

A century since the confrontation on Blair Mountain

By Chris Lawrence

September 2, 2021 - 1:33 pm

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — One of the largest and most violent clashes over labor rights in America happened 100 years ago this week in Logan County.



Battle of Blair Mountain Marker

The Battle of Blair Mountain was the culmination of a protest by southern West Virginia coal miners who were fed up with the treatment they were getting from coal operators.

“Miners were protesting the nature of the coal company town system in southern West Virginia. They had very little freedom, very little civil liberties, everything in their lives was controlled by the company. There were unsafe working conditions as well and there were very low wages that weren’t even paid in real currency, but in coal company script,” West Virginia University History Professor Hal Gorby said during an appearance Thursday on MetroNews “Talkline.”

The labor strife of the time had been simmering for months. There were efforts to organize the miners into a union throughout southern West Virginia. Coal company officials fervently resisted the idea and hired gunmen to disrupt the process. The West Virginia State Police were called in amid violent uprisings between company hired guns and organizing miners. The Governor declared martial law for a period of time.

Two other events added fuel to the fire. The murders of Sid Hatfield and Ed Chambers in McDowell County on the courthouse steps were considered a tipping point. Hatfield had been the miners’ hero leading up to the Matewan Massacre. There were many miners in Mingo County had been jailed after their arrest under martial law.

Miners met in Charleston and laid out their demands. They wanted coal miners freed from jail, they wanted Logan County Sheriff Don Chafin’s control of the region broken up, and they wanted a union for all miners in the deep southern West Virginia coalfield counties which had been the last holdouts to organize.

The miners began their march in Marmet and crossed the mountain to Madison in Boone County. Union leaders Frank Keeney and Ed Mooney attempted to stop the march. Keeney offered a very dramatic and impassioned speech to the miners in hopes of breaking it up. It almost worked, until some of Chambers' men got into a gunfight with some of the miners in the town of Sharples near Blair Mountain. The incident reignited the march with renewed vigor.

“The miners were coming from all different areas of southern West Virginia and some from out of state as well. They began commandeering C and O railroad trains. They began commandeering automobiles to get miners to Blair. It's estimated by the end of the month there were at least 10,000 miners there,” said Gorby.

Chafin's men dug in with about 3,000 men and the shooting started. The bloody battle lasted five days and it's estimated 100 to 150 were killed. The battle finally ended when federal troops marched in.

“About 2500 U.S. troops converged on Blair Mountain and the miners were not going to shoot at U.S. troops, many of them were veterans themselves,” Gorby explained.

The miners disbursed and many were tried for treason. The trials held at the Jefferson County Courthouse in West Virginia's eastern panhandle. According to Gorby it was a blow to the labor movement in West Virginia.

Union organizers had hoped the federal intervention would be a mediation to level the playing field or organization. However, once miners had been disarmed and their protest broken up, control was given back to local leaders who doubled down on the anti-union activity.

“It really set the union back in West Virginia and started a period for the next decade in which companies were tearing up union contracts. It spread to the Kanawha Valley and the Fairmont area and by the end of the decade, West Virginia was largely non-union and it wasn't until 1933 the union eventually came back during the New Deal period,” he said.

The United Mine Workers will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Blair Mountain by recreating the march during the Labor Day weekend.

“We march in 2021 to honor those 10,000 miners who in 1921 picked up their rifles and headed to Logan and Mingo Counties to free their brother miners there,” UMWA International President Cecil E. Roberts said. “But we also march because many of the same conditions that led to Blair Mountain in 1921 are creeping back into our society.”

UMWA members will retrace the steps of the march on Friday from Marmet to Racine. Saturday they'll march from Racine to Madison, and on Sunday from Madison to Sharples where Roberts is slated to speak. Monday will be the annual UMWA Picnic at John Slack Park in Racine.