

[Bonus] AFD Ep 383 Links and Notes - (Racially Integrated) Alabama Mine Strikes of 1908 & 1920 - Recording June 15

- **1908 Birmingham District Coal Strike** (July 8, 1908 - end of August 1908)
<http://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1478>
 - *In 1908, Birmingham witnessed one of the most remarkable labor disputes in American history. A bitter and often violent two-month strike pitted one of the South's few viable interracial labor unions, District 20 of the United Mine Workers, against northern Alabama's "Big Mules," the Birmingham district's politically influential, wealthy industrial employers. The miners' crushing defeat in the strike set the tone for labor relations in the coalfields, and in industrial Birmingham more generally. The widespread perception that the state had forcefully intervened on the side of coal employers alienated many. But perhaps most importantly, the union's disarray in the wake of its defeat also greatly weakened one of the few organizations in Jim Crow Alabama that had managed, however tenuously, to bring black and white workers together.*
 - Birmingham Alabama was established quite late, in 1871, to serve the newly discovered coalfields and other mining resources: ...coal operators calculated that low labor costs would be critical in gaining a competitive edge over their more established northern rivals. The availability of a large population of destitute freedmen and impoverished whites in the vicinity of the coalfields offered mine owners an important advantage: workers who were both desperate enough to settle for meager wages and so thoroughly divided along racial lines that they would not organize to protest their predicament.
 - UMW District 20, based in Birmingham, had succeeded a short-lived statewide miners union from the turn of the century. The mine owners had quickly made a coordinated push to lay off all union members in favor of non-union miners. US Steel, one of the most powerful corporations in the world, acquired the major coal producer in the state as a vertical integration maneuver to supply its steel mills, which gave its mines deep pockets to be able to withstand union pressures. Smaller mine owners drafted along behind in its wake, reaping the benefits, such as wage reductions to the miners.
 - *District 20 declared a strike to commence on July 8, 1908, and the early momentum seemed to be with the union. **Although only 4,000 of 20,000 miners walked out on the first day, by the end of the first week some 30 new union locals had been formed, and more than half the mine workforce had joined the walkout by the end of the second week.** Among the miners newly organized into the union were a number of men who had been strikebreakers only several years earlier. In addition, the national press reported on the UMW's effectiveness in shutting down mine operations through mass picketing. A number of armed confrontations erupted between strikers and company guards: miners were convinced that the only effective way to win their strike was to shut down coal production; coal operators were determined to continue, even if it meant employing strikebreakers in place of their regular workforce. In these clashes, the union men seemed to be able to give as good as they got.*
 - *By the end of July a sense of panic gripped district operators. The strike was more effective than they had anticipated, and the union seemed poised to win converts among workers in the largest mining operations. Mine owners resorted to a number of aggressive measures in their efforts to counter these developments, such as dispatching labor recruiters as far away as New York's Ellis Island to hire strikebreakers and increasing their use of unpaid convicts leased from the state to maintain coal production. Mine owners also deputized*

hundreds of armed men to confront the workers and urged Governor Braxton Bragg Comer to declare martial law and dispatch state troops into the coalfields, a request he eventually granted. In addition, owners and their supporters in Birmingham's business community openly advocated vigilantism and resorted increasingly to inflammatory rhetoric to rouse white Alabamians against the interracial UMW.

- *The most remarkable feature of the strike was the union's ability to unite miners across the racial divide, a development that was unique not only for Birmingham, but for American society as a whole during this oppressive period in race relations. A parade of striking black and white miners through the streets of Jasper provoked fury among members of Birmingham's business community who warned the UMW that its policy of biracial organizing would ignite racial violence. Prominent mineowners denounced the UMW's interracial workforce as an insult to southern traditions, and called for armed state intervention against the racially mixed strikers. [This of course included incidents of lynching.]*
- [https://www.bhamwiki.com/w/1908 United Mine Workers strike](https://www.bhamwiki.com/w/1908_United_Mine_Workers_strike) Local business owner/philanthropist Louis Pizitz, a Russian immigrant, provided food to the workers in the tent camps to support their strike.
- Striking miners lived in company housing and were evicted but set up tent camps.
- *The mine operators' increasingly strident appeals for forceful intervention, supported by lurid reports of "racial mixing" among striking miners in Birmingham's business press, eventually won over Governor Comer. In late August, he summoned UMW leaders to his office and warned that legislators would not tolerate what they perceived as efforts to promote equality among black and white miners. Union leaders denied such intentions, but their efforts were in vain. Under the guise of containing a public health nuisance, Comer ordered the military on August 26 to cut down the tent colonies that had become home to those strikers evicted from company housing. Four days later, union officials declared the strike over, and despite grass-roots efforts to continue the strike, the scale of the defeat was soon apparent. Mine owners, however, relished the new situation, confident that they could revitalize the coal industry on the basis of a more compliant workforce. One year later, the mines had returned to normal operations, and the miners' efforts toward labor reforms had ended in utter failure.*
- **1920 Alabama Coal Strike** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1920 Alabama coal strike](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1920_Alabama_coal_strike)
September 7, 1920 - February 1921
 - Statewide strike by the United Mine Workers against coal mine operators, backed by national UMW leadership.
 - About 15,000 of 27,000 Alabama miners went on strike at the start.
 - They wanted union recognition and wage increases
 - Union miners were also in direct competition in many coalfields against Jim Crow prison labor, working in brutal conditions for almost no money
 - As in 1908, many of the miners lived in company towns in housing owned by the mine owners they were striking against, which left them vulnerable to legal eviction and homelessness during the strike
 - United Mine Workers was an integrated union in Jim Crow Alabama. Popular opinion at the time was against them, both from white people and the Black middle class, who saw black capitalism as their route to economic security.
 - This was a markedly violent strike, with casualties on both sides, but significantly more on the union side. The first blow was struck by the miners on September

16, when they killed the general manager of the Corona Coal Company, Leon Adler, along with Earl Edgil, a company guard. Retaliation quickly followed, mostly aimed at Black miners. At least 16 miners were killed, more than half of them Black. It is unknown how many strikers were wounded.

- The governor called out the Alabama Guard and state police which engaged in violent attacks and lynchings; the state police even indiscriminately shot machine guns in a Black business district in Pratt City.
- The governor was the arbitrator at the end of the strike but basically completely took the side of the mine owners on every demand and denigrated Black union members. The union wasn't recognized and basically withdrew from Alabama, wages did not rise, and striking workers were not rehired.
 - Document submitting to arbitration by the governor without reservation: <https://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/voices/id/6447>
- [jstor.org/stable/1052655](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1052655) The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America (Northrup; Southern Economic Journal; April 1943)
- Union officials were painted as outside agitators, and it was implied that Northern Black UMW organizers were there to lead Southern Black miners astray.

While there is every likelihood that racial friction would not have been absent in an atmosphere so tense as that of an Alabama coal strike, it is clear that the coal operators and their allies were responsible for bringing the question of color to the forefront and making it a central issue of the industrial conflicts of both 1908 and 1920-21.