

# Harlan Miners Speak

*Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields  
Prepared by Members of the National Committee  
for the Defense of Political Prisoners*

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

My husband is a member of the National Miners Union, and I am too, and I have never stopped, brother, since I knew of this work for the NMU. I think it is one of the greatest things that has ever come into this world.

—Testimony of Aunt Molly Jackson,  
Straight Creek, Kentucky  
November 7, 1931

*HARLAN MINERS SPEAK* was first published in 1932, and this new edition is the first since 1970, when Da Capo Press reprinted the original. This volume is welcome both as retrieved history and as a valuable resource for continuing analyses of how American working-class communities responded to the economic and social crises of the early Depression era. The testimony and witness herein give voice to several enduring themes in Appalachian labor history: class conflict, environmental exploitation, the fragile social contract between workers and employers, job control, and ideological struggles. The work also addresses the responsibility of the public and government at all levels to develop fair political institutions, protect workers and communities in dynamic economies, and obviate social and class tension.

This introduction is a contextual guide to the original text, a report issued in 1932 by a committee of writers chaired by novelist Theodore Dreiser, who had come to investigate conditions in the coalfields at the invitation of William Z. Foster, leader of the American Communist Party. While Dreiser was in Kentucky, an incident occurred that overshadowed the committee's work. To

## INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

the degree that the Dreiser committee episode of November 1931 is usually recounted, it tends to be dominated by two narratives, each of which has reinforced the notion of the committee's alienation from eastern Kentucky. The first involves the entrapment of Dreiser in an adulterous interlude in Pineville's Hotel Continental. Dreiser and traveling companion Mary (or Marie) Pergain adjourned to a hotel room in Pineville on the evening of November 7, 1931. A hotel employee notified members of a local citizens' committee, who went to the hotel and famously leaned toothpicks against the couple's door. When the toothpicks were intact early the next morning, the vigilance committee spread the word throughout Pineville that the New Yorkers had polluted the moral climate of Kentucky. Dreiser and Pergain were later indicted for adultery, a misdemeanor, but not tried.<sup>1</sup> The second narrative emphasizes the writers' dogmatic ideology and perceived condescension toward destitute miners and their families.

It will be evident to readers that some members of the committee had indeed internalized paternalistic assumptions toward mountain people, "essentializing" poor miners into noble but pitiable victims of isolation, untouched by the civilizing currents of modern society.<sup>2</sup> Understandably, the exotic aspect of radical urban intellectuals projecting their allegedly bohemian values onto the rugged physical and cultural terrain of Harlan and Bell counties has stood out in the conventional retelling of the sad and bitter events of the coal strikes of 1931–1932 in eastern Kentucky. The University Press of Kentucky hopes, however, that this new edition will contribute to a richer appreciation of the conflicts in "Bloody Harlan" and transcend reductionism to place the Dreiser committee and the people of the coalfields into the larger historical framework of which they were a part—as participants in and witnesses to a struggle to heal a failed system and to build a more just and equitable country.



## COAL, WORKERS, AND MARKETS

By 1931, when conditions in eastern Kentucky's coal country prompted the formation of the Dreiser committee, the coal industry had been sick for several years. Recent Appalachian historiography has shed light on the historical causes of systemic poverty in one-industry regions. That poverty foreshadowed the economic crisis that afflicted the country by 1930. Prior to the crisis the Harlan coalfield (which spanned Harlan, Bell, Knox, Breathitt, and Perry counties) had experienced phenomenal growth during the coal boom of 1909 to 1919, and dramatic population increases accompanied the boom. Coal mining became the major source of employment in the region for both native and immigrant workers. Throughout eastern Kentucky, small independent and major corporate mining operations enjoyed increasing demand for their product as American industry grew and as war orders from Europe rolled in between 1914 and 1917. America's entry into the Great War extended the boom, but the coal bubble began to deflate with the Armistice in Europe and an especially mild winter in 1918–1919.<sup>3</sup>

Postwar coal markets contracted but were fairly stable between 1919 and 1923. Small profit margins and increased operating costs, however, drove many operators out of business. Investment tended to go toward the industry's growing dependence on machinery, which maximized production but undercut labor's bargaining power. Operators could not allow heavy investment in machinery to erode investors' dividends, so they employed draconian tactics to reduce the costs of a weakened labor force. The means of social control that coal operators established in the early days of the industry—company stores, company housing, payments in scrip, "yellow-dog" contracts, blacklisting, private police forces, and influence over county government and law enforcement agencies—were tightened.<sup>4</sup> Operators also tightened company policies designed to minimize direct labor costs, in-



## INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

cluding the use of arbitrary tonnage rates, company checkweighmen, and nonpayment for production-related work such as laying track, setting posts, and blasting.<sup>5</sup> Strikes over wages, job control, and production practices in unionized coalfields, where the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) had gained a tenuous foothold during the war years, were disadvantageous for labor in 1919, 1921, and 1922. Throughout West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, non-unionized miners who sought representation by the UMWA also struck, generally with disastrous results. The union's leadership, directed by the mercurial and increasingly autocratic John L. Lewis, consistently withheld or withdrew UMWA support for the non-union strikers. These actions by Lewis were understandable from a fiscal standpoint—the union simply did not have the resources to provide significant help for unorganized workers, especially where company control was thoroughly entrenched. But from the perspective of many miners hoping for better lives, Lewis and the UMWA hierarchy seemed ineffectual if not deceitful. Lewis's growing authoritarianism and rigid control of union offices engendered internal conflict in the UMWA, an important factor in the events of the Kentucky strike of 1931–1932 and the intervention of the Dreiser committee.<sup>6</sup>

### COAL, WORKERS, AND BOSSES

By the end of 1923, bituminous coal production had peaked in the United States. A perfect storm of elements contributed to the spreading sickness in the industry. Competing fuels for home heating, slow growth rates in midwestern industries, the resumption of coal mining in Europe, hydroelectric power generation, and overproduction—all joined forces to send the industry into a depression. A British general strike in 1926 briefly moderated the effects of the slump, but according to cultural historian David C. Duke, “by 1930, nearly half the bituminous miners in the country were out of work. The UMWA was as sick as the industry it represented.”<sup>7</sup>



The weakness of the UMWA was likewise due to a convergence of factors. In 1919 leading American industrialists and managers had exploited public fears during a wave of strikes in the steel, coal, and textile industries and a general strike in Seattle. Business leaders convinced nervous citizens that labor unrest was caused by radical ideologies that threatened American freedom. The climate of reform in the prewar years had encouraged a lively national debate over the relative merits of industrial democracy, socialism, anarchism, and the nationalization of important industries. Wartime mobilization of resources, corporate power, and public opinion, however, set the stage for the postwar persecution of critics of the industrial arrangement that had "licked the bloody Hun." Even conservative pro-capitalist labor leaders such as John Lewis of the UMWA and Samuel Gompers, longtime president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), were often labeled as "bolshevist" or "red," although some industrialists regarded the two men as voices of "responsible unionism" against more radical agitators. Emanating from a meeting in Chicago in 1921, a network of business leaders devised a multifaceted economic system they came to identify as the "American Plan." Free markets, individual contract, management control, nonregulation of business, and vigilance against "unsound" or radical thought took on patriotic, almost holy, vestments. The American Plan was an important element in a political, ideological, and legal campaign against organized labor, and it put the UMWA and other unions on the defensive.<sup>8</sup>

The rollback of wartime federal support for organized labor, the American Plan, and the decline in employment in the coal industry after 1923 practically destroyed the United Mine Workers of America. The abrogation of union contracts by northern West Virginia coal operators, which the UMWA appeared powerless to check, catalyzed the collapse of UMWA fortunes in the pre-New Deal coalfields of Appalachia. The union barely survived, losing two-thirds of its membership by 1930.<sup>9</sup> It was therefore not well



## INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

positioned to offer substantive assistance to desperate miners in eastern Kentucky when they struck in 1931.

### REBELLION

The distress of the Harlan coalfield miners and their families was an acute reflection of the depression that traumatized Kentucky and the nation. Kentucky farmers had endured a collapse in the tobacco economy following World War I. Per capita farm incomes in the state were next to last in the nation in 1930. A devastating drought in the summer of 1930 further punished the agricultural sector, crippling a state economy already damaged by Prohibition and the coal crisis. By late 1931, four thousand Harlan County miners, more than one in three, were out of work. Working miners made as little as eighty cents a day and worked only a few days a month.<sup>10</sup> According to historians James Klotter and Lowell Harrison, Kentucky's state Red Cross director "reported in 1930 that 'the picture of distress . . . in the eastern part of our state is almost unbelievable. . . . There is a growing army of itinerants traveling on foot.' . . . Relief from the New Deal was in the future, so hungry, desperate, jobless people roamed the region, looking for work or just food. Company evictions left many homeless and hungry, and even more just angry."<sup>11</sup>

When the Black Mountain Coal Company announced a 10 percent wage cut on February 16, 1931, that anger erupted and Black Mountain miners staged a spontaneous walkout. Some veterans of the coal strike in 1922 sought help from the remnants of the United Mine Workers of America, by this time a mere skeleton organization in the southern Appalachians.<sup>12</sup> These workers appealed to UMW District 19 president William Turnblazer, who contacted national vice president Philip Murray. Murray convened a mass meeting in Pineville (Bell County) on March 1 that more than two thousand miners attended. He convened a second mass meeting in La Follette, Tennessee, a few weeks later. Murray



pledged UMWA support if the Kentucky and Tennessee miners formed a union "with ten thousand dues paying members." He cautioned that the UMWA intended to negotiate with the region's coal operators "in a spirit of cooperation. . . . We are not radical or revolutionary." Murray warned that unauthorized strikes would be disavowed by the union—in effect telling the miners to put a damper on militant protest.<sup>13</sup>

The "spirit of cooperation" was not forthcoming from the coal companies. In retaliation for the Pineville meeting, Harlan and Bell County coal operators, who for years had coordinated anti-unionism through the Harlan County Coal Operators Association and similar trade associations, implemented mass firings and evictions in their coal camps. These actions heightened the strikers' resistance. Following a violent confrontation on May 5 in Evarts, Kentucky, between militant miners and several carloads of deputies under the command of Harlan County sheriff J. H. Blair (resulting in the deaths of three deputies and one miner), Gov. Flem Sampson dispatched four hundred Kentucky state troopers to restore order—with the approval of the UMWA, which hoped the officers would be neutral arbiters. It appeared to the strikers that both the deputies and the troopers were actually extensions of the coal operators' private mine security system, acting as they did to assist the operators in evictions and denying relief to striking mine families. The strike spread to twenty-three Harlan and Bell County operations, and in the week after the "Battle of Evarts," the number of striking miners rose from eighteen hundred to fifty-eight hundred. More than eleven thousand miners joined the UMWA during the spring organizing campaign—before the union labeled the strike a "wildcat" walkout and withdrew its support.<sup>14</sup>

Why did Lewis abandon the strikers at such a critical juncture? Lewis and the conservative establishment of the UMWA bureaucracy feared that the organizing campaign was broader than it was deep and would cut too severely into UMWA relief funds.



## INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

It is also not unlikely that the militant mobilization of the strikers reflected the type of radical independence against which Lewis and his loyalists had been fighting for years. John Hevener explains that the “bankrupt United Mine Workers [union] was unable and unwilling to contribute strike relief to an unauthorized walkout”—suggesting that Lewis had concluded that spontaneous organization by the Harlan and Bell County miners might not translate into union discipline.<sup>15</sup> The miners felt betrayed, the strike had failed—and in June, the National Miners Union (NMU) came to Kentucky.

### A RADICAL ALTERNATIVE

The National Miners Union, founded in 1928, was the American Communist Party’s frontal challenge to the conservative unionism of John L. Lewis and the UMWA. It emerged after the Soviet Union declared the so-called “third period” in 1927. Since its founding in 1919, the American Communist Party had practiced the tactic of “boring from within” established trade unions in order to seize control of the labor movement. In line with this policy, Communist Party and noncommunist rank-and-file radicals within the United Mine Workers of America, frustrated with the failure of Lewis and the conservative leadership to expand organizing or to combat the American Plan’s assault against labor, supported a “Save the Union” insurgent movement within the UMWA from 1926 to 1928. Dissident UMWA District 2 (central Pennsylvania) president John Brophy challenged Lewis for the presidency in 1926 with support from Save the Union activists. Lewis, exercising his control of the union machinery and of the *UMWA Journal*, beat back Brophy’s insurgency and shortly thereafter expelled Save the Union supporters from the union. The “third period,” announced by American Communist Party leader William Z. Foster, renounced “boring from within” in favor of “dual unionism,” or the formation of radical unions to challenge the American Federa-



tion of Labor. Many Save the Union insurgents gravitated toward the new National Miners Union.<sup>16</sup>

By 1931 the NMU was one of several communist unions in the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), formed as the party's industrial arm at a convention in Cleveland in 1929. The TUUL resisted cooperation with management in favor of mass strikes and class conflict. It promoted mass organizing, a seven-hour work day, a five-day work week, international trade union solidarity, racial equality, and the reorganization of American industry on a Soviet model. According to labor historian James R. Barrett, the NMU was quick to "attach itself" to local rebellions against wage cuts in western Pennsylvania, eastern Ohio, West Virginia, and, of course, eastern Kentucky. In July 1931 twenty-seven southeastern Kentucky delegates traveled to an NMU convention in Pittsburgh. Led by Holiness preacher Jim Grace and Jim Garland, half-brother of folksinger Aunt Molly Jackson and a working-class troubadour himself, the Kentucky delegation "emotionally depicted the starvation of the Kentucky miners and the Red Cross's and UMW[A]'s refusal to assist them. Grace urged the delegates to 'take our guns and pistols out of their hiding places, and use them on the traitors and gun-men who represent our present form of Government.' The NMU promised assistance to out-of-work miners and their families and pledged to support another strike."<sup>17</sup> Word of the NMU's presence in Kentucky—Grace and others had been recruiting members for months before the Pittsburgh meeting—redoubled the vigilance of the political and media establishment in Harlan and Bell counties. The NMU never commanded the allegiance of more than a small minority of unemployed miners in eastern Kentucky and most of its local members had already been blacklisted, but business owners, local officials, and community leaders who had some sympathy for the miners and even tolerated the idea of the UMW recoiled from the specter of "reds" in their midst. Therefore the escalation of violence against NMU organizers and members, the raiding of NMU homes, and the "savagely hostile"



## INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

press attacks on the union (and then on the Dreiser committee) buried the legitimacy of the miners' grievances in an avalanche of patriotic reaction.<sup>18</sup>

Local civic leaders focused on the "alien" presence of the NMU, but preachers Jim Grace and Finley Donaldson, along with Jim Garland, Andrew Ogan, and Sam Reece, represented important indigenous leadership within the NMU. Reece, a veteran local labor organizer since the strike of 1922, had worked at a mine owned by Pearl Basham, the largest contributor to the Harlan County Coal Operators Association. After the Battle of Evarts, Sam and Florence Reece's home was raided by Sheriff Blair's deputies. "When the thugs were raiding our house off and on," Florence Reece recalled, "and Sam was run off, I felt like I just had to do something to help." Florence wrote, and later performed hundreds of times, "Which Side Are You On?" which accurately portrayed Harlan County as "being divided between two hostile, armed camps." This ballad became the most popular and enduring anthem of the Appalachian labor movement.<sup>19</sup>

Local support for the National Miners Union in spite of the risk could be attributed to its sponsorship of soup kitchens for hungry families. The ideological position of the American Communist Party—whose insistence on racial equality and, more importantly, whose embrace of atheism later alienated many of the NMU's original supporters, including Grace and Donaldson—initially was of little concern to starving families. Food provided by the party's Workers International Relief and legal assistance from the International Labor Defense were appreciated by desperate citizens who were increasingly alienated from their local authorities. The repression of radical agitators was one thing, but routine vigilante attacks against soup kitchens, not to mention intimidation of miners' wives and children, was something else. It was to document and publicize such violence that William Z. Foster invited Theodore Dreiser to investigate conditions in the coalfields.<sup>20</sup>



## THE DREISER COMMITTEE

Dreiser was sixty years old and his best work as a novelist was behind him by the time he arrived in Kentucky. His affinity for the political left grew with the Great Depression as he traveled the nation to investigate the widespread suffering of its victims, and his commitment to radical reform soon eclipsed his writing career.<sup>21</sup> The most prominent member of the committee other than Dreiser was thirty-five-year-old John Dos Passos, whose *42nd Parallel*, the first volume of his so-called USA trilogy, had appeared in 1930. Along with Bruce Crawford, publisher of the Virginia-based labor newspaper *Crawford's Weekly*, Dos Passos seems to have had the most nuanced understanding of the specific conditions of the Harlan County dispute. These writers' social commitment and critiques of industrial capitalism had attracted William Z. Foster, who, while he distrusted intellectuals personally, understood their potential value to the Communist Party's vision for U.S. workers. He recruited Dreiser to draw attention to the NMU strike in Pennsylvania, and Dreiser served as chair of the party's National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners (NCDPP). Dreiser later agreed to put together the Kentucky committee for the NCDPP.<sup>22</sup>

The Dreiser committee was charged with investigating and documenting widespread reports of arrests and beatings and the dynamiting of NMU members' and supporters' property. The International Labor Defense alleged that Sheriff J. H. Blair's deputies used systematic, not sporadic, terror against hungry miners and their families and that coal operators had established a feudal system of control and repression in the Harlan coalfields. Some scholars have criticized the Dreiser committee for asking leading questions, patronizing their witnesses, and being more concerned with showcasing their political perspective than with the particular circumstances in eastern Kentucky. An examination of the writers' comments and interviews validates some of this criticism but also



## INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

suggests that the committee—at considerable personal risk in a dangerous environment—raised significant questions about the immediate conditions of the coal communities they studied and about the structural failures of industrial capitalism within that setting. The testimony reveals that the officialdom of the Harlan fields considered the NMU a dangerous and illegal organization deserving of repression. Aunt Molly Jackson testified that in her vocation as midwife she witnessed the deaths of from three to seven children each week from the effects of malnutrition, that her community of Straight Creek (Bell County), Kentucky, was plagued by cholera and famine, and that the Red Cross and county officials withheld relief from the children of NMU members. Readers will decide for themselves who had the most compelling arguments about the anatomy of justice in the coalfields.

## AFTERMATH

The immediate accomplishments of the Dreiser committee were ambiguous. Surely the nation's attention was drawn to the feudal conditions in "Bloody Harlan" for a while. The spadework done by the Dreiser committee led to a second writers' group called the Independent Miners' Relief Committee. Arriving in Pineville on February 10, 1932, during a strike in Bell County called by the NMU, this committee was headed by well-known novelist Waldo Frank and included Edmund Wilson, Mary Heaton Vorse, Malcolm Cowley, and International Labor Defense lawyer Alan Taub.<sup>23</sup> The Frank committee immediately faced violent intimidation, with Taub and Frank being seriously beaten. They left Pineville within hours. The ill-advised NMU strike, writes John Hevener, failed "because the NMU could not deliver sufficient strike relief, and because the NMU attracted mainly unemployed, blacklisted members devoid of bargaining power rather than working miners," who, it should be noted, had no bargaining power either.<sup>24</sup>

Ultimately, the only significant "victory" for the NMU in the



strike of 1932 came in the form of a dramatic funeral in New York for nineteen-year-old Harry Simms, organizer for the Young Communist League, who was murdered by sheriff's deputies on Brush Creek in Knox County on February 10, 1932 (the very day of the Frank committee's visit). Jim Garland eulogized Simms and later wrote and often performed "The Ballad of Harry Simms." Aunt Molly Jackson left Kentucky to work with Dreiser and Dos Passos on a U.S. Senate investigation of feudal conditions in Kentucky. A preliminary hearing by the subcommittee of the Committee on Manufacturers was held in May 1932. The subcommittee rejected the idea of a full investigation, concluding that the witnesses were "more or less Communists, or so inclined." Jackson later recorded "The Hungry Ragged Blues" and "Poor Miners Farewell" for Columbia Records in New York and became a familiar voice of working-class protest.<sup>25</sup> In 1939 Bruce Crawford became the director of the Works Progress Administration's Writers' Project in West Virginia. He wrote that state's WPA guide, but its pro-labor passages were censored by Gov. Homer Holt.<sup>26</sup> John Dos Passos renounced his radical politics of the early 1930s and moved steadily to the political right, growing ever more cynical about the progressive possibilities of collective action and government activism.

Not long after the murder of Harry Simms, nineteen NMU organizers were arrested in Pineville when deputies and vigilantes raided their headquarters. This was the day, writes Dexter Collett, "that the coal operators and their thugs broke the NMU in Kentucky." Most supporters of the NMU left the state; the few who lingered on were represented by Jim Garland, who was paid five dollars per month as an NMU organizer. In 1935 Garland was replaced by the radical poet and labor organizer, Don West.<sup>27</sup> By that time, the eastern Kentucky drama had been superseded by class violence during strikes by longshoremen in San Francisco, truckers in Minneapolis, and textile workers from Maine to South Carolina. This wave of conflict prompted the U.S. Congress to enact one of the most complex and ambitious legislative accom-



## INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

plishments of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal: the National Labor Relations Act, usually referred to as the Wagner Act for its sponsor in the U.S. Senate, Robert Wagner, a New York Democrat.

### LEGACY

In 1935 the NMU disbanded when the American Communist Party dissolved the Trade Union Unity League, again adopting a strategy of working within established unions. One important historian of class and culture in eastern Kentucky writes that years afterward "it appeared that the NMU had accomplished nothing more than the temporary radicalization of a very small minority of Harlan Countians."<sup>28</sup> Others conclude that the legacy of the dual union period may not be quite so limited. James R. Barrett, for example, contends that the failures of the radical unions of the early 1930s "should not obscure the important role they played in organizing groups of workers otherwise ignored by the mainstream movement" and in "arguing for a radical vision of the labor movement as an agent of social and political transformation." The TUUL's greatest importance, Barrett writes, was its development of experienced radical activists for the industrial union movement led by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) after 1935. Protected by the Wagner Act, the CIO and an energized AFL "unionized American basic industry by the end of World War II." By the mid-1950s nearly 40 percent of American workers in the private sector had union protection. Ironically, therefore, the TUUL had a direct effect on the creation of the American middle class.<sup>29</sup>

The development of the so-called New Deal labor relations, beginning with the labor provisions of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 and expanded by the Wagner Act, played a decisive role in mediating the bitter class conflict that tore apart eastern Kentucky and other areas of the country in the early 1930s. The UMWA under Lewis's guidance began a successful organizing campaign with the Appalachian Agreements of 1933,



signed by nervous operators who feared more radical alternatives would capture their workers' loyalty if the UMWA was driven away. Eastern Kentucky operators continued to resist, even when United States Steel's subsidiary in Lynch, Kentucky, signed on with the UMWA in 1936. Congress's La Follette hearings, however, widely publicized the web of violence and intimidation that characterized the Kentucky coal associations' reaction to unionization.<sup>30</sup> Civic awareness and support had shifted in favor of labor during the Roosevelt administration, and after a bitter strike in 1938–1939 the Harlan County Coal Operators Association negotiated collective bargaining contracts with their employees and the UMWA.<sup>31</sup>

Equitability for coalfield communities survived only for a generation, however. By 1947 a conservative reaction against labor's growing power resulted in the Taft-Hartley Act, which deprived labor of many of its most effective organizing strategies and strengthened the legal rights of companies to deny and subvert unionization in their workplaces. The expulsion of radicals from AFL and CIO unions (the federations merged in 1955) during the red scare of the 1950s sapped much of the vitality and social justice vision from organized labor. Concurrently, mechanization and international competition squeezed the UMWA, and the need for coal miners declined dramatically in the Appalachians. In the 1970s a version of the Save the Union movement called Miners for Democracy reformed many of the autocratic tendencies of the Lewis and post-Lewis years (Lewis retired in 1959) but could not negate the structural realities of the industry in the age of globalization. The power of the UMWA and most of the industrial unions eroded dramatically from the early 1970s to the present. Today, less than 10 percent of private sector workers are unionized. The decline in organized labor's power contributed to stagnant wages, increased poverty, and vanishing health insurance, pensions, and job security for American workers. This erosion has multiple causes, but one of the most important is



## INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

the so-called "union avoidance" movement, the direct descendant of the American Plan. Unlike J. H. Blair's deputies, one historian reports, union avoidance professionals carry "briefcases, not blackjacks."<sup>32</sup>

Is the past prologue? There is, one hopes, little possibility that the bitter and violent struggles that characterized "Bloody Harlan" will ever be replicated, although a bitter and sometimes violent conflict between UMWA advocates and the Eastover Mining Company at Brookside in 1973 (a Pyrrhic victory for the union) called to mind the troubles of "Bloody Harlan."<sup>33</sup> Today, violence in the coalfields has a somewhat different meaning than it did in the 1930s. The decline of the UMWA and the political assault against government regulation of business has undermined the progressive safety codes of a dangerous industry. The bitter debate over the mining practice known as mountaintop removal (MTR) has sparked social and political conflict that is different in form and focus, but not far removed in terms of emotional intensity, from the upheaval that brought the Dreiser committee to eastern Kentucky. From the perspective of participants in this debate, the issues reflect practical and existential questions about environmental stewardship, economic development, preservation of community, and the social priorities of the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

A prominent grass-roots organization, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC), has sponsored visits to eastern Kentucky coalfields by regional writers and academics so that they might hear and help act upon testimony from residents whose lives have been directly affected by MTR. This writers' group reflects a more enduring association with the region than the Dreiser committee, composed as it is primarily of Kentucky and Appalachia natives. Its most identifiable voice, Henry Countian Wendell Berry, speaks for a renewal of agrarian stewardship and ecological harmony rather than any political ideology. But in one respect the Dreiser



committee and the KFTC authors share a common purpose—to point out that we, like the people of 1931, must decide which side we are on.<sup>34</sup>

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## NOTES

1. David C. Duke, *Writers and Miners: Activism and Imagery in America* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2002), 30; John W. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On? The Harlan County Coal Miners, 1931–1939* (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1978), 69.

2. Duke cites the essays by Lester Cohen and Melvin Levy to illustrate the cultural biases common to many observers who considered Appalachians to be somehow remote from or exceptional to mainstream American society and values (Duke, *Writers and Miners*, 32–33). Class-based stereotypes about presumptively backward mountaineers were not held exclusively by outsiders, however. In fact, the essentializing of Appalachian people was typically facilitated by local elites, often to generate philanthropic sympathy for the mountaineers. William Goodell Frost, president of Berea College in eastern Kentucky, had institutionalized the “otherness” of native Appalachian mountaineers in an *Atlantic Monthly* article in 1899 in which he referred to them as “Our Contemporary Ancestors.” Earlier, Will Wallace Harney had portrayed mountaineers as a “peculiar people” residing in a “strange land.” By the late nineteenth century, writes Katherine Ledford, a thriving school of “local color” authors, notably Mary Noailles Murfree and John Fox Jr., “could draw upon the hillbilly stereotype for their literary needs. Backwardness, superstition, and ignorance, or innocence, simplicity, and kindness—the hillbilly embodied it all.” It is certainly plausible that Dreiser and the members of the writers’ committee, to whatever degree they were aware of Appalachian issues, were influenced by this local color movement. See Ronald L. Lewis, “Beyond Isolation and Homogeneity,” in *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from an American Region*, ed. Dwight Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford (Lexington: Univ. Press



## INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

of Kentucky, 1999), 21; and Katherine Ledford, "A Landscape and a People Set Apart," in *ibid.*, 64. An excellent book-length study that analyzes class relations and the perceptions of Harlan Countians between the 1930s and 1990s is Shaunna Scott's *Two Sides to Everything: The Cultural Construction of Class Consciousness in Harlan County, Kentucky* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1995).

3. Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880–1930* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1982), 155.

4. "Yellow-dog" contracts, widely used in the Appalachian coal industry, stipulated that miners would not be hired unless they promised not to engage in union activity. Under such contracts, workers understood that employment terms were based on individual negotiation with the employer—that is, there could be no "outside agency" or collective bargaining. Real or suspected violation of the yellow-dog contract could, and usually did, result in dismissal and often blacklisting—the refusal of competing companies to hire the offender. These and other arbitrary practices of the operators were temporarily suspended under pressure from the Wilson administration during the war in order to guarantee uninterrupted production, but the federal protection, which had contributed to a burst of unionization in the coal industry during World War I, evaporated after the Armistice. Then, coal operators returned to their earlier practices, fortified by the Supreme Court decision in the case of *Hitchman Coal and Coke Company v. Mitchell* (1917), which legitimated the yellow-dog contract and blacklisting as within the prerogative of employers to operate as they saw fit. During the war the owners did not use yellow-dog contracts and blacklisting because of labor shortages and high prices for coal, but when labor shortages eased and prices dropped, they unleashed these practices with a vengeance. See John Hennen, *The Americanization of West Virginia: Creating a Modern Industrial State, 1916–1925* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1996), especially 57–118. The best brief analysis of the structural conditions of coal communities in eastern Kentucky is Alan Banks, "Class Formation in the Southeastern Kentucky Coalfields, 1890–1920," in *Appalachia in the Making*, ed. Dwight Billings, Mary Beth Pudur, and Altina Waller (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1995), 321–46.

5. Duke, *Writers and Miners*, 27. Coal miners in this era were paid solely on the basis of the amount of coal produced; any associated tasks were known as "dead work." The coal was weighed, in non-union mines,



solely by company employees known as checkweighmen, who had the final say in how much of the miner's production for the day was coal as opposed to slate, rock, or dirt. Typically checkweighmen employed the so-called "long ton," or twenty-two hundred pounds, to represent a ton, rather than two thousand pounds.

6. Many of the most militant participants in the strike of 1931–1932 and those that followed had participated in the strike in Kentucky in 1922. See Alan Banks, "Miners Talk Back: Labor Activism in South-eastern Kentucky in 1922," in *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes*, ed. Billings, Norman, and Ledford, 215–27.

7. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 156–57; Duke, *Writers and Miners*, 27. See also the essays by Melvin Levy and Anna Rochester in *Harlan Miners Speak*.

8. Hennen, *The Americanization of West Virginia*, 99–118.

9. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 156–57; Duke, *Writers and Miners*, 27.

10. James Klotter and Lowell Harrison, *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1997), 359–60; John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980), 96.

11. Klotter and Harrison, *A New History of Kentucky*, 360, 366. The extreme conditions are graphically reported in the Dreiser committee report by committee members Charles Rumford Walker, Melvin Levy, and Adelaide Walker. Harlan residents Caleb Powers, Mrs. J. M. Grace, Charlie Scalf, Henry Thornton, Mrs. Flora Shackelford, and Molly Jackson (who became both a public face and public voice of the miners and their families in her capacity as folksinger) were among those coalfield residents who commented on living conditions.

12. Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, 97.

13. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?* 34.

14. Duke, *Writers and Miners*, 27; Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, 98; Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?* 33, 45–47.

15. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?* 37.

16. Duke, *Writers and Miners*, 28; Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography*, abridged ed. (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1986), 123; Teresa Statler-Keener, "Save the Union Movement," in *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*, ed. Rudy Abramson and Jean Haskell (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2006), 591–92.

17. James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American*



## INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

*Radicalism* (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1999), 173–76; Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?* 57–58.

18. See Bruce Crawford, “Harlan County and the Press”; Boris Israel, “Representing the Press,” chapter VII in *Harlan Miners Speak*. See especially the testimony of Bruce Crawford and Boris Israel, the affidavits of Jim Grace and Debs Moreland, and the testimony of Viola Grace, Richard Wolfe, Jeff Baldwin, Sheriff J. H. Blair, and William E. Brock in *Harlan Miners Speak*.

19. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?* 60; Dexter Collett, “The Musicians of the Mine Wars: I,” *Appalachian Heritage* 34.2 (spring 2006): 78–79.

20. The most egregious violence may have been the killing on August 30, 1931, of two local NMU members at a soup kitchen. Blair’s deputy, Lee Fleenor, was acquitted a year later after a jury deliberated for five minutes (Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?* 60; see especially the testimony of Jeff Baldwin and Molly Jackson in *Harlan Miners Speak*).

21. Duke, *Writers and Miners*, 29.

22. Barrett, *William Z. Foster*, 173–76.

23. Duke, *Writers and Miners*, 34.

24. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?* 78.

25. *Ibid.*, 79–88; Dexter Collett, “The Musicians of the Mine Wars: II,” *Appalachian Heritage* 34.3 (summer 2006): 64–65.

26. John Alexander Williams, *West Virginia: A Bicentennial History* (New York: Norton, 1976), 162–63.

27. Collett quoted in *ibid.*, 65.

28. Scott, *Two Sides to Everything*, 33.

29. Barrett, “Dual Unionism,” and “Trade Union Unity League,” in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, ed. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 202, 779.

30. The La Follette Committee, or the Committee on Education and Labor’s Subcommittee on Civil Liberties, was chaired by Sen. Robert La Follette Jr. of Wisconsin. Formed in 1936, it investigated the violation of civil liberties in labor relations (Melvyn Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America* [Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1994], 134).

31. Klotter and Harrison, *A New History of Kentucky*, 366.

32. Extensive research supports these broad conclusions. Publications that focus on these trends are Kate Bronfenbrenner et al., *Organiz-*



*ing to Win: New Research on Union Strategies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1998); Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and Sylvia Allegretto, *The State of Working America, 2006–2007* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Economic Policy Institute/ILR Press, 2006); and Robert Michael Smith, *From Blackjacks to Briefcases: A History of Commercialized Strike-breaking and Unionbusting in the United States* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 2003).

33. Eastover, a subsidiary of Duke Power, finally signed a contract with the UMWA at Brookside in 1974. The union victory was short-lived, however, because the company drastically cut back on medical and retirement benefits in the contract negotiated in 1978 with a weakened UMWA. The bitterness of the 1973–1974 strike divided workers, many of whom eventually turned away from the UMWA and joined the Southern Labor Union (SLU), a virtual “company union” that drove the UMWA out. Duke Power shut down its Brookside operations in 1981, and Eastover sold its Harlan County holdings to local operator Pat Abbott, who eventually “refused to sign even the SLU contract.” Unionization in Harlan County coal operations is now just a memory (Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?* 184; Scott, *Two Sides to Everything*, 61, 64–65).

34. For MTR and its effects on communities, see Wendell Berry et al., *Missing Mountains* (Nicholasville, Ky.: Wind Publications, 2005); Erik Reece, *Lost Mountain* (New York: Riverhead, 2006); and Penny Loeb, *Moving Mountains* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2007).