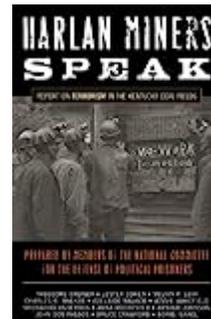




Members of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners.
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Personalizing “Bloody Harlan”

For students of Appalachian studies, Harlan County, Kentucky, has long symbolized the social, economic, and environmental problems associated with coal field industrialization in the mountains. In the minds of many, “Bloody Harlan” has come to exemplify the struggles by early twentieth-century Appalachian coal miners for better living and working conditions against powerful corporate and political forces. This University Press of Kentucky reissue of the 1931 investigation of the labor conflict in the Harlan and Bell county areas provides a powerful reminder of the difficulties faced by mining families of the era.

By the late 1920s, the coal industry suffered from cut-throat competition, sagging markets, and declining profits. The onset of the Great Depression only worsened conditions for this “sick” industry and operators consistently reduced wages in an effort to remain competitive. Miners found themselves barely able to subsist and turned to unionization in an effort to secure better working and living conditions. Confronted by the politically powerful Harlan County Coal Operators Asso-

ciation and discontented with the lack of adequate support from the United Mine Workers of America, miners welcomed the assistance of the Communist-affiliated National Miners Union (NMU). News accounts of increasing violence against striking miners, their families, and even members of the press circulated in national newspapers. At the request of Communist Party chairman William Z. Foster, novelist Theodore Dreiser agreed to chair a distinguished group of writers known as the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, charged with investigating and documenting the situation in Kentucky.

Historian John C. Hennen’s excellent introduction dramatically increases the value of this reissue of the committee’s 1932 report. Hennen insightfully places the committee’s findings within historical context and ably provides readers with a thorough understanding of contemporary attitudes toward unionization and radicalism. Drawing from a wealth of scholarship on the topic, his observations regarding scholarly criticisms of the committee’s activities as well as the actual events in Harlan will prove invaluable to readers unfamiliar with the

topic. Additionally, Hennen's thorough citations supply an essential reading list for anyone wishing to know more about the Harlan County Mine War.

The essays penned by committee members addressed a variety of topics related to conditions in the Harlan coal fields of the 1930s. In so doing, the writers identified many of the common themes characteristic of America's coal wars, including the loss of civil rights and labor's mistrust of authorities sympathetic to the goals of the mining companies. Although the essays reflect stereotypical misconceptions about Appalachian coal miners, the observations make a valuable contribution toward a better understanding of the realities of mining life in the region during the 1930s. Dreiser used his essay to pursue his political sensibilities and question the value of individualism in American culture, but he adequately provided insight into the disparity created when striking miners confronted the animosity of the local legal system. Melvin P. Levy and Charles R. Walker demonstrated an obvious bias for the NMU, but still produced informative discussions regarding the opening of the coal field in the area, and also identified common grievances such as the employment of company-paid mine guards as deputy sheriffs. Even though Anna Rochester's contribution contained minor errors, her essay provided a useful discussion of the intricate network of corporations that controlled the Kentucky coal fields. She accurately noted that the Harlan County contest pitted miners against the strongest forces in the capitalist world (p. 58). News reporters Bruce Crawford, the only mountaineer on the committee, and Boris Israel both suffered bullet wounds while in Harlan and the circumstances of the shootings certainly supplied some indication of the risks endured by anyone perceived as a potential challenge to local authority.

Committee members Arnold Johnson and Adelaide Walker produced particularly interesting essays regarding the inequality of miners within the local legal system and the terrible living conditions of the striking laborers. Johnson noted the abuse of civil rights based on Kentucky's criminal syndicalism law, which made felons of miners who possessed leftist literature, participated in assemblies, or made inflammatory speeches. Even allowing for bias, readers will note that Johnson's observations provide sufficient evidence of an abuse of miners' legal rights, while crimes by company-hired thugs went un-

challenged. Walker's powerful description of the dreadful state of sanitation, malnutrition, and general living conditions among many miners conveys a stark reminder of the enormous difficulties faced by the region's mining families.

Without doubt, the testimonies of mining families afford the most enlightening section of the committee's report. Comments of the miners and their relatives convey a touching image of individuals dependent on charity, clothed in little more than rags, and uncertain about the next meal. These testimonies also communicate clearly the miners' deep-seated belief that vested authorities had no intention of protecting miners against abuse or violence. Bruce Crawford crystallized this attitude by noting that he did not report his own bullet wound because their side probably done it (p. 129).

Weaknesses of this volume evolve from committee essays based on a stereotypical view of Appalachian miners and, to a lesser degree, a tendency to often ask leading questions. Dreiser and his colleagues proceeded with a mistaken notion of mountaineers as a culturally and historically homogeneous people. Undoubtedly, these misguided perceptions had been influenced by earlier color writers who created and cultivated the popular impression of a people isolated by terrain and time, whose habits and beliefs qualified them as America's contemporary ancestors. Certainly the manner of questioning guided the path of the testimonies, but, in some cases, the interviewers understandably attempted to have people address and validate known events or situations. However, the committee occasionally ignored contradictory evidence, such as failing to pursue one miner's observation that the company did not charge him house rent whenever he was not working.

The strength of this volume remains the personal observations of coal mining families, who battled both economic depression and official resistance to any organizing activities that authorities could distort and portray as un-American. Although clearly biased, the committee's questions resulted in first-person accounts that reveal a powerful and compelling story. This volume provides a touching, if sometimes distressing, personal voice to the Appalachian mining families who lived through the difficulties of a mine war, and conveys the atmosphere of an era in a manner rarely accomplished by traditional academic studies.

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