on the Court House steps in Welch in McDowell County.

Violence was not limited to blacks or the poor. During England's campaign for Attorney General, a deputy in Logan threatened to kill him.<sup>27</sup>

Amidst this constant violence, the union made great progress, though it had much less success in southern West Virginia. In 1900 the UMW had 897 members in West Virginia, representing 3.1 percent of the mine labor force and producing 0.2 percent of coal tonnage. Miners flocked to the union during and immediately after the First World War, and UMW membership grew to 49,027 in 1920. Those members represented 42.4 percent of the coal labor force and produced 49.5 percent of coal tonnage in West Virginia. Yet, as Fred Mooney of UMW testified before the Senate in 1921, Logan, Mingo, Mercer, and McDowell were counties without union mines.<sup>28</sup>

Extant propaganda provides evidence of the resources operators employed to stop unionization. In response to a labor pamphlet accusing the Tug River Valley coal company of shooting miners, L.E. Armentrout, vice president of Borderland Coal Company, wrote *Borderland and Bullets: Charges Answered*. Armentrout stated that Borderland had always maintained an open-shop policy in which workers could choose whether to join the union, but that the union then came in and tried to force all the laborers to join. Non-union laborers were “threatened, intimidated, shot at in their homes and at their work,” Armentrout alleged. Only when the union attacked non-union men did Borderland institute a policy of firing union men. “When their program was announced, and this intimidation started, we notified our men that if they joined the union under these circumstances we would let them go.” Instead, more employees joined the union, which declared a strike on July 1. Union members and the operators’ men exchanged fire, which Armentrout claimed was purely defensive: “The company’s employees returned the fire, but never on any occasion, started the fire.” Nor did the company fire into miners’ homes, Armentrout asserted, despite testimony to the contrary:

As to the statement of Mr. J.B. Smith in the *Roanoke Times* of the 26th and continuing in the affidavit of Mrs. Soard, that miners’ homes were fired upon by mine guards or employees of the company, such is untrue.

Armentrout did not discuss Borderland’s anti-union campaign, which historian Crandall Shifflett has characterized as “second to none in its militancy.”<sup>29</sup>

In testimony before the U. S. Senate, miner Blaine Maynard challenged operator credibility by describing an operator conspiracy to

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blame sabotage on the union. Maynard, a mine foreman, was planning on moving out of the Williamson area when his mine superintendent, Bob Satterfield, approached him with a plan to create conditions for the enactment of martial law to avert the potential success of a strike in which C.H. Workman was an organizer. According to Maynard, Satterfield said, "You go and burn that out [a railroad trestle] and claim C.H. Workman hired you to do that and we will get rid of him and this damned strike will be gone to hell." Satterfield offered Maynard \$1000 for his cooperation.<sup>30</sup>

UMW President McMurray and the miners thus fought a remarkably united group of extremely powerful businessmen and law enforcement officials who demonstrated a willingness to use any means to defeat unionization campaigns. Local sheriffs, such as Don Chafin of Logan County, often orchestrated campaigns of repression, prompting condemnation by the UMW:<sup>31</sup>

What, we may ask, are the fears of this rich man as compared to the fears of the humble miner of Logan County who saw his "buddies" shot down at Sharpless, who knows of the murder in Don Chafin's jail, who knows of the hateful espionage of Lively and other undercover men, and who knows that all the power of the law in Logan County is personified in Don Chafin, himself a rich man and a coal operator, with a staff of deputy sheriffs paid from funds furnished by the operators' association? What terrorism can radicalism hold that is more dreadful than terrorism of the law, administered for one class and by one class against another class of citizens?<sup>32</sup>

Testimony by former state officials and by former miners corroborated the UMW's assertions. In his testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Education and Labor in October 1921, McMurray presented a different perspective from Armentrout's on the origins of mine violence. McMurray cited the report commissioned by Governor Glasscock that identified the private mine guards as the origin of the violence in the Paint and Cabin Creeks conflicts. He also referred to a report by Lawrence R. Lynch in *Political Science Quarterly* that said the presence of deputized private guards "was the direct cause of much of the violence" in these incidents. The violence of the deputized private guards was systematic and not limited to the Kanawha district.<sup>33</sup>

Operators also conspired to create conditions under which anti-miner violence would appear legitimate and defensive. R.H. Kirkpatrick worked as a foreman for Burnwell Coal and Coke in Mingo County. Kirkpatrick testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Education and Labor that the superintendent of his mine staged a fire fight that could be blamed on the union in order to create conditions under which martial law and anti-union repression could end a strike. The superintendent said, "If we can get martial law in here, the strike is broken."<sup>34</sup>

Frank Ingham, a miner in Mingo County, provided to the U.S. Senate first-hand evidence of operator terror. Ingham testified in July 1921 that he had been mining for fourteen years in Mingo County when he was fired for joining the union. A constable served the eviction notice and forced Ingham and his wife out of the company home with only three days' notice. Ingham went to his sister's house in McDowell County, only to be thrown in jail without any charges filed against him. Ingham asked to contact a family member or a lawyer, but the sheriff told him: "the only message you can get out will be to God, and unless you hurry you will fail in that." Two minutes before midnight the sheriff released Ingham from jail, and seven men with two cars were waiting for him. Ingham told the sheriff he preferred not to get in either car, whereupon a prohibition officer clubbed him with an iron rod. The seven men tied Ingham's hands with his suspenders, drove into the country, and hauled him into the woods. They beat him until they thought he was dead and then left, but only after a deputy sheriff gave him one last kick in the face and took his wallet. Ingham managed to drag himself through the woods to a nearby cooling station, where a couple of laborers put him on a train to Williamson.<sup>35</sup>

Exiled from Mingo County, Ingham went to McVeigh, Kentucky, and found work with another coal company, only to be fired two weeks later when the manager learned he was a union man. That manager told him, "Frank, I have a telephone message from the manager of the mine you left, and he says that you belong to the union, and he advised us to get rid of you." Ingham next found a job with a different company, only to be fired five days later under the same circumstances. Eventually H.D. Ingram, the manager who had fired Ingham initially, invited him back to work on the condition he renounce his union



membership. Ingham accepted, in large part because he missed his wife, a schoolteacher in Mingo County. The operators had forbidden Ingham to visit his wife in Mingo County and had also prevented her from changing school districts in order to live with her husband.<sup>36</sup>

Ingham worked under H.D. Ingram only briefly; he was fired for a second time when he worked to avoid a “race riot.” H.D. Ingram tried to replace most of the white workers with black miners and pay the blacks lower wages, but Ingham, who was black himself, tried to convince blacks not to take the jobs. Ingham then went to work hauling heating coal for the UMW strikers’ camp. While building a house for his family in Mingo County, Ingham was arrested again. His brother and sister pressed for a trial. The sheriff refused, saying he would put the next “nigger” in jail who asked anything about the case. Ingham sat in jail for twelve days before a judge in Charleston ordered his release.<sup>37</sup>

The testimony of Frank Ingham demonstrates that operators and local law enforcement authorities worked together, using systematic violence to intimidate union members. While articles in the *Post* portrayed the violence as the work of both sides, testimony before the Senate Committee and from government inquiries shows that the operators used violence much more frequently and in a more organized fashion. Ingham’s testimony also raises the issue of race. The operators tried to drive down wages by replacing whites with blacks. In contrast, the UMW demonstrated remarkable colorblindness in its organizing efforts. This commitment to equity built alliances with the 15 to 20 percent of the population of the town of Williamson who were black. The operators used violence to repress organizing by both blacks and whites, and they exploited blacks’ marginal legal standing to pad company profits.<sup>38</sup>

## **VII. Changing Political Dynamics**

Diminished economic security manifested itself at the polls, and presented another threat to operator power. In 1912, three times as many residents of West Virginia voted for Socialist candidate Eugene V. Debs than in 1908. Although the new corporate elite maintained national political control, reformist local and state officials won office across the country. Established figures reacted fearfully to this political development. William Forbath writes,

Federal judges echoed the old Federalist dismay about local politics and their faction-driven disregard for the lawful rights of property. Local officials were “lawless,” “blameworthy,” “irresponsible” and sometimes “subversive” in their dereliction of duty.

With the notable exception of Sid Hatfield, whom the Baldwin-Felts guards eliminated, coal mine owners and operators prevented such “undesirables” from winning office in southern West Virginia. While the propertied classes throughout the state fought viciously against unionization, nowhere was it more important to maintain non-union mines than in Logan, Mingo, Mercer, and McDowell counties. By 1920 miners had organized nearly all the other fields in the state through the UMW. If the southern fields had fallen as well, operators would have been in a much weaker position to resist multi-state strikes, in which worker success depended upon ending regional output. Thus the bloody reprisals organized by southern operators represented a desperate attempt to maintain a position of power in regional coal politics.<sup>39</sup>

### **VIII. Operators’ Last Stand**

Continual violence between miners and operators characterized the “Progressive” era nationally. Miners in southern West Virginia had much less success defending their interests than had their peers in the northern part of the state, and as a result were still fighting as 1920 drew to a close. As coal operators transformed the local landscape, they held down wages through repression of unionization. Their control of vast tracts of land and a high percentage of the housing stock prevented workers from accumulating capital of their own and created dependent relationships between workers and corporations. Miners stubbornly resisted operator assaults on their economic well being, using union organizing experts to counter private guards imported by the operators. The miners tried to balance the increasingly concentrated power of the coal operators with their own collective institution, the union. Their resistance and the growing clout of the United Mine Workers spurred the coal operators to intensify campaigns of organized violence against miners during and immediately after the First World War. Union organizing posed such a threat to the operators that they resorted to violence that drew the attention and condemnation of some local, state, and national political leaders. Con-

cerned politicians responded by investigating the labor conflicts. Although these investigations did not have any immediate effect on the miners' quality of life, it opened possibilities for increased government supervision of labor relations in the future.

By the time of the Great War, every successive year brought more extreme poverty to mining families, described eloquently in the folk song "Coal Creek Trouble":

My song is founded on the truth  
 In poverty we stand  
 How hard the millionaire will crush  
 Upon the laboring man  
 The miner toiling under ground  
 To earn his daily bread  
 To clothe his wife and children  
 And see that they are fed.

Each year also brought an intensification of paramilitary violence paid for by coal operators and organized by local law enforcement and national private guard services.<sup>40</sup>

The growth of the UMW during the early twentieth century, however halting, indicated the growing power of laborers, without which operator violence would have been more violent and less public. By bringing the terror to the attention of the press and politicians, the UMW checked the operators' ability to repress their employees' attempts to live in a dignified manner. Although the coal companies introduced appalling violence and economic insecurity to southern West Virginians between 1890 and 1920, the growing strength of the UMW gave hope for eventual improvements in miners' standards of living.

## Endnotes

\* All *Washington Post* articles cited herein were accessed via ProQuest. The papers of W. Jett Lauck, lawyer for the UMW, cited in this article are contained in the Harrison Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia.

1. For a sample of the leading interpretations of the Progressive era, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Knopf, 1955), especially p. 236; Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900–1916* (New York: Free Press, 1963), especially p. 280; and Richard McCormick, "The Discovery That Business Corrupts Poli-

- tics: A Reappraisal of the Origins of Progressivism," in *Who Were the Progressives?*, ed. Glenda Gilmore (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 2002).
2. Altina Waller, *Feud: Hatfields, McCoys, and Social Change in Appalachia, 1860–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), pp. 22, 25, 30; John Alexander Williams, *West Virginia: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984), p. 102. Leading studies of coal miners during these years include Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780–1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), and Crandall A. Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880–1960* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991).
  3. "Opposing the Surveys: West Virginia Squatters Defy the Government and the Coal Companies," *Washington Post*, 5 March 1894, p. 1.
  4. *The Case of the West Virginia Coal Mine Workers*, before the Committee on Education and Labor of the United States Senate, October 1921 (United Mine Workers, 1921), p. 60, citing Lawrence R. Lynch, "The West Virginia Coal Strike," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 29 (1914), pp. 626–63, Lauck papers box 16; W. Jett Lauck, "The Control of the Anthracite Coal Mining Industry of the United States," in *Report on the Concentration in the Control of Industry in the United States* (United Mine Workers, 1915), p. 4, Lauck papers box 140. Data on the coal firms come from the coal statistics section of Lauck's "Report on the Concentration in the Control of Industry in the United States," which, unlike the section entitled "The Control of the Anthracite Coal Mining Industry in the United States," does not have page numbers. Based on directorships in a wide variety of financial and industrial corporations, Lauck concluded that the Morgan-First National Bank and Standard Oil-National City Bank groups were the most powerful business organs in the country. Their corporate networks reached into the hollows of southern West Virginia. E. J. Berwind, for example, ran Berwind-White Coal Mining Co., one of the largest mining firms in southern West Virginia. He was also a director of the National Bank of Commerce. H. A. Berwind, vice-president of Berwind-White, was also a director of New River & Pocahontas Coal Company, another large mining concern in the area. Williams, *West Virginia*, pp. 107, 129.
  5. Map of the Pocahontas Coal Field, undated, compiled and published by the Pocahontas Operators' Association, in the Harrison Special Collections Library of the University of Virginia.
  6. "Coming to Grips with Monopoly," *The New Republic*, 28 March 1923, pp. 123–4; Lauck papers box 153.
  7. See National Park Service website <<http://www.nps.gov/neri/hist-gal.htm>> accessed 5 November 2005. According to Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, pp. 156–61, company towns often had adequate housing; offering miner testimony and photographs from a coal-company library as evidence, he posits that miners' housing in the company towns he investigates — in particular, Stonega, Imboden, and Exeter, all in Wise County, in far southwestern Virginia — may well have provided an improvement over miners' previous experience. According to Lewis,

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in *Black Coal Miners in America*, pp. 124, 146–7, however, only 14 percent of houses in company towns in Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia had indoor running water (compared with 90 percent in Ohio), and 2 percent of those company towns had sewage systems or recreational opportunities, although one “model town” he identifies, Holden, is in Logan County, one of the four counties in this study.

8. Pocahontas Operators’ Association, *The Story of Pocahontas, 1863–1915: A Good Coal*, pp. 26–7, in the Harrison Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia.
9. Frank P. Harman, “A Review of the Pocahontas Strike and its Causes: From the Operators’ Standpoint; With Reply by ‘Junius,’” in the Harrison Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia; *In the Matter of the Investigation of Violence in Coal Fields of West Virginia and Adjacent Territory, and the Causes Which Led Up to the Conditions Which Now Exist in Said Territory*, before the United States Senate Committee on Education and Labor, Transcript of Hearings, vol. 1, 14 July 1921 (Washington, D. C.: National Shorthand Company), pp. 243, 239, Lauck papers box 16. Data from the U.S. Census on Mines (1910) and the U. S. Coal Commission (1922) suggest that company store prices were inflated in many regions of the country.
10. Based on an analysis of data compiled by Gregg Lewis, University of Virginia Professor Mark Thomas concludes that both real and nominal wages of West Virginia miners fell between 1890 and 1920. Data from the United States Coal Commission indicate that nominal wages rose more slowly in the non-union southern fields than in the northern unionized fields. W. Jett Lauck, lawyer for UMW, compiled data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics that, in conjunction with nominal wage data from the U. S. Coal Commission, demonstrate that most miners in West Virginia suffered declining real wages, with non-union workers suffering particularly. In other words, Thomas’s analysis of Lewis’ data corroborates the conclusion I reached based on a cross analysis of the data from both Lauck and the Coal Commission. While subsistence farmers in southern West Virginia saw wage increases as the coal companies forced them off the land and into the formal economy, such increases did not represent increased economic security, as data on home ownership indicate. Unfortunately, neither Thomas’s nor the Coal Commission’s data chart wages before and after the influx of the coal companies, so I cannot state with certainty the degree to which wages increased as formerly subsistence farmers entered the formal economy.

Operator-sponsored violence also contributed to economic insecurity, as the testimony of Ingham and others illustrates (Email correspondence with Mark Thomas, 2 December 2005, 5 December 2005.) Professor Thomas describes how he ran the analysis: “The Lewis data are taken from the *Historical Statistics of the United States* (1976 edition) — look at the section on wages for his series on average wages of bituminous coal operatives. To convert from nominal to real wages, I used Albert Rees’s cost of living index for 1890–1914, linked to the BLS series for later years. Both are taken from *Historical Statistics of the United*

- States* (1976 edition), the section on prices and cost of living; *Report of the United States Coal Commission*, Part 5 Atlas of Statistical Table, Senate Document 195, Part 5, 68th Congress, 2nd Session, pp. 170–3, 187–9, in Alderman Library at the University of Virginia; W. Jett Lauck, *The Cost of Living in the United States Since 1913 As Determined by the Statistics of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics* (United Mine Workers, 1921), Lauck papers box 148.
11. *Report of the United States Coal Commission*, Part 5 Atlas of Statistical Table, Senate Document 195, Part 5, 68th Congress, 2nd Session, pp. 170–3, 187–9, in the University of Virginia Alderman Library; Email correspondence with University of Virginia Professor Mark Thomas, 2 December 2005.
  12. Lauck, *The Cost of Living in the United States Since 1913*; *United States Anthracite Coal Commission Report, Findings, and Awards*, Minority report of Neal J. Ferry, Labor member of the Commission, 1920, p. 51, Lauck papers box 148; *The Relation Between Wages and the Increased Cost of Living*, presented by W. Jett Lauck to the United States Railroad Board, Washington D. C., 1920, Lauck papers box 149; *Wage Reductions Not Necessary to Decrease Prices: An Analysis of the Present Industrial Situation*, presented by W. Jett Lauck to the United States Railroad Board, Washington, D. C., 1920, Lauck papers box 147.
  13. *UMW Brief*, presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Education and Labor, pp. 50, 55, Lauck papers box 16; *In the Matter of the Investigation of Violence in Coal Fields in West Virginia and Adjacent Territory*, pp. 8, 9, 72.
  14. *UMW Brief*, pp. 14, 30, 36.
  15. *In the Matter of the Investigation of Violence in Coal Fields of West Virginia and Adjacent Territory*, pp. 267–8.
  16. *1900 U.S. Census*, Volume 2, Population Part II, p. 699; *1920 U.S. Census*, Volume 2, Population, p. 1321. Note: The Census used different terms and different columns to depict the housing situation in 1900 and 1920, so the numbers above involve some calculation on my part in order to compare equivalent groups. In 1900, the Census disaggregated housing into farm and non-farm categories, whereas the 1920 Census did not differentiate between these categories. I added farm and non-farm rental housing and non-rental housing together from 1900 in order to make comparisons with the data from 1920. I calculated rental home data by combining multiple columns from the 1900 Census, since the data were formatted differently from 1900 to 1920. Home ownership data by county are not available from 1890.
  17. "Following Some Bad Advice," *Washington Post*, 13 April 1894, p. 4; "Signs of Weakness," *Washington Post*, 24 April 1894, p. 1; "Negroes Make Good Miners," *Washington Post*, 21 May 1894, p. 7; "Coal Must Be Mined," *Washington Post*, 30 May 1894, p. 1; "The Ohio Compromise," *Washington Post*, 18 June 1894, p. 1; "The Soft Coal Strike," *Wall Street Journal*, 31 May 1894, p. 4.
  18. "Strike's Second Week," *Washington Post*, 12 July 1897, p. 1; "Miners Are Satisfied," *Washington Post*, 17 July 1897, p. 1; "Must Close All Mines," *Washington Post*, 18 July 1897, p. 1; "Calling on M'Kinley," *Washington Post*, 20 June 1897, p. 1; "Debs Is Discouraged," *Washington Post*, 21 July 1897, p. 1; "An Appeal to Labor," *Washington Post*, 21 August 1897, p. 1.

19. "Miners' Strike Critical," *Washington Post*, 23 June 1901, p. 3; "Marshals Fired Upon," *Washington Post*, 25 June 1901, p. 3.
20. *UMW Brief*, p. 33.
21. "Voice an Army of Miners," *Washington Post*, 21 January 1902, p. 10.
22. "Strike in Virginia Fields," *Washington Post*, 6 June 1902, p. 1; "Obeyed Strike Order," *Washington Post*, 8 June 1902, p. 8; "Heavy Loss to Roads," *Washington Post*, 11 June 1902, p. 10; "Pocahontas Field is Busy," *Washington Post*, 24 June 1902, p. 10; "Conditions Improved," *Washington Post*, 29 June 1902, p. 5; "Rioting in West Virginia," *Washington Post*, 5 September 1902, p. 4.
23. "Miners will Resume," *Washington Post*, 4 June 1904, p. 4; "Miners Plan Strike Fund," *Washington Post*, 15 January 1905, p. 1; "Idle Mines Orderly," *Washington Post*, 2 April 1910, p. 5.
24. "4 Die in Mine War," *Washington Post*, 25 July 1913, p. 1; "Uncle Sam as Miner: Kenyon Backs Martin's Plan for Federal Ownership," *Washington Post*, 22 January 1914, p. 3.
25. "Defy the Miners' Union," *Washington Post*, 20 June 1913, p. 3; "4 Die in Mine War," *Washington Post*, 25 July 1913, p. 1; "Uncle Sam as Miner," *Washington Post*, 22 January 1914, p. 3; "Troops to Mine Coal," *Washington Post*, 28 October 1919, p. 1.
26. "Mines at Work Despite Strike," *Washington Post*, 2 July 1920, p. 4; "U.S. Troops Quit Mingo Coal Field," *Washington Post*, 6 November 1920, p. 3; "Eventful Regime Ends in West V.A.," *Washington Post*, 14 November 1920, p. 19; "Wants U.S. Troops to Return to Mingo," *Washington Post*, 27 November 1920, p. 1.
27. *Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Education and Labor* (transcript), 24 October 1921, pp. 2, 501–10; *UMW Brief*, pp. 50, 60.
28. William Boal, "Estimates of Unionism in West Virginia Coal, 1900–1935," *Labor History*, vol. 35 (Summer 1994), pp. 429–42; William Boal and John Pencavel, "Estimates of Labor Unions on Employment," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 109 (February 1994), p. 269. Boal and Pencavel cite slightly higher rates of unionization, particularly near the turn of the century.
29. L. E. Armentrout, *Borderland and Bullets: Charges Answered*, Borderland Coal Company, 1920, in the Harrison Special Collections Library; Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, pp. 119, 122.
30. *In the Matter of the Investigation of Violence in Coal Fields of West Virginia and Adjacent Territory*, pp. 203–4.
31. *The Case of the West Virginia Coal Mine Workers*, before the Committee on Education and Labor of the United States Senate (United Mine Workers, 1921), pp. 66–8, Lauck papers box 10.
32. *UMW Brief*, p. 10.
33. *The Case of the West Virginia Coal Mine Workers*, p. 60, citing Lawrence R. Lynch, "The West Virginia Coal Strike," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 29 (1914), pp. 626–63.
34. *In the Matter of the Investigation of Violence in Coal Fields of West Virginia and Adjacent Territory*, pp. 317–18.
35. *In the Matter of the Investigation of Violence...*, pp. 82–4.

36. *In the Matter of the Investigation of Violence...*, pp. 78, 79.
37. *In the Matter of the Investigation of Violence...*, p. 101.
38. UMW's commitment to Ingham's welfare was not an aberration in the campaign for labor rights. In a letter from 17 May 1920, T. L. Felts, of the Baldwin-Felts guard service, describes a mass meeting in Matewan wherein a preacher named Combs "said the negroes were once in bondage and Abraham Lincoln gave them their freedom, and we the miners, both black and white, were in bondage and that the United Mine Workers were going to give them their liberty." Lauck papers box 15.
39. William Forbath, "The Shaping the American Labor Movement," *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 102 (April 1989), p. 1182.
40. From the WPA Federal Music Project, in the University of Virginia Special Collections Library.