

# New Nonfiction from Rob Bokkon: “Betrayal at Blair Mountain”

There were 10,000 of them. Boys fresh back from the war in France, middle-aged guys who fought in Cuba with TR, and old men who'd only ever handled a rifle to shoot squirrels and rabbits. They were country boys from the hollers, both black and white, they were Italian and Polish, Hungarian and Slovak. Some had lost fingers, toes, or arms fighting the Kaiser. Far more had lost them underground mining coal. Every one was lean from months of starvation rations and mad as hell. And they had nothing to lose. They had lost their jobs, they had lost their homes, they had all been condemned as radicals and communists (and to be fair, a good many of them were). All of this because they'd had the audacity to demand a day's wage for a day's work, paid in American currency, cash on the barrel head.



They marched under many banners: the flag of the UMWA, regimental banners from the Great War, an occasional Gadsden flag, but the most common was simply Old Glory. The ex-doughboys brought their old uniforms out of storage and pinned on their medals, but most wore overalls, shirts that had once been white, and old work boots. The real uniform was simple: a bright red bandanna tied around the neck, red for socialism and the union and the blood of the miners. Such a little thing, a piece of cloth, yet it could get you shot down like a dog on the streets of Mingo and Logan Counties. In the company towns, the mine operators' wives had started calling the insurrectionist coal miners "red necks" (*sic*) and the miners quickly appropriated the name for themselves: The Red Neck Army.

The Red Neck Army marched together toward death, arrest, ignominy, unemployment and poverty, ready to take it all on for the right to unionize. For the right to be paid in United States dollars instead of coal-company scrip only accepted at a coal-company store. For the right to live somewhere other than a pineboard shack owned by a coal operator, who took the rent out of your pay for the privilege. For the right to assemble on the streets of their hometowns, unsupervised by armed guards who listened in on every conversation, who harassed their wives and sisters and daughters, who sometimes shot up the storefronts for fun.

They marched for the rights they were promised in the Constitution. Together they represented the largest armed uprising since the Civil War and the largest labor disturbance in the history of the United States.

Between the miners and their goal were a mountain, all the guns in the world, an army of trained thugs bought and paid for by big business, and the might of the United States military.

And chances are, you have never heard of any of it.

\*

This essay is not intended to be a full analysis of what happened at Blair Mountain. Rather, it is a meditation, if you will, on what Blair Mountain meant then and means now. It is an examination of why the story was buried for so long and why it is so important again, and why it will continue to be resonant as a post-COVID America reckons with the issues of labor and wealth and the rights of the working class.

The history of the labor movement in the USA goes back to the 1840s or before, and is fraught with tales of heartbreaking injustice, illegality, and immorality. The right of working people to organize for better wages and safe treatment should never have been controversial, but from the very beginning, business owners derided labor organizers as foreign-born agitators, malcontents who came from abroad to destabilize our American way of life, Reds and anarchists and, later, "Bolsheviks" once that word meant anything to American ears. (The same rhetoric is used today to describe Antifa protestors, BLM activists, and anyone at all who is brave enough to suggest that we might do things differently.) From the Molly Maguires in the Pennsylvania driftmines of the 1870s through the Pullman workers' strike in the 1880s, the Colorado coal miners' strikes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to Blair Mountain in 1921, organized labor was opposed at every turn by big business, the government, and the rantings of the popular press.

And yet the labor movement grew and grew. The American worker was often literate, and read voraciously; books became cheap in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and newspapers and magazines cheaper, and the works of Marx, Engels, Kropotkin, Emma Goldman, and Eugene Debs passed from hand to hand or were read aloud on shop floors for the benefit of those who could not read. Socialist journals and newspapers abounded; West Virginia alone boasted three socialist weeklies by the early 1920s, and

the cities of the Northeast had hundreds. None of that, of course, was as important as grassroots organizing, and thousands of union organizers spread out from the coalfields of Pennsylvania and the stockyards of Chicago and the steel mills of Ohio to spread the good news, risking their livelihoods and their very lives to do so.

Their sacrifices were often in vain, and not only because of the beatings they received from sheriffs' deputies and armed guards. Many workers were too afraid to join the union, or believed it was some foreign plot, or had accepted the bosses' mythology that if they kept their heads down and worked hard, the magic of rugged individualism would one day make them rich too. Yet the union organizers were able to recruit enough men to be a complete nuisance to big business, which reacted with increasing fury as the decades passed. Joining the union would get you fired, then it would get you thrown out of your company-owned house, and after a few years one of the collieries in West Virginia came up with the idea of the "blacklist": any miner who had signed his name to a UMWA card would never work again.

They had that power, because in West Virginia, the mine companies virtually owned the state and its government. Fifty years after its independence from slave state Virginia during the Civil War, the Mountain State arguably had less freedom than anywhere in the country. Mining towns were armed camps, patrolled by private detectives known as "gun thugs" who controlled every aspect of daily life. They worked closely with local police departments and sheriffs' offices to ensure that order, as the mine owners determined it should be, was maintained at the end of a rifle muzzle. All of the land had been bought up decades before by either the coal companies or the railroads that serviced the collieries, and what they didn't own the timber companies did. The miners were forced to live in company housing, which consisted of pineboard shacks built without insulation or even properly painted, so that the

boards would pull apart and let in drafts after just a few months. Sanitation barely existed; the miners' outhouses were built over the same creeks where they were expected to gather their water for cooking, washing, and drinking, so outbreaks of typhoid and cholera were common. When petitioned for septic tanks or even better outhouses, the mine companies blamed the rampant disease on the "filthy habits of the miners" and did nothing, evicting families who had lost their breadwinners to the disease and hiring new people brought in from the Northeast with promises of a luxuriant lifestyle and ample pay (both of which were flat lies). The work was brutal and dangerous, and mine safety regulations, such as they were, flouted regularly or ignored entirely.



Red Jacket Coal Camp, West Virginia, 1920s

The day of a typical coal miner started at 4 AM, because a miner's shift was sunup to sundown. It was dark when they went into the mine and dark when they came out. The miners ranged in age from 13 to 70 or older, if the elderly could still swing a pick or shovel coal. Prior to the child labor reforms

instituted by Teddy Roosevelt, there were many boys as young as five working in the picking sheds, spending twelve hours a day sorting slate and other impurities from the coal as it came out of the mines. Boys of ten could go into the mines with their fathers, since their small size allowed them to go into "low coal" tunnels of 18 inches' height or less. It should be noted that more unscrupulous companies continued to utilize child labor well into the 1920s in open defiance of the law, a practice that only ended definitively when FDR came into office. Within the mines, conditions were horrific. No breathing apparatus was available, so the miners were forced to inhale every particle of rock dust and powdered coal they encountered. Ventilation fans kept the air circulating but were often allowed to break down and remained unfixed for days or weeks; the heat in the mines often climbed over ninety degrees Fahrenheit and each miner had to rely on a canteen carried on his belt for water.

The work itself was wretched, taking a toll on the human body that cannot be imagined by the modern reader. All rock was dug by hand, with a pickaxe, often by men laying on their backs in tunnels two or three feet in height. Blasting of the coal face, done with dynamite, was an inexact science and cost many a miner a finger, a hand, his life. Once the coal was freed from the rock it had to be shovelled by hand into the mine carts with great care to ensure that no bits of slate or other non-coal matter were included. Roof-bolts, that kept the millions of tons of rock above from burying the workers, had to be hammered into place overhead. And the natural dangers were myriad.

The "black damp", a buildup of nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and water vapor, had no smell and could asphyxiate the unwary in seconds. Other gases were wildly flammable and could ignite from nothing more than the lamp on a miner's helmet or a struck match, exploding and filling miles of tunnels with a firestorm that few survived. Rockfalls were common, especially

in areas where the miners had extracted all the coal from a seam and were closing the face by removing timbers for later re-use.

After enduring all this and far more than we can list here, the miner would emerge into the night, black from head to foot, aching in every joint, knowing that he had to be back at work in eight hours, knowing that there wasn't enough food to eat at home, knowing that his home was too hot or too cold or falling down, knowing that he had one day off per week to look forward to, knowing that he was being paid not a daily or even an hourly wage but by the tonnage of coal he had loaded that day. The going rate in 1921 for a non-union miner was 57 cents a ton.

And yet, sometimes, you didn't get paid at all.

The coal came down from the mine in cars drawn by mules (automation was slow to reach the innovation-resistant coalfields of West Virginia) to the coal tipple, where "checkweighmen" would examine it for impurities. If a single piece of slate or rock, no matter how minute, was "found" in the car, the checkweighman marked it off and the miner received nothing at all for his work, to offset the company's "inconvenience" in removing impurities from the coal. This practice was regarded as not only legal but also perfectly fair by the mine owners and their well-paid friends in the West Virginia state legislature and the Governor's Mansion.

This was the life of a miner. This was the life that the union and any sensible person could see was unfair, unkind, unsustainable and unworthy of perpetuating. Yet the mine owners insisted that they were benevolent men. Did they not provide their workers with housing? Did they not provide them with food? Did they not pay them wages for their toil? Some of the more "enlightened" companies even organized baseball teams for the miners (since they weren't tired enough on Sundays) and gave them the use of company swimming pools and even

libraries, with carefully selected reading lists, of course. The press were more than willing to repeat the mine owners' propaganda, portraying them as enlightened, educated men of breeding, offering the hand of kindness to the "primitive, backwards folk" of Appalachia, who were "near-morons" unable to survive in the modern world, and who should be grateful that they weren't ekeing out an existence farming tobacco on a hillside somewhere.

If this sounds extreme and unbelievable, the reader is invited to explore press coverage of labor disputes from the era, and will discover that the examples given here are mild. When labor agitation flared, the calls for brutal crackdowns and strongarm tactics from papers as storied as the New York Times or the Washington Post occupied prominent front-page space, and were read by millions. Especially in the years of the first Red Scare in Wilson's last years in office (1918-1921) the rhetoric directed against working people and their aspirations was appalling.

And yet, membership in the union continued to grow. By 1920, the last bastion of completely non-union mining in the state of West Virginia lay in its extreme south, in Mingo, Logan, and McDowell counties. The vociferously anti-union sheriff of Logan County, a prominent Democrat by the name of Don Chafin, had been on the coal companies' payroll for years and had sworn that no organizer would ever walk the streets of "his" county unmolested. It is important to note that prior to the days of FDR, both of the major parties were reliably anti-union except when it suited them; Woodrow Wilson's Department of Labor had forged a convenient alliance with the UMWA for the duration of WWI, and then promptly turned on them as soon as coal production was no longer vital to make the world "safe for democracy".

When the powers that be arrested hundreds of miners in Mingo County without trial or warrant in 1921, the UMWA had finally had enough. Further inflamed by the murder of pro-union police

chief Sid Hatfield at the hands of Baldwin-Felts detectives on the very steps of the McDowell County courthouse, the Red Neck Army began to coalesce just south of the state capitol at Charleston. Armed with rifles mostly obtained through legal means (UMWA members were encouraged to join the NRA), the Red Necks marched for Mingo, determined to unionize Logan County on the way. They sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" as they marched, changing one line of the chorus to "And we're gonna hang Don Chafin from a sour apple tree, our truth is marching on".

They never got anywhere near him, of course.



Logan County Sheriff Don Chafin, 1920s.

Don Chafin had thousands of volunteers, scabs from the mines, Baldwin-Felts gun thugs, and newly minted "deputies", all armed to the teeth, spread out along a twelve-mile-long perimeter ridge across the top of Blair Mountain on the border

of Logan and Boone Counties. He built barriers and dug trenches just like the ones the doughboys had faced in France. He had surplus Lewis guns from WWI emplaced everywhere. He had private planes armed with nail bombs and gas shells, a generous donation from the governor of Kentucky. He had the United States National Guard and the Army Air Corps and a chemical weapons unit on reserve. (These last were never used, but do not forget that Warren Harding's government was more than willing to deploy these resources on its own citizens.) The miners fought valiantly for five days, until the National Guard was deployed. Unwilling to fire on United States soldiers in uniform, the Red Neck Army finally disbanded and turned in its weapons for a promise of safe-conduct out of the region and of no further prosecution afterwards, which the mine owners promptly ignored. Hundreds were arrested in the weeks following the battle, thousands more would never work in the mines again, and the UMWA in West Virginia was completely decimated. Blair Mountain was an act of bravery. And it was a complete failure.

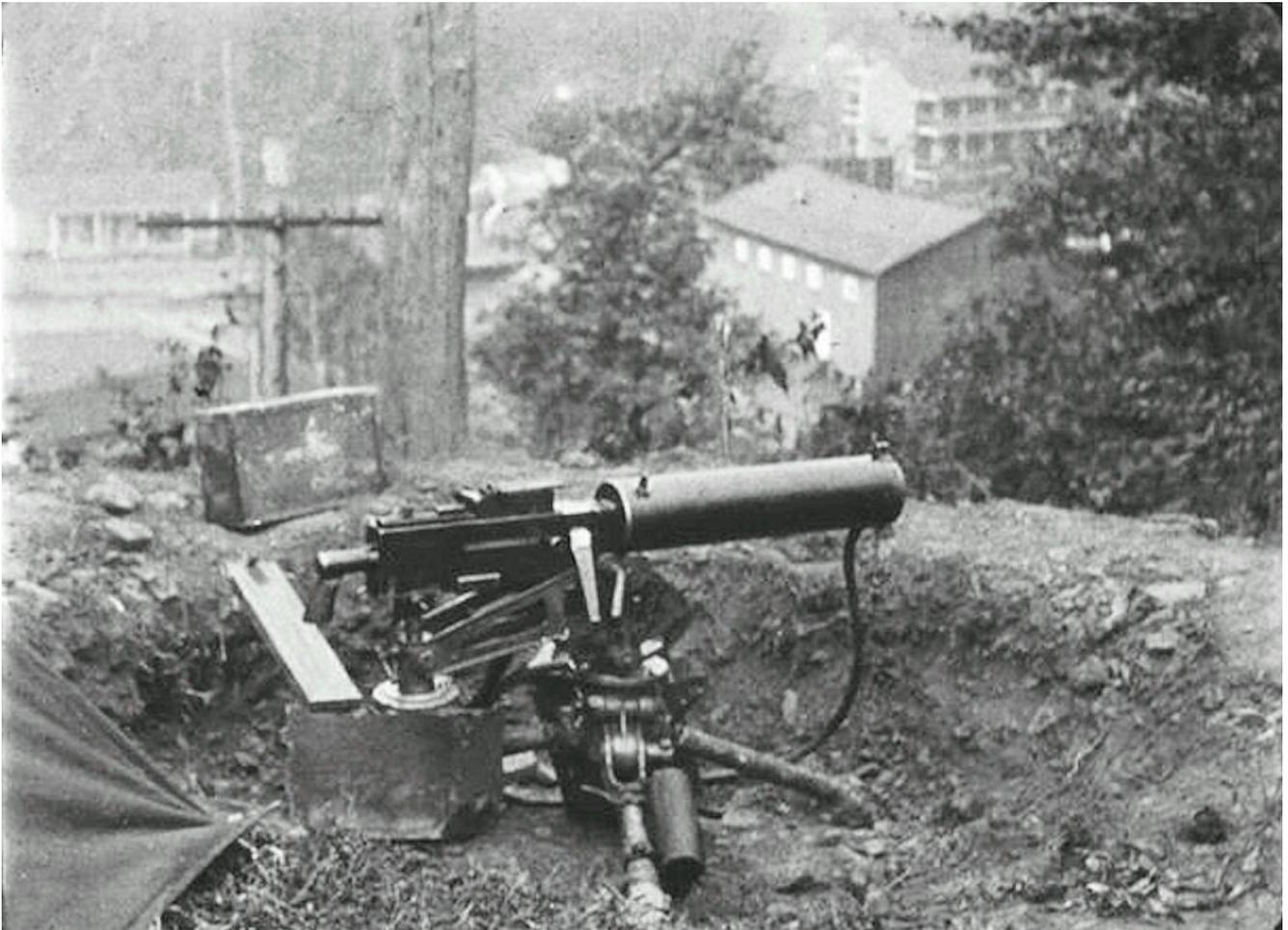
Not until 1933 would UMWA membership recover to pre-1921 levels.

\*

This isn't just history for me. This is personal.

My father, who passed away last year at the age of 94, was a lifelong UMWA member from Logan County, West Virginia, where the climactic battle of this forgotten story took place. Gazi Bokkon was the son of Hungarian immigrants, drafted out of high school in 1945, was a coal miner for decades, and then a federal mine inspector. He used to refer to his days in the Mine Safety and Health Administration as his "civil service" and was just as proud of that as he was his years on Saipan with the SeaBees in World War II. He'd been in the UMWA since his first day on the job and he remained an active member his entire life, faithfully paying his dues until he died. Growing

up, there were always histories of coal mining and the union on the bookshelves, coffee-ringed copies of the United Mine Workers' Journal on the tables, a little ugly statue of a slouched miner in his helmet and coveralls carved from a piece of coal on the mantelpiece. My older brother worked in the mines, and my brother-in-law, and a bunch of my uncles and my cousins and the fathers of half the kids at my school, and my dad's best friend that lived next door, and most of the men with whom we went to church.



Machine gun nest on Blair Mountain, Sept. 1921

The only reason any of those people earned a decent wage and were able to own houses and take their kids on vacations was the union. For the ones that were born before the 1940s, they had all grown up in poverty and seen their own lives transformed by their ability to organize, to negotiate for better wages and better working conditions, to have the power

to stand up to King Coal and demand what was due to them. Because make no mistake: the coal companies are unscrupulous, immoral, unethical, corrupt, and without the least shred of decency. They have always been that way and they will never, ever change. With the exception of the industry's acquiescence to FDR's labor reforms, they have steadfastly opposed any and all measures that would provide the slightest modicum of improvement to the livelihood or safety of their workers. This is all a matter of public record and is not, in any sense, a matter for debate. The only thing that has ever stood between the people who do the actual work of coal mining and the people who fatten themselves on that labor is the union.

For all the good it has done. Since the days of Ronald Reagan, the government has been either openly hostile or indifferent to organized labor, with even the Democratic administrations half-heartedly trying to undo the systemic damage that began with the breaking of the air traffic controllers' strike in 1981 and providing very little in the way of gains. Republican governors and state legislatures have successfully used the rhetoric of rugged individualism to sell their constituents on "right-to-work" legislation in dozens of states, leading to an inherently hostile environment for labor. Massive corporations like Walmart spend tens of millions of dollars per year on blatantly illegal anti-union messaging in their training, for which they are rarely cited or fined. Kroger, the famously unionized grocery store chain, recently hired Trump's former Secretary of Transportation, the notoriously anti-union Elaine Chao, to its board of directors. (You may recognize her as the spouse of the equally anti-labor Senator Mitch McConnell.)

When Dad was born in 1926, the events depicted herein were recent memories, raw and unresolved. The union was still illegal. Don Chafin, the quintessential devil of Blair Mountain, had only stepped down as sheriff two years before. And yet, the Battle of Blair Mountain was not discussed. It was not taught in school, it was not acknowledged by a single

roadside marker, it was not brought up at all except as a matter of local lore. Stories of the Mine Wars were shameful things, to be whispered about over a shared jar of moonshine when you were absolutely sure the mine guards or the sheriff's deputies weren't around.

By the time Dad went into the mines, after WWII, things had changed. FDR's Fabian socialism brought in the unions and gave them full recognition. John L. Lewis and his pro-business centrists had taken full control of the UMWA and thrown out all the "radicals" in the name of "Americanism", rewriting history to suggest a bland and bourgeois union that had always existed, a union free of Reds and Wobblies and anarchists. Better to pretend that miners had always been model citizens; better to pretend that a Red Neck Army of miners had never taken up arms and marched 10,000 strong against the forces of law and order. Blair Mountain faded away from legend to myth and from myth to rumor and finally to nothing at all, save in the memories of those who were there.

By the time anyone cared again, most of the voices had gone silent. Serious scholarship on the Mine Wars and Blair Mountain didn't really take off until the 1990s, when the few surviving members of the Red Neck Army were old, old men. Thanks to the tireless efforts of Appalachian historians and historians of labor, the situation today is very different. The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Blair Mountain is being celebrated as I write this. There are dozens of books on the subject. And yet, the Mine Wars remain an obscure footnote to American history.

The reasons for this are many, and they are not due to casual neglect or a poor understanding of history. They are because of deliberate erasure. This essay is being published on Labor Day weekend; the very institution of Labor Day in the United States is a sham, held on a day determined by the Federal government instead of on May 1, International Worker's Day.

(That day is "Loyalty Day" and "Law Day" in the USA. Imagine celebrating either one.) May Day is of course too socialist for the USA, too closely connected with the actual Marxist roots of labor. And it must be said that unions in the USA have been all too willing to go along with the ruse; for generations, the myth of the polite bourgeois union has grown so pervasive that right-wing, politically conservative supporters of capitalism have been and remain enthusiastic union members, more than happy to enjoy the benefits of organizing while opposing everything labor ever stood for. No one wants to talk about the Wobblies, who were instrumental in getting us the things we hold so dear like the eight-hour workday and the weekend; no one wants to talk about the anarchists, who started the whole national conversation about labor with the Haymarket Riots in Chicago, and no one at all wants to talk about socialism, that dirtiest of dirty words in the American political discourse, yet labor comes from and is defined by its socialist roots.

As for Blair Mountain itself, a few years ago Arch Coal, who owned most of the land comprising the battle site, sued the federal government and won, getting the site de-listed from the National Register of Historic Places. Their reason? They wanted to mine it. Using mountaintop removal, a rapacious technique that involves clear-cutting all the trees, blasting away all the layers of the mountain from the top down until the coal is exposed, dumping the resultant debris in the nearby valleys and streams, and then leaving the mess once the coal is all gone. Thanks to the efforts of historians and the UMWA and other labor activists and a good many environmentalists, in 2018 the site was restored to its status on the National Register and is safe for now. But the mere fact that the coal operators, all these years later, were more than willing to literally erase history in search of more profits, should tell you all you need to know about a business that has forever been dirty and will always be dirty.

Lest the reader be left feeling hopeless, things are changing. More and more young people are learning the history of labor in the United States. More and more people view direct action and strikes favorably. More people quit their jobs in the first quarter of 2021 than at any time since figures have been kept on the subject. Even without marked growth in organized labor, a sort of “soft revolution” is taking place. The American worker took advantage of COVID to network, to reach out for better opportunities, to decide that they were no longer going to accept poor wages and worse treatment. The current “labor shortage” is anything but; it is, in fact, a wage shortage. People are fed up. They know from experience that their workplaces, especially in anti-union “at-will” states, will fire them for less than no reason, and they are unwilling to extend their loyalty to those who do not offer them the same consideration. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we must learn again to listen to the American working class, because if we do not hear them when they ask politely, we will certainly hear them when they start to shout.

Solidarity Forever.

“Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living.”  
–Mother Jones