



TEACHING LABOR'S STORY

“Destitution in West Virginia”: Report of Commission, 1922

The United Mine Workers of America [UMWA] began organizing coal miners in West Virginia as early as 1892. Coal operators resisted, often hiring private police to enforce their will on union-inclined workers. Decades of conflict ensued. One of the deadliest conflicts erupted in the town of Matewan in 1920, culminating in a three-day battle in August 1921 which sparked an uprising, known as the Battle on Blair Mountain, by 8,000 citizens against the mine companies. This drew national attention to the West Virginia coal fields. The New River Coal Operators Association, representing the owners, insisted that there was no “necessary” suffering and invited a well-known progressive reformer to organize a commission to investigate conditions in the coalfields. Commission members spent a week investigating living and working conditions of miners in the New River Coal Fields.

This document is an excerpt from the Commission’s report, describing living and working conditions of miners in West Virginia in 1922.

Many families of the miners in West Virginia are living without sufficient food; some have no adequate clothing. The Commission entered miners’ houses in which there was only a little “fat back” . . . , a little flour and perhaps a little meal; it talked to fathers and mothers who were giving their children two meals a day . . . The Commission found children who had neither shoes nor stockings and women who had no shoes. . . .

. . . We concentrated our inquiry upon the New River Coal Field . . . because the invitation came from the coal operators of that field. Many of the 119 mines in this field are working, the operators having reduced wages and being engaged in a determined and admitted effort to crush unionism among the miners. . .

Continued unemployment or at best slack employment has aggravated the distress among these families. For a year and a half there has been little market for bituminous coal. Mines have lain idle for months and whole towns have sat around doing nothing. Last December the number of mines in [New River] that were working even part time sank to seventeen and production sank to 6 per cent of the full time output.

This has meant exhaustion of the resources of miners’ families. Savings laid up during the period of war wages have been spent. . . .

In mining communities, which exist only for the mines, this is difficult [to find other work], and a little work on the country roads or an occasional odd day’s or week’s job is all that is available. . .

Families have begun to sell their possessions. One woman, whose hardship was only typical, had parted with her sewing machine and her cow in order to buy meat and flour for her family.

The regions visited by the Commission are on strike. In a sense, therefore, it is possible to contend that this need is due to the act of the men themselves. But for two reasons this contention is unsound. First, the market for bituminous coal has not yet been restored; even if there were no strike, therefore, it is probable that many mines would be idle or running part time. Mr. T.L. Lewis . . . in declaring . . . that there was . . . no ‘necessary privation’ in the mining districts, overlooked this important fact. According to Mr. Lewis’ own figures . . . thirty-seven mines in his own field were ‘curtailing’ on May 15, i.e., idle because of no market. The effect of this is merely to continue the distress that began during the depression of last year.

In the second place, present need is aggravated by the need that preceded it. The condition of many families is far worse now than it would have been if there had been full employment last year.

Indeed, it is possible to argue that the strike has tended to relieve some of the distress, rather than to augment it. During the winter and spring of this year outside agencies sent in some food and clothing to the miners. This was inadequate and intermittent and it stopped entirely on April 1, when the strike began. . . In its place the regular and systematic strike relief of the United Mine Workers came. While it is true that this affords only the twenty-five to fifty cents a week for each person already mentioned, it gives a continuous and dependable dole upon which . . . the miners can count. . . .

There is one group in particular who are in especially acute need. These are the families of mine workers who have been evicted from the company houses . . . These men, forcibly thrown from their domiciles or compelled to leave by court order, are now living in whatever shelter they can find. Some are grouped in tents . . . some are living in barns . . . others have found abandoned houses in which to dwell. More than three hundred families have been evicted in the territory visited by the Commission; and "house notices" have been served upon many more. These men are for the most part blacklisted . . .

The eviction of these men is an incident in the determined effort of the New River coal operators to crush unionism. Last Fall, although they had an agreement with the United Mine Workers of America that did not expire until March 31 of this year, many of them joined in an attempt to open their mines on the 1917 scale of wages and to re-employ their men 'as individuals' without union recognition or contract. The men, suffering from privation, went back in large numbers. In other words, the companies took advantage of the men's needs to break the union. . . .

. . . Under the 1917 scale, day laborers in and about the mines receive \$4.10 and \$4.68 a day. On the most liberal estimate of 240 days of operation a year, this would give the laborer between \$85 and \$100 a month. Impartial residents of the mining districts told the Commission that this was not sufficient for a decent living.

Unionism in parts of West Virginia where it has existed for years, notably in the New River field, is being driven into underground channels. Locals of the Union, made up of the unemployed, are meeting secretly . . . many of these men, clinging to what they regard as their fundamental rights, will work clandestinely for a reinstatement of collective bargaining. This bodes ill for industrial peace and is very likely to place the New River field in the same status as Mingo County . . . Whether the President's Coal Conference now meeting in Washington will afford any relief to this situation remains to be seen.

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