

AFD Ep 394 Links and Notes - August 1921 Centennial Battle of Blair Mountain August 25 - September 2, 1921 [Bill/Rachel] - Recording Aug 29

[Rachel] Intro: This week, we are marking the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Blair Mountain, the largest labor uprising in US history - and the largest armed uprising since the Civil War - which took place over August 25-September 2, 1921 in Logan County, West Virginia. The battle saw 10,000 miners come together in solidarity to protest labor conditions and assert their right to unionize. They were up against 3000 lawmen and strikebreakers.

While many news outlets are marking this Centennial, we are discussing not only the battle itself, but the conditions that led to this battle, such as the company towns that kept the miners in precarity. We will also tie the struggle of the miners 100 years past to the struggle of American miners today, who have many of the same grievances and are seeking the same recognition of their right to organize.

Background: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Blair_Mountain

- Miners in WV were strictly non-union, union membership was grounds for immediate termination. Since miners lived in company towns, this meant a loss of housing as well as a loss of employment. They were also paid in scrip that was only good in the company town, and they often worked using leased tools. Conditions were extremely precarious for the workers, and the stakes of daring to organize were too great. However, the new president of the UMW in 1919, John L. Lewis sought to unionize WV miners. He was under pressure to do so from rank and file members participating in the Coal Strikes of 1919 [episode #333: <http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2020/11/17/nov-15-2020-the-coal-strikes-of-1902-and-1919-arsenal-for-democracy-ep-333/>], as well as mine owners of unionized mines who were being undercut by the non-union mines.
- Matewan Massacre - May 1920 fight between newly unionized miners in an independent town in Mingo Co. and the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency. Mother Jones and Frank Keeney, president of the local union district, had inspired 3000 Mungo Co. miners to join the union. They were then fired. The detectives were hired to evict the fired miners from a coal camp outside of Matewan. They first evicted a mother and her children at gunpoint which enraged the miners. Word quickly spread and the police chief Sid Hatfield confronted the detectives and attempted to arrest them. Albert Felts countered that he had a warrant for the chief's arrest. Mayor Cabell Testerman declared Felts's warrant bogus and a gunfight ensued (7 detectives killed and 3 townspeople killed).
- The Matewan Massacre was a demonstration of the fallibility of the Baldwin-Felts Agency, and galvanized the miners into joining the union. Tensions increased between miners and owners, with intermittent skirmishes occurring throughout the summer of 1920. Police Chief Hatfield and Mayor Testerman fueled the resistance by converting Testerman's jewelry store into a gun shop.
- January 1921, Hatfield's trial for killing Albert Felts began. His legend grew, but the union was experiencing setbacks. The miners who joined the union were replaced by non-union miners who signed yellow-dog contracts.
- Mid-May 1921, union miners waged a battle against non-union mines. It was called the "Three Days Battle", and it ended in a declaration of martial law. Hundreds of miners were arrested.
- August 1, 1921, Hatfield was on trial for dynamiting a coal tippie. At the courthouse, he and a friend named Ed Chambers were gunned down by Baldwin-Felts agents. Word spread of the murder and miners quickly gathered in protest
- August 7, 1921, rally in Charleston. Frank Keeney and another union leader Fred Mooney presented Governor Ephraim Morgan with a list of their demands, which was summarily rejected. The miners were angry and intended to march on Mingo Co. to release the arrested miners and end martial law there. In between Charleston and Mingo

Co. was Blair Mountain in Logan Co. and the sheriff there, Don Chafin. Chafin had already sent troopers to disarm miners in the area the prior week, but his men were routed.

- Also August 7, 1921, Mother Jones held a rally to try to prevent miners from marching from the capital, fearing a bloodbath in the fight between the miners and Logan Co. deputies. The miners accused her of losing her nerve.
- August 20-24, thousands of miners began converging on Blair Mountain, even commandeering a Chesapeake and Ohio freight train. Keeney and Mooney fled for Ohio, and another local UMW leader, Bill Blizzard, assumed leadership over the miners. Meanwhile, Sheriff Chafin started preparing his defenses, backed by the Logan County Coal Operators Association, creating a private armed force of over 2000 men.

[Bill] Narrative of subsequent events (Source is a new Smithsonian article from a few days ago (Aug 25, 2021) marking the centennial

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/battle-blair-mountain-largest-labor-uprising-american-history-180978520/>):

- *According to Chuck Keeney, historian and descendant of key labor leader Frank Keeney, the miners swore themselves to secrecy over who was leading them to avoid legal retaliation. This meant that no single “general” led the miner army, although they did think of themselves as an army, and not just as peaceful protestors. Keeney says they were rebelling against the mine guard system, but they were also avenging the death of their friend. While the miners may have been a ragtag group, full of secrets, Keeney argues they were still well organized, as do historians who’ve recorded the history. In Thunder in the Mountains, a thoroughly reported historical account of the battle, author and historian Lon Savage describes a testy, oppressed and angry group of laborers. “They had been crushed and killed on their jobs and fired from them when they tried to organize a union,” Savage wrote. “They had been evicted from their company homes and machine-gunned in their union tents. Periodically they had risen in fury.”*
- *On August 25, 1921, it all boiled over and miners marched toward Mingo, where they hoped to force local deputies to lift the strict martial law that inhibited union organizing.*
- *The two sides fought for days, shooting stray bullets back and forth in mountain passes on the march to Mingo. With gunfire being exchanged throughout the march and in wooded, sheltered areas, it was difficult to ascertain, and even now, how many men were shot or injured at any given time. Before and during Blair Mountain, Logan County Sheriff Don Chafin ruled the region and sided with local coal operators, hoping to put down the rebellion and restore order in his jurisdiction. He helped organize a raid on the town of Sharples on August 27, when around 70 police officers fired at opposing miners. Two miners were killed, but as people ran from town to town the rumored death toll grew like a big fish story. Savage wrote that miners told each other bodies were stacked up after the raid.*
 - *Quoting from the History Channel website: By August 28, some 10,000 union men had massed near the border of Logan County and begun trading gunfire with company supporters. To distinguish one another in the dense forests, many of the miners tied red handkerchiefs around their necks. They soon became known as the “Red Neck Army.”*
<https://www.history.com/news/americas-largest-labor-uprising-the-battle-of-blair-mountain>
 - *Quoting now from the National Park Service website: On the night of August 30, John Wilburn, a minister and part-time miner, led a group of 70 miners—including two of his sons—up the mountain. During a dawn patrol, Wilburn and four other men encountered three of Chafin’s deputy sheriffs including John Gore, an infamous mine guard in Logan County. In the gun battle that ensued, the miners*

shot and wounded Gore who then shot and killed miner Eli Kemp. Wilburn responded by shooting Gore in the head, ensuring that he was dead. [...] For the next three days, the two sides battled with gatling guns, rifles, and other firearms along the ridge of Blair Mountain. During the second day of fighting, Chafin ordered his men to fly airplanes over the encamped marchers and drop two nausea-inducing gas bombs, and two bombs filled with gunpowder, nuts and bolts. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/the-battle-of-blair-mountain.htm>

- This was the second time in 1921 that domestic aerial bombardment had occurred. Listen to our episode from May of this year (#378) on Tulsa and the destruction of Black Wall Street for more information <http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2021/05/30/may-30-2021-tulsa-1921-arsenal-for-democracy-ep-378/>
- Going back to the History Channel article: [On August 31, after the deadly nighttime forest shootout between Pastor Wilburn and Deputy Sheriff Gore] ... *the main army of miners commenced a two-pronged assault on Chafin's trenches and breastworks. Scores of union men streamed up the mountainside, but despite their superior numbers, they were repeatedly driven back by the defenders, who riddled them with machine gun fire from the high ground. The miners made more progress when the battle was renewed on September 1. That morning, a detachment of union men assaulted a spot called Craddock Fork with a Gatling gun looted from a coal company store. Logan forces fought back with a machine gun, but after three hours of heavy fire, their weapon jammed. The miners surged forward and briefly broke the defensive line, only to be repulsed by a fusillade of bullets from a second machine gun nest located further up the ridge. For the rest of the day, the hills and hollows echoed with gunfire as the union men repeatedly attacked the defenders' lines. "Machine guns cracked up there so you would think the whole place was coming down on you," miner Ira Wilson later recalled. At one point in the battle, the din also included the sound of falling bombs. Sheriff Chafin had chartered three private biplanes and equipped them with teargas and pipe bombs loaded with nuts and bolts for shrapnel. The planes dropped the homemade explosives over two of the miners' strongholds, but failed to inflict any casualties. In the end, the miners' siege of Blair Mountain was only ended by the arrival of federal troops. A squadron of Army Air Service reconnaissance planes began patrolling the skies on September 1, and by the following day, General Bandholtz had mobilized some 2,100 army troops on the orders of President Warren G. Harding. Scattered fighting continued between the miners and the Logan Defenders until September 4, but most of the men welcomed the government intervention and laid down their weapons. Roughly 1,000 exhausted miners eventually surrendered to the army, while the rest scattered and returned home. It was later estimated that some one million rounds had been fired during the battle. Reports of casualties ranged from as few as 20 killed to as many as 100, but the actual number has never been confirmed.* <https://www.history.com/news/americas-largest-labor-uprising-the-battle-of-blair-mountain>
- The clashes at Blair Mountain come to an end with the federal intervention. Returning to the Smithsonian piece: *According to Keeney, the miners' doomed mission was the "closest thing to a class war" our country has seen. On September 2, 1921, President Warren G. Harding heeded West Virginia lawmakers' requests for federal troops. Their presence persuaded the miners to throw down their guns and surrender, as many were veterans themselves and refused to fight against their own government. They sought to*

wage war not against the United States but against coal operators. Keeney says it's not clear what would've happened had the miners continued, but anything is possible.

- "If they had continued to fight, they would have broken through, probably," says Keeney, who wrote a book about the labor uprising, *Road to Blair Mountain*. In an alternative history, a miner coalition could have overwhelmed the local police force and coal-employed fighters to push forward on the march to Mingo. There, they might have lifted martial law, freed jailed coal miners and made good on a popular miner's tune, "We'll Hang Don Chafin From a Sour Apple Tree."
- Aftermath: Newsreel footage from the time, posted to YouTube and included in the Smithsonian article, shows miners turning in guns to uniformed troops and uncovering weapons caches in the nearby hillsides.
 - *It's true that the miners didn't defeat Chafin and his deputized army. It's also true they threw down their guns when federal troops were called in. But to many, they didn't exactly lose. By surrendering only to the federal government and not to local authorities, they proved they were a force to be reckoned with. "It was Uncle Sam did it," a miner yelled as he leaned out of a passing streetcar during the retreat. Savage wrote in his book that the miner "expressed the pride of all that neither Sheriff Chafin nor [West Virginia] Governor [Ephraim] Morgan had stopped their march."*
 - Although pretty much everyone prosecuted for their involvement in the uprising got off the charges because it was so clear that juries all across the state were sympathetic, the uprising was still largely viewed as part of a pattern of failure for the union and union efforts in the coal mining industry in general: *membership in the United Mine Workers of America plummeted; continued strikes cost the UMWA millions and made little headway toward their goals of changing coal company policies. UMWA membership peaked around 1920, with 50,000 members, but fell to just 600 in 1929. Later, it would rise and fall again, following a roller coaster of peaks and declines throughout the 20th century.* (Don't forget to check out our bonus episode, #383, on the Alabama Coal Strike of 1920, which had happened the year before these events.
<http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2021/06/16/preview-june-15-2021-alabama-coal-strikes-of-1908-and-1920-arsenal-for-democracy-ep-383/>)

[Rachel] Other angles of analysis (see the several Twitter threads from historians/journalists we've looked at)...

- WWI veterans <https://twitter.com/100YearsAgoNews/status/1430532495020380160>
 - *The governor warns he'll call in federal troops to stop the march. But the miners are skilled riflemen, many of whom served in WWI, and spoiling for a fight. "It is time to lay down the Bible and take up the rifle," says one of their leaders, Baptist preacher John Wilburn.*
 - *Many of the marchers were World War I veterans, and they came armed to the teeth with military-issue Springfield rifles and shotguns. "It is time to lay down the bible and take up the rifle," miner and Baptist reverend John Wilburn declared. [...] Upon learning of the march, Chafin scraped together a 3,000-strong army of state police, deputies and citizen militiamen and prepared for a fight. "No armed mob will cross the Logan County line," he proclaimed. Chafin and his supporters had soon constructed a network of machine gun nests and trenches around Blair Mountain, a 2,000-foot peak that stood directly in the miners' path.*
<https://www.history.com/news/americas-largest-labor-uprising-the-battle-of-blair-mountain>

- [Bill] Also would be interesting to know if there was any cross-pollination of ideas from [the ongoing guerrilla uprising in Ireland at the time](#), although presumably most Scotch-Irish Appalachian insurrectionists were of Northern Irish unionist stock. The war in Ireland involved endless deadly ambushes of unionist and British police before the IRA would melt away again into their hiding spots.
- Black working class https://twitter.com/Dr_JessieW/status/1431020961000796170
 - *The Battle of Blair Mountain (and events surrounding it) is incredibly important for understanding capital's power, labor, and racial capitalism in early 20th century. Full stop.*
[...]
I don't know, however, that it's possible to write about it accurately without dealing with the other major events/patterns in the region: race riots & threats of race riots against Black workers & businesses; disproportionate incarceration of Black people in WV then and since.
The assaults on Black women and children; the testimonies from Black workers that they had to move carefully so as not to make white workers fear they were taking "their" jobs, that the punishments for organizing alongside white men could be brutal.
My question then is what is the meaning of Battle of Blair Mountain from the perspective of those Black workers, for whom the stakes were incredibly high? How did they join that battle to the linked struggles for Black freedom and workers' rights? Why does the story so rarely begin from their perspective? What is the meaning when we start with them and their families, the complexity of relationships under Jim Crow?
<https://twitter.com/wvulou/status/1431076068279078916?s=20>
For now I'll note that Eli Kemp, an African American, was the first miner to die on Blair Mountain.
- [Bill] Also important to note, as we talked about in episode 383 on the Alabama Coal Strike that this industry's unionization drives were unusually racially integrated and the situation in West Virginia was the same. The Smithsonian article makes this point too: *Despite the ultimate surrender, one of the many bits of Blair Mountain history that continues to stick out is the diversity of the miner's army. In 1921, coal company towns were segregated, and Brown v. Board of Education was decades away. However, Wilma Steele, a board member of the West Virginia Mine Wars Museum, says Matewan was one of the only towns in the United States where Black and white children, most commonly Polish, Hungarian and Italian immigrants, went to school together. Other miners were white Appalachian hill folk. Most all were kept apart in order to prevent organization and unionization. It didn't work. Keeney recalls one incident during the Mine Wars, Black and white miners held cafeteria workers at gunpoint until they were all served food in the same room, and refused to be separated for meals. "We don't want to exaggerate it and act like they were holding hands around the campfire, but at the same time they all understood that if they did not work together they couldn't be effective," Keeney says. "The only way to shut down the mines was to make sure everybody participated."*

There will be a centennial commemorative concert on September 3 this year in Charleston WV and then the UMWA will march 50 miles over the route of the 1921 marchers ending on Labor Day this year with a rally at the other end. (Visit Blair100.com for more info.

<https://www.blair100.com/>)

It's also important to remember that the coal strikes in Alabama that we talked about earlier this summer are still ongoing, as the Smithsonian piece notes: *In a more direct parallel to the struggles of the Blair Mountain marchers, miners in Alabama are now in their fifth month of strike as they fight for higher pay. Miners are particularly upset because they took massive pay cuts to save the Warrior Met coal company from bankruptcy and have gotten none of the raises and benefits promised for their sacrifice. In 2016, Warrior Met, a global supplier that mines the kind of coal needed for steel production, reached an agreement that included severe cuts to pay, health care benefits, time-off from work and more.*

Braxton Wright, a Warrior Met miner, says morale is on a bit of a roller coaster. The local UMWA holds solidarity meetings and cooks meals for miners, families and the community each week. Miners are also getting strike pay from the union and are supported by a food pantry. Wright, whose father and grandfather were miners, say striking workers are attacked on the picket lines regularly. They've had five instances in which non-union workers who break picket lines try to ram picket lines with their vehicles.

Warrior Met operates today without a contract, even though it has two union coal mines in the region. Wright says they've received a lot of solidarity from other retail, theater and even media unions, some of whom marched in a picket line with the Alabama miners. The solidarity with unexpected allies may be surprising, but so are environmental concerns miners have about nearby waterways, which Wright says has been polluted by coal runoff. They fought for a pollution check on the Warrior River; these are not backwoods miners unconcerned by climate change and pollution.

Strike fund: <https://umwa.org/umwa2021strikefund/>