

# THE FIGHT FOR JUSTICE IN VIRGINIA

Moss 3 and the  
Pittston Coal Strike of  
1989

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Throughout American history, there have been labor strikes that have dramatically affected the nation. Most strikes began regionally, with some taking on national importance and involving a wide variety of people. One strike that came to the entire nation's attention was the Pittston Coal Strike from 1989-1990. The Pittston Coal Strike was an intense movement that led some to believe that Southwest Virginia looked like a war zone.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the strike, the Pittston Coal Company was the largest exporter of coal in America.<sup>2</sup> Pittston was also "one of three large-scale producers of metallurgical coal used to produce coke for the steel industry."<sup>3</sup> By the late 1980s, the Pittston Coal Company impacted both the local economies of Southwest Virginia and the national economy.

Since little time has passed since the strike in 1989-1990, few historians have written on the events. Those who have written on the strike, including Anne Lewis, believe that the strike represented an incredible community-wide effort that brought the people of Southwest Virginia together in a special way; it unified

the people of Southwest Virginia like never before.<sup>4</sup> Historians of the Pittston Strike also believe one reason for the strike's apparent irrelevance in the area today is a result of the United Mine Workers Association's lack of continued involvement and the reassertion of Pittston's power in Southwest Virginia once the strike was over. Like most authors who have written about this strike, I agree that what made the Pittston Coal Strike so significant was how many people the strike brought together from both Appalachia and other areas. Not only were miners from Southwest Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, and West Virginia on strike, but there was also wide support from community members. The strike likewise garnered support from people all across the nation and the world.

Although the strike had its roots in a large area of Appalachia, this paper will focus on the events and the impacts of those events that occurred in Southwest Virginia around the small town of Saint Paul in Wise County, Virginia, during 1989 and 1990. This article will trace the strike as a whole, and it will offer a more in-depth look at some of the critical points of the strike, including the Moss 3 sit-in and Camp Solidarity. It will discuss how the strike ended, the impacts of the strike on the people living in the area at the time, and the future impacts of the strike upon the miners and other locals. This article examines the importance of the outcome of this strike on the livelihood and employment of many people in the area and the overall economy of Wise County. This analysis brings together various perspectives on the strike, including historical viewpoints found in books and documentaries, portrayed in local newspapers, and gleaned through interviews conducted with two individuals who played essential roles in the strike.

## THE PITSTON COAL STRIKE

The Pittston Coal Company sparked the 1989-1990 strike by taking away the retirement and health benefits of its miners. As historian Steven L. Fisher writes, like "many employers in today's economy, Pittston invoked global competition as a reason why coal miners should agree to a lower standard of living and less control over their own workplaces."<sup>5</sup> In 1988, Pittston sent a letter to its miners stating, "As of February 1, 1988, health benefits that we are providing under this contract will no longer be provided. Issues will be taken up during

1. Steven L. Fisher, *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 202.

2. Anne Lewis Johnson, *Justice in the Coalfields* (Whitesburg, KY: Appalshop, 1995).

3. Adrienne M. Birecree, "The Importance and Implications of Women's Participation in the 1989-90 Pittston Coal Strike." *Journal of Economic Issues* 30, no. 1 (Mar. 1996): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4227055>.

4. Anne Lewis, interview by author, 16 November 2012.

5. Fisher, *Fighting Back in Appalachia*, 197.



the upcoming negotiations with the Union.<sup>6</sup> This was a particularly hard blow since coal miners faced the pressure that one could suffer a career or life-ending injury while on the clock. The main focus for the union, and Pittston as well, during the strike was the pension fund.<sup>7</sup> Miners feared that without a guaranteed pension they could not support their families if they happened to be injured in an accident while working. Originally, the Pittston workers did not want to go on strike. Despite a long history of refusing to work without a contract, Pittston miners remained on the job for fourteen months after their previous contract ran out.<sup>8</sup> Though these workers remained on the job, community-based organizations in the area were preparing during these fourteen months to be ready if a strike occurred.

The United Mine Workers Association (UMWA), under president Richard Trumka, led the Pittston strike. In April 1989, Trumka “called a selective strike against Pittston operations to protest the company’s systematic violation of federal labor laws.”<sup>9</sup> Approximately 1,700 miners from Southwest Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, and West Virginia went on strike against the Pittston Company. The union miners on strike used three strike tactics. First, members of the union worked to negotiate with the Pittston Company through verbal communication. After this tactic produced less-than-satisfying results, strikers began to peacefully protest on Pittston-owned property. One encounter that will be discussed in greater detail later was the sit-in at the Moss 3 Preparation Plant. The third form of resistance was violent protest. Although this form of protest was seldom used, some strikers resorted to violence after Pittston would not acknowledge their verbal negotiations or peaceful protests.<sup>10</sup>

An example of this violent form of protest occurred in July 1989, when it was reported in Russell County, Virginia, that a coal truck driver had been shot at by UMWA strikers. Police investigators found two small-caliber bullets had been fired into the truck’s windshield but had not injured the driver. The police never identified the shooter.<sup>11</sup> The striker was

probably firing at this truck driver because coal truck drivers did not join the UMWA miners in going on strike.<sup>12</sup> There were also instances of striking miners sabotaging Pittston coal trucks, even though the Union would eventually have to pay fines for the assessed damages.<sup>13</sup>

The peaceful and violent forms of protest led to Virginia sending in hundreds of state troopers. State troopers had to break the strike to enforce Virginia’s “right-to-work” law.<sup>14</sup> While the union was on strike, there were many replacement miners working for Pittston. The state troopers’ job was to make it possible for operations to continue peacefully at Pittston’s facilities. One of the state police leaders during this strike was Lieutenant J.B. Willis. On the status of the state troopers, Willis said, “we are there to occupy a neutral position.”<sup>15</sup> The number of state officers in the area was so large that it was believed there was one state police officer to every two strikers in Virginia.<sup>16</sup> During the strike, most people in Southwest Virginia strongly opposed state troopers being in the area. Locals believed the state government in Richmond had forgotten that Southwest Virginia was a part of the state, until Richmond wanted to impose martial law upon them.<sup>17</sup>

The Pittston Strike ended in January 1990 when miners reached a tentative agreement with Pittston. The new contract included medical benefits for retirees, widows, and disabled miners. It also changed the medical benefits for current working miners. In return, Pittston gained greater control over union work rules. With the end of the strike, many union workers spoke of how they were glad to be going back to work after such a long ordeal.<sup>18</sup>

Although there were many events that the union miners and their supporters rallied behind, there was one event that was the turning point of the strike: the takeover by union workers of Pittston’s Moss 3 preparation plant. There was also another major rallying point where union members and supporters displayed the greatest amount of support and vigor for the effort. This was a place called Camp Solidarity. To fully comprehend the Pittston Coal Strike one must understand both Moss 3 and Camp Solidarity.

6. Johnson, *Justice in the Coalfields*.

7. Steve Fisher, interview by author, 31 October 2012.

8. Fisher, *Fighting Back in Appalachia*, 198.

9. *The 1989-90 Pittston Strike*, <http://www.buffalocreekflood.org/89-90pittstonstrike.htm> (accessed 19 Nov. 2012).

10. Richard Brisbin Jr., *A Strike Like No Other Strike: Law & Resistance During the Pittston Coal Strike of 1989-1990* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 2.

11. Labor in America, “‘We Won’t Go Back:’ UMWA/ Pittston Strike 1989-90” (Clinchco: *Dickenson Star*, 1990), 60.

12. Labor in America, “‘We Won’t Go Back,’” 98.

13. Deborah Rouse, “Miners Continue Demonstrations,” *Coalfield Progress*, 23 May 1989, 1.

14. Brisbin Jr., *A Strike Like No Other Strike*, 153.

15. Deborah Rouse, “Talks Resuming; UMWA Claiming Growing Support,” *Coalfield Progress*, 18 April 1989, 7.

16. Brisbin Jr., *A Strike Like No Other Strike*, 154.

17. Johnson, *Justice in the Coalfields*.

18. Johnson, *Justice in the Coalfields*.

## MOSS 3 SIT-IN

Union strikers deliberately planned the Moss 3 plant takeover. Moss 3 was Pittston's central coal preparation plant in Virginia and the third largest coal preparation plant in the world.<sup>19</sup> Before the takeover, Moss 3 was the main focus of protests in the six-month UMW strike.<sup>20</sup> In one instance, state troopers arrested five hundred strikers around the plant and sent them to local jails in several buses and vans.<sup>21</sup> The takeover of Moss 3 occurred "only after the courts and National Labor Relations Board had effectively closed off an entire range of peaceful, nonviolent tactics the union was attempting to pursue."<sup>22</sup> The miners were beginning to realize they "could not win unless they could somehow retake the initiative, slow coal production, and challenge the legitimacy of the legal rules that were being used to cripple the strike."<sup>23</sup> Former UMW president Sam Church made the occupation possible by luring several state policemen out of the Moss 3 area, located near the border of Russell and Wise County. Church led them to a preparation plant in McClure, in Dickenson County, Virginia. With the policemen cleared out, a U-Haul and a white delivery truck pulled into the Moss 3 plant, dropping off ninety-nine union workers and a local minister named Jim Sessions.<sup>24</sup> The fifty-three-year-old Methodist minister said he intended to remain with the miners to make sure the protest inside the plant remained nonviolent.<sup>25</sup> Sessions and the strikers brought with them supplies they believed would suffice for a few days in the plant and proceeded to march into the plant wearing camouflage, the typical attire of the strike.<sup>26</sup> Sessions and the miners successfully entered the preparation plant in a mere twenty minutes.<sup>27</sup>

The Moss 3 takeover was well planned by those who participated, including local citizens who did not occupy the plant. Locals mapped out where they would congregate on this day so they could protect Sessions and the miners

looking to occupy the plant.<sup>28</sup> Many of these protestors filed out around the gate of the Moss 3 preparation plant so that state troopers or members of Pittston could not interrupt the sit-in. Strikers even cut down trees to prevent others from entering the plant. After four days of occupation, federal marshal Cecil Roberts was brought in to negotiate with the miners. They were told to vacate the area or else be forcefully removed from the plant. At 9:20 p.m., the strikers left the preparation plant, leaving behind only litter and the stench of urine.<sup>29</sup> The Moss 3 takeover proved significant because, "it was a direct challenge to Pittston. For the first time in the strike the UMW had carried protest onto the private space of Pittston and threatened its hegemony over its turf."<sup>30</sup> The Moss 3 takeover was to "be the last major act of civil disobedience and collective protest during the strike."<sup>31</sup> As a result of the Moss 3 takeover, all Pittston coal production throughout Virginia was put on hold for almost a week.<sup>32</sup>

It is hard to say any event affected the outcome of the Pittston Coal Strike more than the Moss 3 preparation plant takeover. The takeover was crucial because it was the first time the union really brought the strike into Pittston territory. The takeover was also important because it received support from various groups who made the takeover possible, whether that be by caravanning the police away from the scene, forming a human barricade around the plant so that officials could not get to the protestors in the plant, or being a part of the actual takeover itself. The Moss 3 preparation plant takeover was a perfect example of the community-wide support the union mobilized to win this strike.

## CAMP SOLIDARITY

Camp Solidarity, located only a few miles from the Moss 3 preparation plant, was originally established as a place to house UMW and other union allies aiding and visiting the Pittston strikers.<sup>33</sup> From its beginning, the camp hosted large numbers of people involved with the strike. On June 19, 1989, "the camp opened with a gathering of a thousand strikers and supporters."<sup>34</sup> The camp was initially a place to

19. Fisher, *Fighting Back in Appalachia*, 205.

20. "99 Miners Occupy Pittston Plant," *Chicago Tribune*, 18 Sept. 1989, 8.

21. Bill McKelway, "500 strikers are arrested at coal plant," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 26 April 1989, 1.

22. Fisher, *Fighting Back in Appalachia*, 199.

23. Fisher, *Fighting Back in Appalachia*, 199.

24. Brisbin Jr., *A Strike Like No Other Strike*, 172.

25. "99 Miners Occupy Pittston Plant," *Chicago Tribune*, 18 Sept. 1989, 8.

26. Fisher, *Fighting Back in Appalachia*, 204.

27. Fisher, *Fighting Back in Appalachia*, 207.

28. Peter Crow, *Do, Die, or Get Along: A Tale of Two Appalachia Towns* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2007), 134.

29. Brisbin Jr., *A Strike Like No Other Strike*, 172-174.

30. Brisbin Jr., *A Strike Like No Other Strike*, 175.

31. Brisbin Jr., *A Strike Like No Other Strike*, 175.

32. Fisher, *Fighting Back in Appalachia*, 222.

33. Brisbin Jr., *A Strike Like No Other Strike*, 179.

34. Brisbin Jr., *A Strike Like No Other Strike*, 179.

house and feed visitors involved with the strike. Along with being a place to aid outsiders who were in support of the union, the camp also became a safe haven for locals needing a break from striking. The camp was conceived by those involved as a place of “liberation outside of company control.”<sup>35</sup> Camp Solidarity was the backbone of union strikers and supporters. It brought them together throughout the Pittston Strike. On most days, it was not unusual to see Camp Solidarity feed more than 2,000 people in a day. The camp upheld morale during the strike and helped miners raise thousands of dollars in strike support funds.<sup>36</sup>

Along with being the backbone of the strike, Camp Solidarity provided a place where people involved who would usually not interact with each other could come together and focus on the shared goal. The camp broke down barriers between people of different incomes and backgrounds.<sup>37</sup> Minister Jim Sessions believed Camp Solidarity had become “a gathering place for local strikers and community members and for the constant stream of visitors who come [sic] to offer support and to witness for themselves what [was] happening in this amazing strike.” In a single visit to the camp, a visitor could find “an auto worker from Michigan, an Eastern Airlines flight attendant from California, a British labor journalist, a Free Will Baptist preacher, and a Jesuit priest.”<sup>38</sup> It was a place of diversity, which was new for Southwest Virginia, a region sheltered and isolated by the Appalachian Mountains.

During the strike, Camp Solidarity became the center for the miners involved. One union striker at the camp suggested a chain link fence be put up around the camp’s borders to preserve it as a monument to the union’s fight in 1989-1990.<sup>39</sup> Camp Solidarity was not just a place to have a hot meal, take a hot shower, or discuss the issues of the strike. The camp was also a major symbol of the strike. The camp represented the unity, hard work, and improvisation the union, their families, and outside supporters used to win the strike. The camp was “a space for education in militancy and resistance through civil disobedience and the collective venting of frustrations about Pittston that reinforced the

identity of the striker with his cause.”<sup>40</sup> It was reported that there were around forty thousand supporters of the strike that paid a visit at some point or another to Camp Solidarity.<sup>41</sup> The camp was not only exceptional in bringing people together, but it also broadened the beliefs of unionism and issues such as human rights for both coal miners and other supporters.<sup>42</sup>

## A COMMUNITY VICTORY

The Pittston Coal Strike ended on February 20, 1990, with sixty-three percent of mining strikers from Southwest Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, and West Virginia ratifying a contract settlement created on New Year’s Eve 1989. With this ratification, work camps—including Camp Solidarity—were shut down, and some seventeen hundred Pittston miners were ready to return to work.<sup>43</sup> With this signing, UMWA Vice President Cecil Roberts stated, “I hope we can bring peace back to Southwest Virginia and let people get on with their lives. I hope the future is now in our hands.”<sup>44</sup>

The Pittston Coal Strike lasted nearly eleven months and involved up to as many as ten thousand people. The strike “was one of the longest and largest incidents of civil disorder and insurgency in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century.”<sup>45</sup> Many believe political pressures put upon both parties by the George H.W. Bush administration ended the strike.<sup>46</sup> One of the major results of the Pittston Strike was that it united not only the people of Southwest Virginia, but also people from across the nation and world who came to support the cause. Most support from outside Southwest Virginia came from ally unions, such as the United Steelworkers Union and the British National Union of Mineworkers.<sup>47</sup> The Pittston Coal Strike was truly a community strike. The joy of winning the strike was a victory for every member of the Southwest Virginia community. The unionism of the communities of Southwest Virginia led to a victory that the people of the area believed could never have been achieved if the communities had struck separately.<sup>48</sup> Even people not on the scene of the Pittston property protesting contributed to the effort in one way

35. Brisbin Jr., *A Strike Like No Other Strike*, 181.

36. Birecree, “The Importance and Implications of Women’s Participation in the 1989-90 Pittston Coal Strike,” 197-198.

37. Anne Lewis, interview by author, 16 November 2012.

38. Fisher, *Fighting Back in Appalachia*, 203.

39. Hans R. Agrawal, “Struggling at Camp Solidarity: The Pittston Coal Strikers,” *The Harvard Crimson*, 3 Jan. 1990, 1.

40. Brisbin Jr., *A Strike Like No Other Strike*, 181.

41. Brisbin Jr., *A Strike Like No Other Strike*, 180.

42. Anne Lewis, interview by author, 16 November 2012.

43. Labor in America, “We Won’t Go Back,” 99.

44. Labor in America, “We Won’t Go Back,” 100.

45. Brisbin Jr., *A Strike Like No Other Strike*, 2.

46. Brisbin Jr., *A Strike Like No Other Strike*, 3.

47. Brisbin Jr., *A Strike Like No Other Strike*, 180.

48. Anne Lewis, interview with author, 16 November 2012.

or another. Reverend Jim Sessions said, “like many people in the Appalachian region and throughout the country, we found our lives touched by the 1989 United Mine Workers strike in the southern Appalachian coalfields.”<sup>49</sup> Before the Moss 3 event had even taken place, it was believed that over twenty thousand union, religious, and community supporters from across the nation marched upon Pittston.<sup>50</sup>

Many restaurants, convenience, and grocery stores located within the protesting areas refused service to state troopers who were arresting members of the strike. One restaurant owned by Laurel and Wayne Rasnake in Dickenson County, Virginia, said they refused service to state troopers for two reasons: “survival” of the business and support for the UMWA.<sup>51</sup> The sign outside of their place of business stated, “we respectfully refuse to serve state troopers during the period of the UMWA strike.”<sup>52</sup> Another great source of community support for the UMWA during the strike came from local high school students. In Dickenson County, approximately one hundred and fifty camouflaged students walked out of their classrooms one morning as a form of protest in favor of the strike. Even though the students were told beforehand a walk-out would incur an automatic three to ten day suspension, they were still willing to fight for their family members and friends on strike. The large student participation at high schools did not include the group of students striking alongside the miners at Moss 3.<sup>53</sup>

## AFTERMATH IN SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA

The Pittston Coal Strike was one of the most important events in the history of coal mining in Southwest Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, and West Virginia. It was also a standout event in the histories of the United Mine Workers Association and other labor unions. Without a victory in this strike, the lives of many coal-mining families would have been crippled by the removal of benefits and retirement funds. Yet despite the positives, there were still several major problems that arose from union victory.

Because the Pittston Company could not afford to keep many of the workers they had before the strike, a large percentage of miners were laid off after 1990. As early as February 1995, of fourteen hundred Virginia miners who

went on strike, only four hundred seventy still worked union jobs with Pittston.<sup>54</sup> Not only could Pittston not afford to keep all the workers they had before this strike on staff because of financial reasons, the large coal company was also angry about losing the strike and wanted to show they still had dominance over the union in Southwest Virginia. Pittston began to show their frustration with the emergence of heavy strip mining in the area. Strip mining led to the polarization of Southwest Virginia communities as people had different views on the issue. Feelings towards strip mining were divided mainly upon the basis of income: it made the rich people in the area richer and the poor people poorer.<sup>55</sup> With the emergence of strip mining, poverty swept through the area due to fewer jobs available in the strip mining industry. Strip mining also led to division in the communities of Southwest Virginia over issues such as degradation of the environment. This community polarization within five years of the strike discouraged people who wanted to remember the strike as a success.

Another reason for this polarization and Pittston dominance was that the union lost much of its strength in Southwest Virginia after the strike ended. The union decided on its own to pull many of its resources out of Southwest Virginia. This lack of follow-through is not uncommon with the UMWA. Some who follow the union today believe one of its downfalls as a group is that it does not do a good job sticking with the communities it puts so much time and effort into during strikes.<sup>56</sup> With the polarization of Southwest Virginia communities through the power and control of Pittston and the lack of follow-up by the UMWA in the area, many miners lost their jobs and their communities fell deeper into economic depression.

## A FORGOTTEN CAUSE?

Though I have lived in Wise, Virginia, only twenty miles from the site of the Moss 3 preparation plant, for most of my life, I had never heard about the Pittston Coal Strike until I entered my second year of college. After learning of the strike’s existence, it was so strange to me that I had never been told about an event that had such a major impact upon the livelihood of the people of Wise County. I interviewed two people involved with the strike when conducting research for this paper: Anne Lewis and Steve Fisher. I asked them why, if this

49. Fisher, *Fighting Back in Appalachia*, 195.

50. Fisher, *Fighting Back in Appalachia*, 198.

51. Labor in America, “We Won’t Go Back,” 60.

52. Labor in America, “We Won’t Go Back,” 60.

53. Labor in America, “We Won’t Go Back,” 18-19.

54. Johnson, *Justice in the Coalfields*.

55. Anne Lewis, interview with author, 16 November 2012.

56. Steve Fisher, interview by author, 31 October 2012.

strike was such a success for the area, had I never heard about the Pittston Coal Strike growing up?

Fisher blamed this lack of enthusiasm and pride for the strike on the UMWA for not staying in the area to make sure the Pittston workers were still being taken care of by their company. Also, he believed that with the union losing power in the area, smaller interest groups within these Southwest Virginia communities wanted to get back to their own affairs.<sup>57</sup> Lewis believed it was the Pittston Company's political power that led to the lack of remembrance for the event in Southwest Virginia. She explained that the workers are rarely remembered after a strike is over. The large corporations of the area overpower the workers' opinions in the communities to the point where the workers are silenced. Just like the conflict over strip mining in the area, Lewis believed the battle between Pittston and the people of the area is class-based. Those who are wealthier, i.e., the Pittston hierarchy, will be heard more loudly than those members of the lower and middle classes, the Pittston miners.<sup>58</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although the Pittston Coal Strike may not currently be a hot topic of conversation in Southwest Virginia, it was nevertheless an event that affected and continues to affect the lives of those living in the area today. The strike resulted in a renewed security blanket for a great number of families in the area through the renewed health and retirement benefits package with the new contract. However, the victory brought grief to others in the area as they lost their jobs with the growth of strip mining.

It is tough to say whether there will be unity like that displayed during the protests at the Moss 3 Preparation Plant or at the meetings within Camp Solidarity ever again in Southwest Virginia. The Pittston Coal Strike of 1989-1990 was not only a tremendous display of will through protest, it was also an event of unionism Southwest Virginia had never seen before.

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57. Steve Fisher, interview by author, 31 October 2012.

58. Anne Lewis, interview by author, 16 November 2012.