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"The Bottom Would Drop Out of Everything": A Brief History of the Battle for Blair Mountain

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Abstract

In the summer of 1921, thousands of Appalachian miners took up arms and marched in southwest West Virginia. Fighting back against attacks on miners' unions like the United Mine Workers of America, the conflict quickly turned violent. The Battle for Blair Mountain, as it came to be known, was one of the largest labor strikes in American history and impacted the history of the Coal Wars and the United States for decades to come. This analysis uses interviews with people who experienced the battle as well as the speeches of labor leaders Samuel Gompers and John Lewis to discuss the events and implications of the battle.

Keywords

blair mountain, labor strike, mining, coal wars, labor history

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A Brief History of the Battle for Blair Mountain

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I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

In the summer of 1921, West Virginia went to war. Armed pickets patrolled the hills of Logan County, shooting those who could not provide military passcodes.[1] Military entrenchments stocked with Thompson submachine guns guarded coal company towns throughout the region.[2] While companies of US Army soldiers constructed posts on the mountains, bombing planes flew overhead, conducting surveillance.[3] Private planes, as well, flew over the combatants, dropping gas bombs and improvised explosive devices.[4] In what would become known as the Battle for Blair Mountain, tens of thousands of West Virginia mine workers led an armed uprising against the local coal companies and their private detectives, becoming the largest labor movement in American history.

Though the Battle for Blair Mountain was only one of dozens of miner revolts in the "Coal Wars" of the early 19th century, it is especially notable for the sheer number of those involved, the violence of the uprising itself, and the awareness it raised for the miner's labor movement. Two groups of sources are especially valuable in understanding the Battle for Blair Mountain: First, a series of interviews conducted for *Even the Heavens Weep*, a 1985 documentary on the "Coal Wars". The transcripts, available through the West Virginia State Archives, provide first-hand accounts of the battle and discussions of its practical legacy. These oral histories from some of the last living Americans to have experienced the battle have not been meaningfully included in the

[1] Herman Pugh, "Statement of John Brown, in Re: Invasion of Logan County by Miners" (Herman N. Pugh Shorthand Reporting, October 1921), Radford University Collections, William C. and Bill Blizzard When Miners March Collection, https://monk.radford.edu/records/item/17807-statement-of-john-brown-in-re-invasion-of-logan-county-by-miners?offset=1,17-20.
[2] Ethan Karnes and Shaun Slifer, "The Land Will Tell the Story: Beneath the Soil of Blair Mountain," Beneath the Soil of Blair Mountain, accessed April 26, 2022, https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9aff728b3785441aa512f0adf4286b3d.
[3] "Army Fliers Fall in West Virginia," *The New York Times*, September 4, 1921, sec. 1.
[4] James Green, *The Devil Is Here in These Hills: West Virginia's Coal Miners and Their Battle for Freedom* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2015), 278.

written historiography of the Battle for Blair Mountain.[5] This analysis aims to introduce their voices to the historical record.

Second, the speeches and writings of two major labor leaders are used to help contextualize the events of Blair Mountain within larger national and industrial trends: Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and John Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMW).[6] By considering national leaders who aimed to influence national and corporate policy and local participants whose goals reflect the lived experiences of West Virginia miners, the Battle for Blair Mountain is understood as both part of a nationwide decades-long struggle as well as a local event which reflects the specific challenges of Appalachian miners.

It is most practical to begin an analysis of the Battle for Blair Mountain with labor conditions after World War One. During the Great War, American war manufacturing industries increased, including the coal industry, which helped fuel the vehicles that brought Yankee doughboys across the Atlantic and onto European battlefields. This revenue growth increased miner salaries; average hourly earnings of bituminous-coal miners leaped from $0.358 in 1914 to $0.759 in 1919.[7] Miner's unions grew during the war years, advocating for better working conditions and higher wages. These unions helped reduce miner's dependence on coal operators, who commonly provided substandard houses in "company towns" and used "scrip", a "form of

[5] The transcripts of these interviews retain both the speech patterns of rural West Virginians as well as the typewritten errors of the transcribers. Thus, misspellings and typos have been edited for the sake of clarity when they appear to reflect a transcription error rather than the authentic voice of the subject.
[6] There are dozens of other leaders whose impact on the Battle for Blair Mountain deserve study, most notably "Mother" Mary Jones, co-founder of the Industrial Workers of the World, and Phillip Murray, vice president of the UMW. Regional leaders like Fred Mooney, Frank Keeney, and Bill Blizzard would also be valuable for further study on this topic. However, for the sake of brevity and clarity, these leaders are not meaningfully studied here.
[7] Witt Bowden, "War and Postwar Wages, Prices, and Hours, 1914-23 and 1939-44: Part 1. - Comparisons of World Wars I and II," *Monthly Labor Review* 61, no. 4 (October 1945): 613–23, 614.

company money that could be redeemed at the company store" but nowhere else.[8] As a local farmer intoned, "If that union would to be broke, why… I'd think us poor fellows would have to just work and do the best you could. Root hog or die for to make a living… and I think the bottom would drop out of everything."[9]

However, when the Great War formally concluded in 1918, demand for coal declined, especially the "soft coal" which struggled to compete with oil in the domestic market.[10] John Lewis, president of the UMW and former miner, argued that the coal operators' continued expansion in the face of declining demand was nothing more than an "orgy of speculative investment in an over-done industry" which led to "self-inflicted losses."[11] Because coal companies were unwilling to stop post-war expansion, they turned to wage reduction to ensure profitability. This, of course, led to conflict with coal unions like Lewis' UMW. At the same time, though, labor unions weakened nation-wide. During the war, union membership increased by 2,503,100 members, almost doubling in size. In the following three years, membership would decline by 26%, atrophying 1,330,800 members.[12]

This challenge to unions was felt acutely by the UMW, formed in 1890 to strike for better wages and conditions for coal miners. Though the UMW had been effective in expanding membership into northern West Virginia, southern West Virginia remained difficult to unionize. Mingo County, home of the state's richest coalfield, was one such non-union county which the

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[8] "Arthur Kilgore Mine Scrip Collection," Yale University Energy History, accessed April 26, 2022, https://energyhistory.yale.edu/library-item/arthur-kilgore-mine-scrip-collection.
[9] Ronce Hunter, Interview with Ronce Hunter, interview by Dave Ferraro, n.d., West Virginia Archives, https://archive.wvculture.org/history/labor/hunterronce.pdf, 9.
[10] Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John Lewis: A Biography* (New York: The New York Times Book Company, 1977), 76.
[11] John Lewis, *The Miners' Fight for American Standards* (Indianapolis: The Bell Publishing Company, 1925), 26.
[12] Leo Wolman, *The Growth of American Trade Unions, 1880-1923* (Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1924), 34.

UMW hoped to add to their organization.[13] Meanwhile, neighboring Logan County was "the base of the mine operators' power" and home to County Sheriff Don Chafin, who was paid by coal operators to "protect them against the union and its organizers."[14] Chafin was infamous among coal miners. One woman who experienced the battle as a child remembered, "I hardly drew a breath while I was there in Logan town. It was just frightful to think that they were under… they couldn't unionize or do what they wanted to do. They had thugs, I think is what they called them and people were just afraid to go."[15] Another shivered that Chafin "was a regular king in Logan County. […] He'd give [local men] authority to carry a gun and put a tin badge on and tell them to keep all the union organizers out of Logan County."[16] When the battle came, Chafin would lead the coal operators' private army.

The UMW attempted to unionize despite Chafin's intimidation, which coal operators used to justify violent crackdowns on mine laborers. Beginning in 1920, Mingo County miners were forced to sign contracts asserting that they would not "assist or encourage in any way, the United Mine Workers of America, The I. W. W., or any other labor union, organization or association."[17] These contracts were especially egregious to Samuel Gompers, president of the AFL, who emphasized that such "blank contracts" could lead to discrimination against union members nationwide. Speaking at the Industrial Conference in Washington, D.C., Gompers exclaimed, "they are laying the basis for suits against these officers or these organizations should they attempt

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[13] Robert Shogan, *The Battle of Blair Mountain: The Story of America's Largest Labor Uprising* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 4.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Hazel Riley, Interview with Hazel Riley, interview by Beth Nogay, n.d., West Virginia Archives, https://archive.wvculture.org/history/labor/rileyhazel.pdf, 3.
[16] Maxey Mullins, Interview with Maxey Mullins, interview by Dave Ferraro, n.d., West Virginia Archives, https://archive.wvculture.org/history/labor/mullinsmaxey.pdf, 8.
[17] "Blank Coal Labor Contract, 1920s," 1920s, West Virginia Archives, Logan Coal Operators Association Collection. "I. W. W." refers to the Industrial Workers of the World, a labor union established in 1905.

to organize any of those employees in any of the unions."[18] Gompers identified the threat clearly: if "blank contracts" from West Virginia were not struck down as illegal, then they posed a threat to labor unions everywhere.

The discrimination formalized in "blank contracts" was not new, however. Miners from the period attested to violent attempts at preventing union membership. One miner remembered that when his father delivered union messages to another miner's home, deputies "knocked him the head over here […] and shot at him, and they cut him, too."[19] Miners who defied blank contracts or refused to sign were fired, "driven like cattle from their homes, and their goods were thrown out into the roads."[20] In May 1920, attempts to evict miners would lead to the first hostilities of the Battle for Blair Mountain.

Known as the "Matewan Massacre" or "The Battle of Matewan", the affair was the clash of miner-aligned law enforcement and operator-employed private detectives from the Baldwin-Felts Agency in Matewan, West Virginia. It was well known that the Felts agents "brutally beat union organizers as they were ordered", and their presence in the town was not appreciated by the violent chief of police Sid Hatfield. Decades after the Matewan Massacre, a local man remembered fearing the Felts agents as a child: "They hated them. They hated one another. They were hired killers and back in the country they didn't take no stuff. Everybody loved to shoot then they liked to shoot at them too."[21] In front of the town hardware store, the agents and the police met,

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[18] Samuel Gompers, *The Postwar Years 1918-21*, vol. 11, The Samuel Gompers Papers (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 175.
[19] Bailey Dave and Dewey Gunnoe, Coal Company Violence Against Union Organizers in the 1920s, interview by Mary Hufford, Audio Recording, 1996, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/cmns001904/.
[20] William Kenyon, "West Virginia Coal Fields," § Committee on Education and Labor (1921), 5.
[21] Paul Maynard, Interview with Paul Maynard, interview by Beth Nogay, n.d., West Virginia Archives, https://archive.wvculture.org/history/labor/maynardpaul.pdf, 5.

immediately arguing before gunfire broke out.[22] When the dust settled, 10 men were killed, including Matewan mayor Cabell Testerman and head detective Albert Felts.

In the hugely popular trial which followed, Hatfield and his men were acquitted, convincing miners "who had stood vigil" that armed resistance could work against the powerful private agencies arrayed against them.[23] National leaders touted the events as a response to the illegal behavior of coal operators and called for government intervention on behalf of mining communities. Samuel Gompers wrote to Senator William Kenyon "that the invasion of West Virginia by an armed band of men in pay of absentee owners of West Virginia mining property constitutes a suspension of the constitutional guarantees" of the United States.[24] This rhetorical approach – the emphasis of coal operators denying miners their civil liberties and ability to respond through the legal system – would define Gompers' and Lewis' responses to the events which followed.

Though the legal victory would boost morale for union organizers, hopes were dashed when Sid Hatfield was assassinated by Felts agents on August 1, 1921.[25] William Blizzard, son of miner army leader Bill Blizzard, remembered that the "news went out to every hamlet and coal camp and miners already furious could contain themselves no longer […] The miners began to reach for their rifles, as they could see no possibility of help from any official source."[26] Miners across West Virginia were ready to arm themselves and march to Mingo and Logan counties to expand the union and fight back against operator aggression. Before they began their assembly in southern West Virginia, UMW District 17 leaders Fred Mooney and Frank Keeney articulated

[22] It remains unresolved as to who initiated the gunfire.
[23] "Jury Acquits 16 of Coal Strike Murder," *The New York Times*, March 22, 1921.
[24] Gompers, *The Postwar Years*, 295.
[25] "Sid Hatfield Shot Dead," *The Herald Democrat*, August 2, 1921.
[26] William Blizzard, *When Miners March* (Oakland: PM Press, 2010), 224.

seven demands, including the end of "discrimination against any employee belonging to a labor Union," the "establishment of an eight-hour day", and other reforms related to the operation of coal mines.[27] These demands were ignored.

In the following weeks, thousands of armed miners would organize just outside of Logan County, aiming to combat the armed guards of the coal operators, who utilized machine gun nests to hold them back from the eponymous Blair Mountain.[28] Travelling atop train cars, hundreds of miners "sat down on the car and had their guns holding them in their laps and they was singing that song going to hang Don Chafin on a sour apple tree."[29] On August 25th, largely under the leadership of UMW subdistrict director Bill Blizzard, thousands of miners began their march into Logan County. A transporter of food for the miner's army felt that their goal was to organize Mingo County "and after they organized Mingo I think they'd organize Logan."[30] Another fighter's memories were rooted in the lived experience of miners in the region; when asked "Why did you want to fight the operators," Paul Maynard responded, "Cause they was kicking people out of their homes."[31]

The miner's army was widely varied in terms of age and preparation for battle. One man, recollecting his experience, remembered that "they were young and old and all nobody that could handle a gun could be of any help to try and organize that's who went along."[32] Another man involved in the march remembered the odd sight of "hundreds of people coming in[,] old men,

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[27] Ibid.
[28] "Under Fire in Mingo War," *The Washington Times*, September 11, 1921.
[29] Interview with Maxey Mullins. According to Mullins and others, this song was sung to the tune of "John Brown's Body".
[30] Chris Holt, Interview with Chris Holt, interview by Dave Ferraro, n.d., West Virginia Archives, https://archive.wvculture.org/history/labor/holtchris.pdf,13-14.
[31] Interview with Paul Maynard, 7.
[32] Bernard Edelman, Interview with Bernard Edelman, interview by Dave Ferraro, n.d., West Virginia Archives, https://archive.wvculture.org/history/labor/edelmanbernard.pdf, 3.

young men, middle aged men, men with automatic the latest rifles that you could buy and men with old muzzle loaders."[33] Local resident Maxey Mullins remembered "most of these miners – a lot of them had went to service and brought back their guns with them," including her neighbor who "brought [his gun] home from service" and accidentally "shot hisself through the foot" before he could join the battle.[34]

The miners placed armed patrols on roads and seized "passenger trains on the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad to transport reinforcements to their camps", ultimately capturing multiple machine gun nests and multiple Logan County deputies.[35] One fighter remembered stealing "this machine gun and 33,000 rounds of ammunition" from a "scab mine" and turning "it over to the Blair Mountain people where they was fighting against Logan."[36] Miners also used their knowledge of the land, as one man remembered, "These fellows – I knowed two of the fellows that led the gang – had knowed the woods just like a puzzle you know."[37] Local women served the miners as well. Miner Paul Maynard remembered "they'd lie misinform on the people to these thugs and anything. Hide the men from them."[38]

Days later, Sheriff Chafin struck back by ordering planes supplied by the Coal Operators Association to fly over marching miners, dropping improvised explosive devices and chemical weapons.[39] Obviously, this indicated technical superiority of Chafin's forces. One account of the battle noted that "of course seeing the airplane was excitement enought because most of us up here

[33] Interview with Chris Holt, 7.
[34] Interview with Maxey Mullins, 4.
[35] "Mingo Marauders Still Menace Area," *The New York Times*, August 30, 1921.
[36] Interview with Paul Maynard, 6.
[37] Interview with Ronce Hunter, 6.
[38] Interview with Paul Maynard, 8.
[39] "West Virginia Mine Wars: Sheriff Don Chafin," National Park Service, May 26, 2021, https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/sheriff-don-chafin.htm. Some of these bombs failed to explode and were subsequently used in the trial of Bill Blizzard as an example of coal operators' violence against miners. Blizzard and other miners would ultimately be acquitted.

had never seen one."[40] Modern archeological studies further display how uneven the arming of the two armies was, concluding that "the weapons used by the Logan defenders were coming from more centralized sources, such as the state government, which could draw heavily on military-surplus weapons", whereas "the striking miners utilized a variety of weapons, many grabbing whatever old hunting rifle they had available. This accounts for why the striking miners who outnumbered the ad hoc army of defenders, were unsuccessful in taking the mountain."[41] As Chafin's planes dropped bombs from above, miners positioned sharpshooters to snipe enemies from the trees.[42] The brutality of such a battle was clear to Paul Maynard, who declared, "We used the same systems as you do in a war. It was a war."[43]

Battle continued to rage for a week as state and federal officials determined how to end what they described as a "civil insurrection."[44] To begin, government officials requested that John Lewis and other UMW leaders end the violence. However, John Lewis deflected blame for the march from his organization and instead redirected national attention on the government's failure to uphold order and contain coal operators' private armies. Published in the New York Times, Lewis claimed that "the United Mine Workers of America is in no degree responsible. The trouble is directly traceable to the continued assaults and outrages perpetrated by the armed Baldwin-Felts agents employed in such great numbers by the coal operators" and that "the lamentable breakdown of the State Government of West Virginia with its consequent failure to give protection to its citizens has indeed justified" his criticisms. Lewis crafted a specific narrative that pointed to coal

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[40] Interview with Chris Holt, 7.
[41] Karnes and Slifer, "The Land Will Tell the Story." For a full archeological study of the battle, consult Brandon Nida et al., "What Did the Miners See?: Archaeology, Deep Mapping, and the Battle for Blair Mountain," *West Virginia History: A Journal of Regional Studies* 12, no. 1–2 (2018): 97–120.
[42] *Miners' War Ends as Troops Arrive* (First National Kinograms, 1921).
[43] Interview with Paul Maynard, 12.
[44] "Fighting Continues in Mountains as Federal Troops Reach Mingo; Planes Reported Bombing Miners," *The New York Times*, September 3, 1921.

operators and their private detectives as the instigators of violence, not the miners responding in self-defense. Though he urged the miners to return home, Lewis argued that violence would only end if West Virginia Governor E.F. Morgan would "compel the surrender of the Baldwin-Felts army, with all its war munitions."[45] As local miners waged a military battle in the hills of West Virginia, John Lewis waged a narrative battle in the popular newspapers of the day.

Ultimately, the government would take military action to compel both sides to lay down arms. On August 30, President Warren G. Harding released a proclamation commanding an end to the march and threatening the use of U.S. troops to end it by force: "I do hereby command all persons engaged in said unlawful and insurrectionary proceedings to disperse and retire peaceably to their respective abodes […] and hereafter abandon said combinations and submit themselves to the laws and constituted authorities."[46] Shortly after, Governor Morgan released a similar proclamation: "Whereas, United States troops have, at my request, been ordered to this State for the purpose of quelling an insurrection, the peace officers of this state are ordered to co-operate with the United States troops to the end that there may be unity of action."[47] It was clear to government leaders that only a United States military presence would put an end to the battle.

To that end, over 4,000 United States Army soldiers were deployed to the area under the command of World War One Veteran Brigadier General Harry Bandholtz, with the expectation that the miner "invaders will quickly disperse and return to their homes."[48] Further, fifteen World War One bombers were sent to fly overhead and gather intelligence on the movements of the

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[45] "Union Chief Urges Miners to Disperse," *The New York Times*, August 31, 1921.
[46] Warren G. Harding, "Proclamation by President Warren G. Harding of August 30, 1921 Regarding State of Insurrection in West Virginia and Committing to Providing Military Aid," August 30, 1921, University of Charleston, https://dla.acaweb.org/digital/collection/Charleston/id/6.
[47] "Fighting Continues in Mountains as Federal Troops Reach Mingo; Planes Reported Bombing Miners."
[48] Ibid.

armies of coal operators and miners.[49] Unfortunately, while flying through a storm, Lieutenant Harry L. Speck's plane crashed, killing four of the five members on board – the only federal casualties of the battle.[50]

With Army troops officially entering the area on September 3, large-scale fighting concluded on September 5, 1921. It is likely that the presence of United States troops signaled to marching miners that the government had heard their demands and was willing to establish constitutional law in a seemingly lawless region. A driver for the miners argued that "my opinion is [the miners] were glad to see it happen. […] There was a big lot a laughin and hollerin and a hoopin and so on."[51] In theory, the arrival of United States soldiers meant the arrival of fair legal proceedings – without them, miners "had no laws. For the company that was the law. They didn't get you a judge or a prosecuting attorney. You just done what they wanted you to do. […] Wasn't no freedom."[52] On a more tangible level, the miners probably felt that their limited resources and mixed-quality weapons were no match for the high-grade weaponry of the coal operators' private armies, much less the strength of the United States military. However, modern historians believe that the miner's army "was on the brink of victory with operators desperately calling for federal intervention."[53] One deputy sheriff and ex-prisoner of the miner's army noted that "quite a number of [the miners] were ex-soldiers," hinting that perhaps the miners were unwilling to fire upon fellow servicemembers.[54] For example, Freeland Brown, a miner who joined the strike because

[49] Ibid.
[50] "Plane Survivor Improves," *The New York Times*, September 7, 1921.
[51] Interview with Chris Holt, 16.
[52] Interview with Paul Maynard, 25-26.
[53] Wess Harris, "What If We Really Won the Battle of Blair Mountain?" *Appalachian Heritage*, 2011, 88.
[54] "Miners Give Up Fight; Soldiers Cover District," *New York Tribune*, September 5, 1921, Library of Congress.

"they needed our help," borrowed a pistol his uncle had gotten during military service during World War One.[55] Regardless of the reason, miners ended their fighting as troops arrived.

As the miners returned to their homes across the region, they either turned in their weapons, or, fearing that conflict had not truly ended, hid them throughout the creeks and hollows of the mountains.[56] One man, reflecting on his experience of the battle as a child, remembered that "they guns were hid in trees [and] they were hid under leaves anything that they could dispose of."[57] Another recalled that "during the next month or two there was maybe a hundred or two hundred guns found out in the woods hid under a log or under a pile of leaves and so on."[58] By October 1921, the Battle for Blair Mountain was over, leaving the wilderness of Logan and Mingo counties scattered with bullets, hidden weapons, and dozens of men killed and wounded.[59]

Determinations of what the battle had accomplished began with national leaders articulating what was needed for long-standing change. Samuel Gompers focused on private companies being more powerful than the government and thus unimpeded from trampling worker's rights. In the aftermath of the battle, he argued that "West Virginia officials, servile and supine, abdicated and gave way to the corporations. [The officials] disgraced the state, flaunted democracy and made the administration of civil law in an orderly, constitutional manner a

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[55] Freeland Brown, Interview with Freeland Brown, interview by Dave Ferraro, n.d., West Virginia Archives, https://archive.wvculture.org/history/labor/brownfreeland.pdf, 5.
[56] Hidden weapons and discarded bullet casings have provided historical archeologists with an exceptional collection of artifacts from the Battle for Blair Mountain. These artifacts are leading to more accurate understandings of the geography of the battle.
[57] Interview with Bernard Edelman, 1.
[58] Interview with Chris Holt, 15.
[59] The official death toll of the Battle for Blair Mountain remains uncertain. Historian Lon Savage estimates the number was four miners and 14 deputies in Lon Savage, *Thunder in the Mountains: The West Virginia Mine War 1920-1921* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990), 47. Don Chafin is noted by James Green as having killed fifty miners in Green, *The Devil Is Here in These Hills*, 405. Historian Robert Shogan numbers the dead at between 20 and 50 in Shogan, *The Battle of Blair Mountain.*

remembrance of the past." For Gompers, the battle would be worth it only if "the deep causes of the resentment and protest" were removed.[60]

Ultimately, these deep causes were never addressed by any level of government. Though no miner was ever indicted for fighting at Blair Mountain, Don Chafin and his men were never even charged. And while "the union workers who fought on Blair Mountain believed they had achieved a political victory in their long struggle," no federal or state action was taken to ensure that mine conditions, wages, or legal procedures would improve.[61] It is likely that the Harding administration's failure to meaningfully address or even investigate the "civil insurrection" at Blair Mountain was because of "close ties between West Virginia coal operators and Republican office holders."[62] Thus, the Battle for Blair Mountain did not lead to any significant change in government policy.

Neither would the coal companies consider UMW demands after the battle, as evidenced by "the definite refusal of the mine operators to deal with the United Mine Workers" in October 1921.[63] To make matters worse, the post-war economic factors which had reduced the value of soft coal in the face of oil and gas industries continued to threaten the coal industry nationwide. The UMW's failure to achieve much of anything beyond national attention during the battle accelerated existing trends of union shrinkage. Within the region, "membership tumbled from 50,000 to a few hundred while nationally the UMW's membership declined from about 600,000 to fewer than 100,000 by the end of the decade." Likewise, Samuel Gomper's AFL saw 25% of its total membership fade away.[64] It would not be until President Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal"

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[60] "Gompers Lays Mingo Strife to 'Garyism,'" *The New York Times*, September 5, 1921.
[61] Green, *The Devil Is Here in These Hills*, 282.
[62] Ibid., 284.
[63] "Mines Reject Peace Plan," *New York Tribune*, October 28, 1921, Library of Congress.
[64] Shogan, *The Battle of Blair Mountain*, 219.

agenda that meaningful reform to mine labor was meaningfully reformed and the UMW, under John Lewis' leadership, would rise to strength once again.

For those who fought it, the legacy of the battle amounted to little. One man from the area remembered, "it wasn't very much said about it after the[y] had those trials but they amounted to nothing and they were not held here so really much wasn't said about em in Logan."[65] Another, Chris Holt, felt that while the union lost in the short term, they benefitted overall: "And after that mine wars so called mine war the union got disrupt and the union was disband. […] We lost from this section. On the other hand I think maybe I think the publicity and the plight of the miners in the non-union sections I think that ought to have been worth something."[66]

Holt's point is perhaps the most accurate assessment of the battle's legacy. It correctly reflects the weakening of the mine unions, but also points to a growing public awareness of the struggles of American miners. In his discussion of the battle, John Lewis noted that the events in Logan and Mingo County were "typical of the extreme inaccessibility and isolation of these mining villages. Added to all the squalor elsewhere, is the loneliness and sense of helpless subjection to the great corporate powers which have fastened their grip on these little valleys and gorges, threaded by little railroads that the average American never sees."[67] That newspapers covered the events of Blair Mountain so heavily certainly brought attention to the tense situation in mining country. Documentary photographers like Lewis Hines and Doris Ulmann brought images of Appalachia and miners to the American public, who for the first time could see and empathize with Lewis' isolated villagers.[68] As Americans became more aware of the issues facing mining

[65] William Harvey, Interview with William Harvey, interview by Dave Ferraro, n.d., West Virginia Archives, https://archive.wvculture.org/history/labor/harveywilliam.pdf, 8.
[66] Interview with Chris Holt, 20-21.
[67] Lewis, *The Miners' Fight*, 170-171.
[68] On Lewis Hines, consult "Child Labor, Pennsylvania Coal Mines Gallery," Yale University Energy History, accessed April 26, 2022, https://energyhistory.yale.edu/library-item/child-labor-pennsylvania-

communities, President Roosevelt was able to pass the National Industrial Recovery Act which reinvigorated the labor movement in decades to come.[69] As one popular song, introduced before John Lewis' speech at a 1935 Labor Day Celebration rhymed, "President Roosevelt is a friend to the laborin' men // Gives us the right to organize an' be real union men."[70]

Thus, the Battle for Blair Mountain was the product of long-term maltreatment of mine laborers across the nation. Labor unions like the AFL and the UMW, in their fight against coal operators and industrial giants, pushed as hard as they could within the anti-union environment of the postwar era. When individuals, responding to personal injustices because of their union involvement, felt that there was no longer any protection or recourse under the law, they took matters into their own hands and began an armed rebellion that forced coal companies, local leaders, and even the President of the United States of America to respond. In doing so, they failed to immediately resolve the economic and social issues which led to the battle. However, the national attention which the struggle garnered would pay dividends in the decades to come, as the American public finally understood and began to rectify the horrors experienced by the miners of Mingo and Logan counties. By using the voices of both national labor leaders and the forgotten Appalachians who experienced the fighting firsthand, the necessity, challenge, and legacy of the Battle for Blair Mountain is more fully revealed.

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coal-mines-gallery. On Doris Ulmann, consult Melissa McEuen, "Documentarian with Props: Doris Ulmann's Vision of an Ideal America," in *Seeing America: Women Photographers Between the Wars* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000).

[69] Though Roosevelt's New Deal legislation would improve the working conditions of miners and spark a new growth in miner's unions, the relationship between Roosevelt and Lewis was often antagonistic. Lewis could aptly be described as a thorn in Roosevelt's side throughout his presidency, most notably for his anti-war rhetoric and strikes during World War Two, as documented in Melvyn Dubofsky, "John L. Lewis and American Isolationism," in *Three Faces of Midwestern Isolationism*, ed. John Schacht (Iowa City: The Center for the Study of the Recent History of the United States, 1981).

[70] George Korson, *Coal Dust on the Fiddle: Songs and Stories of the Bituminous Industry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1943), 311.

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