

Coal Wars: Unions, Strikes and Violence in Depression Era Central Washington



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David Bullock

Reviewed by Bob Weldin

In addition to his documented sources, David Bullock had another authoritative source that most historians will envy. His mother's family lived through the events depicted in *Coal Wars*. When his grandfather, a skilled Roslyn coal miner, decided to stay with the United Mine Workers of America he and his family were threatened and called *filthy scabs* by those in favor of a new labor union—the Western Miners Union of America. The locality is the Roslyn-Cle Elum coal field in Kittitas County, WA on the east side of the Cascade Mountains. This field was the largest single coal-producing region in the state, and contributed nearly half of the state's annual coal production during the 1920s and 1930s. The Northern Pacific Railroad was the major consumer of the high-grade bituminous produced from the Roslyn-Cle Elum mines. The railroad delayed the introduction of diesel locomotives to its line because of its large reserves of coal, but the writing was on the wall, and it wasn't written in coal dust. The prologue is used to familiarize the reader with the state of the US coal mining industry during the early depression years. He gives an account of the lingering influence of socialism, the IWW, communism, and political radicals that infiltrated the early unions. It was a time of rapid development of new technologies, although some of it came later to Roslyn than to other mines in the country. By the late 1920s, mechanical coal cutting and drilling machines were being introduced, that required fewer miners. In 1900 machines cut 25 percent of US tonnage, but by 1930 that number had risen to 81 percent.

It was during the early years of the great depression when FDR assumed the presidency in March of 1933, with the promise to America's workers of a New Deal—a promise of fair wages and a revitalized economy. As the economy worsened he created the National Recovery Administration (NRA) setting broad powers for representatives of business, labor, and government to negotiate fair prices, wages, and working hours. Labor leaders took this language as a pro-union government endorsement and enlisted workers around the nation. Membership in the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) had dropped from half a million in 1923 to just over 100,000 by 1931. It rebounded to nearly 400,000 during the summer following the NRA's signing. The support for labor union membership prompted an acceleration in the number of

work stoppages. Work stoppages doubled from 841 in 1932 to 1,695 in 1933. The number moved upward in 1934 when some 1,856 strikes involved more than 1,470,000 workers. The Western Miners strike at the Roslyn-Cle Elum coal field was one of those actions.

In the 1930s, John L. Lewis led the UMWA—the most powerful labor union in the nation. A popular story in Roslyn (and probably in other coal towns) suggests that three pictures hung prominently in many miners' homes—Jesus, FDR, and John L. Lewis. By some accounts, Jesus' picture was not always at the top; such was the respect for Lewis. However, during the early years of the depression, many miners were starting to lose faith in their great leader and the UMWA in general. In 1932 miners were asked to take yet another cut in pay—down 20 percent to \$5.40 per day. The six-hour workday had been on the United Mine Workers agenda through the 1920s and early 1930s, yet no progress was being made. There was also much dissent about the use of electric coal cutting machines as a safety and employment reducing issue. By 1932 the situation was no better and the UMWA seemed incapable of resolving the demands of their miners.

Frustrated miners in the Roslyn coal fields talked openly of taking their union back. Andrew Hunter, a socialist with a sharp mind and serious approach to issues drew the notice of his mining peers. He was the man most responsible for leading the dual union movement at the Roslyn mines. Many of the miners joined the new Western Miners Union and then decided to strike. Reasons for joining the new union were as varied as the diverse backgrounds of the workers. Immigrant miners who could not read or write English were undoubtedly swayed by the convincing speakers—better pay, better working conditions, and a six-hour day. Many felt the pull of family and friends, while some joined because they felt their safety could be better protected by a local union. Still other preferred a local union because they felt it was wrong for capitalists in the East to profit from their spilled blood in the mines. Some miners wanted to be sure to be on the winning side, so they signed with the UMWA as well as the Western Miners. With the exception of a murder, it was mostly a verbal battle of threats and insults between members of the two unions and their families. The fight intensified on April 3, 1934, when miners tried to cross the picket lines to return to work. The state police were called in to squelch the riots and UMWA miners went back to work without a better deal. Hard feeling existed between the families of the competing unions for years to come.

The six-month saga of the new union's struggle for recognition began with hope and determination, but ended in bitter disappointment and frustration. The Western Miners Union was abolished and some of their leaders were 'black-balled' from working in the mines. Not a good position to be in during the great depression, with unemployment at 25 percent.

The ability of the author to weave in his families stories makes this mining history a highly personal account. As Carlos Schwantes put it—"This is labor history as it should be done."

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