

Blair Mountain Protests

Posted on June 10, 2011 by Rosemary Feurer

LAWCHA member and newsletter editor Rosemary Feurer attended the protests in West Virginia to save historic Blair Mountain.

Tuesday, June 21

Jay Mallin has created a video about the campaign to save Blair Mountain, entitled [Saving Blair Mountain](#). Give it a look! Thanks to Bill Barry for sharing the link.

[Saving Blair Mountain](#) from [Jay Mallin](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Saturday, June 11



Saturday, we awoke early, having camped that night at the base of Blair Mountain. We listened to speeches from Robert Kennedy Jr., Denise Giardina (author of *Storming Heaven* and *The Unquiet Earth*). Gordon Simmons, West Virginia Labor History Society President and United Electrical Workers West Virginia Public Workers division union organizer, made a terrific speech connecting the struggles of public workers in the present to the struggles of Blair Mountain miners. “ It’s not just Blair Mountain that the companies and the state want to blast & bury. Right now, in the present day, the state of West Virginia is firing

public workers who cannot or will not work more than 40 hours a week, even though workers died for that right in 1886.”

It was terrifically hot, over 92 degrees as 755 marchers launched the 2 mile march up Blair Mountain around 2 p.m. We were halted several times, the police demanding single file lines even though that slowed us down considerably. Along the way, we sang union songs, chanted, and drank plenty of water. Folksingers played the beautiful song by John Prine Paradise <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sddVNMB1HkQ> and union or struggle songs along the way. Marchers cheered as we reached the top. Counter-protesters had greased the boulders where we might have been able to sit down for a rest at the top of the mountain, but the marchers felt exhilaration only. We knew that we had accomplished much to bring the attention of the country to the threat to this historic site. In addition, the alliances that were created between supporters of this historic site and conservationists has resulted in a new attempt to ask the EPA to designate this as Lands Unsuitable for Mining Petition. [You can send in a comment in support of the petition here.](#)

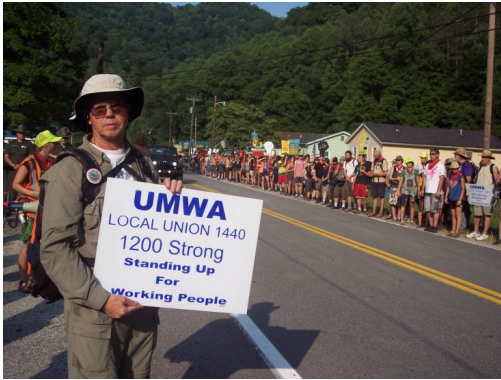
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Friday June 10



We encountered both tremendous support and considerable opposition as we neared Blair Mountain. Along the way, as Joe Stanley, of UMWA Local 93 remarked, “for every negative comment I heard, I heard just as many spirited supporters of our cause.” Stanley who was president of his UMWA Local 93 (but who carried a sign for Matewan Local 1440, see photo) for four years, commented, “ I am here to stop mountaintop removal. This is a tough situation for everybody involved. This (opposition) is orchestrated by the coal companies. This is how they’ve conquered and divided for the last 150 years and left us at the bottom of every list. They’ve taken trillions of dollars out of west Virginia and left us with nothing but misery and grief. Mountaintop removal has cost too great a price. They love splitting us up.

This didn't occur by accident." Stanley remarked that the companies get loyalty from a small group of non-union miners because "underground mining is hard damn work. A lot of these jobs is like running a video game. You have air conditioning in summer, you have heat in winter, you have a stereo, a lot of them have DVDs in 'em, and you can work 14 hours a day and make 75,000-100,000 a year. They ain't no perc jobs underground. You wade in mud, you suck dust, you earn a living underground. These are heavy equipment jobs."



As we continued to march just past the gauntlet of counter-protesters to the area where miners were forced to lay down their arms in 1921, we heard a shout-out from 82 year old Bill Doody, " Boy, I like that sign you have." (referring to Stanley's UMWA sign) Doody said, "I used to live in Blair. My daddy lived across the mountain when the battle was going on, and there was bullets going through the house, over at George's Creek, other side of the Mountain. He was a union man before me. My daddy fought for the union, I won't give the rest of the family credit for nothing. The whole state of West Virginia has belonged to the coal operators all my life. And I'm 82 years and a half. I'm a hard-shell union man. Me and my wife's been married 62 years in September. The reason that these young men's working on the strip mining. Their dad's weren't true union even if they carried the label. I'm still a fighter and I'm not scared of no man. This non-union strip mining, it's for the birds."

You can see the live interviews with Joe Stanley and Bill Doody at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-nFh03l0xs>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxkt263YrS4>

Thursday, June 9 update from Rosemary Feurer

We drove from Marmet, West Virginia, the launching point of the 50 mile march to the Blair Mountain, navigating a series of roads to try to locate the marchers. They have been

walking since Monday, and we figured they would be over 30 miles in. But 30 miles in West Virginia's winding mountain roads is not a short drive. After curling around curve after curve on the march route, it became clear to us just what the marchers had already endured and accomplished. Many locals don't obey the speed limit, their familiarity with the winding roads giving them the confidence I lacked. And the marchers don't have much of an embankment to walk along, and in some areas, they just have to walk single file on the road itself, as there is nowhere else to go.

When we finally reached the marchers in Logan county, we understood just how they were able to accomplish this on an unforgiving terrain. There they were, on the left side of the road facing oncoming traffic, accompanied by state police whose cars gave warning to motorists in the most dangerous areas.

As we approached the marchers, we realized that they were encountering an organized counterprotest. Across the road, held back by police, a group of local residents shouted epithets, telling marchers to "go home," and expressing their support of mountaintop removal. A number of signs in this community read "friends of coal" in neat, printed letters. It was clearly an organized campaign, though other signs were home-made. The marchers had been trained to not respond in any fashion, and soon the counter protest was over, as the marchers continued up a particularly steep road.

Later in the evening several marchers expressed their sense that the troopers have become more and more impressed with the discipline and demeanor of the marchers. The discipline is one indication of the high degree of organization that has gone into this march. But when we compare the 300 marchers today to the kind of self-organization that miners had in 1921, we can only be in awe of how the 10,000 miners made this long trek.

Despite the counterprotest, the marchers felt inspired by the significant support in these communities for the march. Such support was dramatically signified by today's lunch site for marchers, which took place was at Mary Ann and Michael Miles house. Miles home was a camp site for the original 1921 march, and the long memory of that event brought home to the marchers the need for preserving the spaces where this conflict took place, and the larger meaning it holds for some.

A number of the marchers are reading "When Miners March" by William C. Blizzard (ed. Wes Harris). Others such as Dustin Steele, one of the young organizers whose family roots are in Matewan, West Virginia, the old stories of resistance to coal company domination have been handed down as part of their heritage.

Dustin's grandmother, Wilma Lee Steele, is another organizer for the march. She is Mingo County Conservation Supervisor for the West Virginia Conservation Agency. Her husband Terry is president of the Matewan local of the United Mine Workers of America. They married 41 years ago, high school sweethearts who have involved their family in worker and environment preservation. Wilma told me that when some miners at the Matewan local began to speak against endorsing the march, Terry reminded them of how some conservationists had helped clean the muck out of their basements after the 2009 flood in the area. Miner after miner stood up speaking of the help they received from conservationists at that time. Then one exclaimed, they call them "treehuggers" and "lazy-why don't they get a job," but he'd "never seen women working as hard as those women did after the flood." Then one miner, she recalled, jumped up and exclaimed, "we need to support this march, and we need to stop mountaintop removal." The Matewan local gave \$500 to the march, and some members are marching to Blair on Friday. Their international union has refused to give official endorsement, however, claiming that the goal of the march is to end coal mining.

Friday's marchers expect more confrontation, as they enter Massey property lines.

April 14, 2011

Scholars and activists across the country are organizing an event in June to save Blair Mountain. "The March on Blair Mountain is a unifying rally involving labor unions, environmental organizations, scholars, artists, and other citizens and groups. The march commemorates the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921, when 10,000 coal miners rose against the rule of the coal operators and fought for the basic right to live and work in decent conditions. Currently, Blair Mountain is threatened with obliteration by mountaintop removal (MTR) mining, and it is here that a new generation of Appalachians takes a stand.

The event will consist of a five-day march from Marmet, WV, to Blair Mountain in Logan County, WV, beginning on June 6th, 2011. Participants will march 10 miles a day, and evenings will consist of workshops, cultural festivities, and music. On the sixth day, June 11th, a large rally will be held in Blair, followed by a march to the crest of Blair Mountain where culminating activities will occur.

In the spirit of the original march-which consisted of mountain folk, African-Americans, and immigrants from all over Europe-we call on a diversity of groups to march in solidarity for the workers, communities and mountains of Appalachia. If you stand with us, you are one of us-a true mountaineer."

For more information, visit their website at <http://marchonblairmountain.org/>

October 5, 2010

WEST VIRGINIA, October 5, 2010: Prominent scholars and artists from across the United States today published an 'Open Letter' calling upon the US National Park Service and the West Virginia State Historic Preservation Office to take immediate action in protecting the historic Blair Mountain battlesite from imminent threat of destruction by 'mountaintop removal' mining. In the fall of 1921, Blair Mountain was the site of the largest domestic insurrection in the nation's post-Civil War history. Over a five-day period, fierce battles raged across the West Virginia mining region, pitting union miners against municipal authorities and private armies hired by local coal companies. At the height of the conflict private planes were used to drop homemade bombs on union supporters. For many, Blair Mountain became emblematic of the huge disparities in wealth and power in America during the industrial age. Allowing the site to be destroyed by strip mining would "desecrate the memory of the 15,000 men who fought and those who died in this historic labor struggle," campaign supporter Harvard Ayers insists.

Signatories of the Open Letter include filmmakers John Sayles (*Matewan*) and Barbara Kopple (*Harlan County, USA*), bluegrass legend and West Virginia native Hazel Dickens, award-winning novelist Denise Giardina (*Storming Heaven*), and Singer-Songwriter David Rovics (*Battle of Blair Mountain*), along with more than two dozen prominent historians, archaeologists, and university educators, many of them specializing in American labor history. The campaign is seeking urgent action from the National Parks Service to place Blair Mountain on its National Register of Historic Places. Campaigners aim to gather support through an [online petition campaign](#) and have set up a facebook group ('Save Blair Mountain').

Author



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Rosemary Feurer is Professor of History at Northern Illinois University. She is the author of *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950*, among other books and essays. She is working on *The Illinois Mine Wars, 1860-1940* and a new biography of Mary

Harris "Mother" Jones.