

THE BATTLE OF BLAIR MOUNTAIN

In August 1921, an estimated 15,000 coal miners and their allies participated in the largest armed labor uprising in US history.

Since they began organizing under the United Mine Workers of America and striking in large numbers in the 1890s, Black, white, and immigrant coal miners in West Virginia had been working together to democratize their communities and their workplaces. Their alliances and sometimes violent struggles inspired the famous labor song, "Solidarity Forever," published in 1916.

Coal mining was one of the most hazardous jobs in existence and miners had few protections under law. Most miners in West Virginia lived in company towns, where their employers owned almost everything—housing, utilities, stores, and more. Sometimes, companies even printed their own form of currency called "scrip."

Coal companies contracted with the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency to provide law enforcement in the form of armed guards who patrolled communities, monitored trains, spied on workers, and sometimes brutalized suspected union organizers. These anti-democratic features of town life deeply offended miners' sense of dignity and civil rights.

In August of 1921, an estimated 15,000 miners came together across racial and ethnic lines to try and overthrow this violent, anti-union regime. That month, they took up arms, formed military units, and began marching into the nonunion coalfields. Many of them wore red calico handkerchiefs around their necks, a uniform that earned them the nickname the "Red Neck Army."

THE CHARLESTON GAZETTE
Miners On March To Mingo;
Logan Now In a State Of Seige
GREENBRIER'S 44 Armed Die When
Huge Drapple 220-
Is Ripped By Blast
CHAFIN OPPOSES MARCH
SUNDAY MEET
CLEAVING SPLIT
BELL ON SHEL
PLANES, MACHINE
GUNS TO SAY TO MEN

AUGUST 25 - SEPTEMBER 4, 1921

They got as far as Blair Mountain, the borderlands between union and nonunion territory. There, they were stopped by "The Defenders," an opposing coalition of some 4,000 Logan County sheriff's deputies, volunteers, and West Virginia State Police.



A column of armed coal miners on their way to the conflict in Logan County. Images of the march are rare, since the miners usually prevented journalists from taking photographs for fear that these would later be used to identify and prosecute them. *The Outlook*, September 14, 1921



The Amherst Fuel Company positioned these men on a hill at Stowe, southeast of Blair, guarding company property with a Colt-Browning M1895 machine gun from the possibility of attack by approaching nonunion coal miners. *Gift of Corey Walls, collection of West Virginia Mine Wars Museum*

For five days the miners tried to break through the ranks of their opponents, resulting in dozens of casualties and at least six deaths on both sides. Only after President Warren Harding dispatched two regiments of the U.S. Army did both sides peacefully surrender their rifles to the federal government.

Afterwards, hundreds of miners were rounded up and indicted on state charges, including murder and treason, which practically bankrupted the UMWA in West Virginia. Not until the passage of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935 would the West Virginia miners win from the federal government their right to belong to a labor union, ensuring they had a role and a voice in shaping a safer, fairer workplace.



Battle of Blair Mountain overview interpretive panels, will be present at all sites