"Destitution in West Virginia": Report of Commission
June 30, 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.

Father RA McGowan

Rabbi Sidney E. Goldstein

Winthrop D. Lane

Text excerpted by Randi Storch, Professor of History, State University of New York, College at Cortland.
From "Destitution in West Virginia," Report of Commission, June 30, 1922, Box 70, File Coal Miners Relief, *Papers of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise*, Brandeis University.

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DOCUMENT 7.1

Historical Era

THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN AMERICA (1890-1930)

Document Title:

"Destitution in West Virginia": Report of Commission

Document Type: **Investigative Report, non-governmental**

BRIEF DESCRIPTION:

This document is an excerpt from a longer report describing living and working conditions of miners in West Virginia in 1922.

Document Selection and Teaching Guide by:
Randi Storch, Professor of History, State University of New York, College at Cortland

SOURCING THE SOURCE *Note: this can be adapted to introduce and/or create a header for the document*

On May 17th, T. L. Lewis, Secretary of the New River Coal Operators Association, wrote a letter to Rabbi Stephen S. Wise. Rabbi of New York City's Free Synagogue and a leader in the nation's progressive reform movement. Wise was preparing to address a meeting to appeal for funds to relieve distress among coal miners in West Virginia. Lewis insisted that there was no "necessary starvation or even privation" and urged Wise to appoint a commission to investigate conditions.

Rabbi Stephen S. Wise of New York City's Free Synagogue, a leading progressive reformer in the country, appointed commission members. He asked his close friend Dr. John A. Ryan to name a representative, and he chose Father R.A. McGowan of the National Catholic Welfare Council of Washington. Wise, unable to serve due to overseas obligations, appointed Dr. Sidney E. Goldstein, Associate Rabbi of the Free Synagogue and Director of Social Services. The final member Wise appointed was Winthrop D. Lane, author of "Civil War in West Virginia" and long serving member on the staff of *Survey Magazine*.

Commission members traveled to West Virginia June 18th and spent a week investigating living and working conditions of miners in the New River Coal Fields.

Intended Audience: The report is described as a preliminary statement intended to inform Wise and to be used for public dissemination.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE

☐ **Historical Context**:

Conflict in West Virginia coalfields was not new to the 1920s. The United Mine Workers of America [UMWA] tried organizing coal miners in West Virginia as early at 1892, but it was not until 1902 when a strike resulted in union recognition and contracts for more than 8,000 miners. Peace prevailed in the region until 1912 when coal operators in Paint Creek Valley decided they would not match the raise other companies had negotiated with their workers. In response to a strike by their employees, coal operators hired private guards to evict families from company-owned housing In response, miners engaged in armed attacks on company "thugs." By midsummer of 1912 union miners and their employers engaged in the longest and deadliest labor conflict the nation had seen, involving private guards,

striking miners and four deployments of National Guard troops sent by the Governor. Mother Jones, a veteran combatant in the United Mine Workers' battles, came to the region to support the miners and was sentenced to twenty years in prison for inciting a riot. By the end of the thirteen-month struggle, twelve strikers and thirteen company men had lost their lives. United across racial and ethnic lines, strikers won a small wage increase, the right to check independently the weight of their mined coal, and some smaller concessions.

During World War I, the UMWA expanded in the region when the federal government assumed oversight of the coal industry and ordered operators to accept unions. But in the immediate post-war period, coal operators fought back against unions in their mines. In Matewan, coal operators hired men from the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency to evict union workers from their homes. On May 19, 1920, the town's police chief, Sid Hatfield and his deputies shot seven Baldwin-felts agents. For the next year class warfare erupted in the region, representing a return of the problems Progressives attempted to address before the war. The fighting culminated in a three-day battle in August 1921 when an uprising of eight thousand armed citizens launched an offensive against the mines. This Battle on Blair Mountain drew national attention and ended when President Warren G. Harding sent two thousand one hundred army infantrymen to disarm the miners and their supporters. Hundreds of insurgents were charged and put on trial. It was not until workers gained the right to unionize in the 1930s that UMWA organized almost every mineworker in West Virginia without guns being shot.

The Commission visited and reported on conditions in West Virginia in the aftermath of the Baldwin-Felts agents appearing on the scene in 1920. In the months preceding the Battle on Blair Mountain word of "Bloody" Mingo Country had reached a national audience. Roger Baldwin of the American Civil Liberties Union attempted to make conditions in West Virginia known widely as did Winthrop D. Lane, an ally of Baldwin and a journalist who had been sent by the *New York Evening Post* to report on conditions in West Virginia. Lane published a series of newspaper articles and a widely read booklet on the struggle, which resulted in Lane coming to Wise's attention and being put on his Commission. An organization called the West Virginia Miners Relief Committee also worked to get the word out about conditions in West Virginia. This committee reached out to Rabbi Wise for help. Just before Wise made his decision to speak out against the coal operators, he received a request from one of the operators for Wise to form this commission and come to investigate. A Senate subcommittee convened its own hearings in Washington in July, but senators were unmoved by the coal miners plight.

□ **Meaning and Significance of the Document**

The Report's description of conditions reveals the poverty, destitution and high rates of unemployment of mine families in the region. It documents the effects of a collapsed coal market on employment and the difficulties of coal families to support themselves. Commission members report on the efforts of mine operators to dismantle union representation in the coalmines and contrast this with the role of the union and the coal strike in helping mitigate the worst effects of the economic situation in the region. The Report also documents the efforts of unionists to continue their struggle for union recognition in the face of employer resistance.

It is interesting to note that the Commission members disagree with coal operators on the question of who to blame for the conditions in the region. To T.L. Lewis, coal miners brought on destitution by joining a union and going on strike. The Commission argues, however, that destitution was a result of a long-term decline in demand affecting the industry as a whole and had nothing to do with unions. Unions, in fact, according to the Report, were the only force aiding miners and their families. The strike has relieved some the pressure in the mines. Supporters organized to have food and clothing sent to miners, the UMWA sent small amounts of money. Companies, on the other hand, have gone out of their way to disrupt families and destroy unions. Taking advantage of the desperate conditions, employers tricked men back to work for the 1917 scale, a rate of pay negotiated before the war, a rate determined to be insufficient. The Report notes the fact that union activity is being driven underground and Commission members express their concern for what this will mean for "peace" in the region.

GLOSSARY

Bituminous coal – This coal is softer than anthracite coal, and more abundant in the United States and more commonly used. It is used to fire power plants for industrial uses, including making coke for iron and steel production. It is highly combustible and dangerous to mine.

Blacklist – Employer generated list of union activists shared among employers to prevent the employment of unionists.

Collective bargaining – The process of creating a legally binding contract between employers and their employees that governs the terms and conditions of employment.

Company houses – This refers to housing provided by companies to their employees for a rent deducted from their pay.

Fat back – a cut of pork that is particularly fatty and inexpensive

New River Coal Field – Sprawling Raleigh and Lafayette Counties in West Virginia, the New River Coal Field was home to over sixty coal mining towns in the early twentieth century.

President's Coal Conference – On July 1, President Harding called a meeting in Washington, D.C. for representatives of the United Mine Workers and the coal operators to discuss conditions that would end the ongoing strike. The conference ended without results. Harding proposed a plan for production to continue immediately and that a government commission investigate conditions and decide how the conflict should be resolved. Coal operators agreed, but the UMWA refused. The strike ended in August of 1922. In September of 1922 Congress passed a bill creating a Coal Commission to investigate the coal industry. The President appointed seven men to the commission and gave them eleven months to complete their investigation.

The Survey Journal – Edited by progressive reformer, Paul Kellogg, from 1912 to 1952, the magazine was the most important publication of the social work profession and for social reform workers.

United Mine Workers of America – Main labor organization committed to unionizing coal miners in West Virginia.

QUESTIONS:

Document-Specific

- What is the significance of the commission members' backgrounds?
- What did coal operator TR Lewis hope would happen when the commission came to town?
- What did the report identify as the problems of industrial capitalism?
- What does the report suggest about the importance of outside organizations and individuals in witnessing, reporting and organizing support in this labor conflict?
- Why is it significant that the commission visited the region and reported on the conflict? Given that the President organized his own conference and commission, what does Wise's commission suggest about Progressives and their problem solving strategies?
- What does the commission's report reveal about its understanding of the relationship between democracy, capitalism and the rights of citizens in the coalfields? What does the commission hope will happen?

Historical Era

- How did a changing 1920s economy affect coal mining communities in West Virginia?
- What were progressive reformers attempting to do with their report? What role was the federal government taking in this national crisis?

- How did commission members understand the notion of democracy in West Virginia? Which groups encouraged democracy and which prevented it?

Labor and Working Class History

- What were the living and working conditions of coal miners (in 1920s West Virginia)? What were the larger forces that shaped their living conditions?
- What purpose did unions serve in 1920s coal mines? What moral consideration did commission members bring to their understanding of unions? How did they evaluate the morality of coal operators? Why?
- Why were commissioners unsure about the ability of the federal government to fix the problems they observed in West Virginia? What role should the federal government take on in such a crisis?

CITATION & FAIR USE

Text excerpted from "Destitution in West Virginia," Report of Commission, June 30, 1922, Box 70, File Coal Miners Relief, *Papers of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise*, Brandeis University.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Published Books:

Rebecca J. Bailey, *Matewan before the Massacre: Politics, Coal, and the Roots of Conflict in a West Virginia Mining Community* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2008).

David Alan Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981).

Elliott Gorn, Mother Jones: *The Most Dangerous Woman in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).

James Green, *The Devil is Here in These Hills: West Virginia's Coal Minters and Their Battle for Freedom* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2015).

Films:

Matewan. Directed by John Sayles. (1987) 2 hours 15 minutes.

Mother Jones: America's Most Dangerous Woman. Produced and directed by Rosemary Feurer and Laura Vazquez. (2007). Approximately 23 minutes.

Websites:

"West Virginia Mine Wars," compiled by the West Virginia State Archives:

http://www.wvculture.org/history/minewars.html

Mother Jones Museum: http://www.motherjonesmuseum.org/about-us/

CURRICULAR & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONNECTIONS

Curricular Connections:

NCHS US ERA 7 Standard 1: **How Progressives and others addressed problems of industrial capitalism**, urbanization and political corruption.

This document reveals the strategies that progressive reformers used to understand the problems of industrial capitalism, explains the problem of industrial capitalism from the perspective of progressives, and hints at solutions that progressives advocated.

NCHS ERA 7 Standard 3**: How the United States changed from the end of World war I to the eve of the Great Depression.**

This document documents the underside of 1920s business practices.

Common Core Standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3 Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5 Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.6 Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8 Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.