

Book review

The Devil is Here in These Hills: West Virginia's Coal Miners and their Battle for Freedom, by James Green

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The Devil is Here in These Hills: West Virginia's Coal Miners and their Battle for Freedom, by James Green. Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 2015. ISBN 978-0-8021-9209-7.

Workers in Appalachia are maligned. The myth has it that for generations, past and to come, they gladly endure poverty in the name of God and country. The history of the class struggle in America shows how false this portrayal is.

Labor historian James Green's new volume *The Devil is Here in These Hills: West Virginia's Coal Miners and their Battle for Freedom*, documents the bloody struggle to establish the United Mine Workers union (UMW) in West Virginia from the 1890s through the 1930s. The book demonstrates the role of socialists in leading the struggle for industrial unionism, and the solidarity among white, black, and immigrant coal miners. It is not Green's intention, but he also illustrates some of the fatal limitations of trade unionism in workers' "battle for freedom."

The book's most important—and timely—contribution is its revelation of the startling level of violence that characterized class relations in an earlier period. Today, the repeated exoneration of police who brutalize and murder workers should be taken as a warning that the old methods of class rule are being revived.

It is not possible in a short review to convey what took place in West Virginia in the decades of Green's study, but the book meticulously catalogues dozens and dozens of murders and false imprisonments of miners, instances of the imposition of martial law, as well as numerous examples of miners arming themselves and resisting the repression. It was, in the words of President William Taft, a "state of industrial war."

Coal mine owners—"operators" they were called—insisted that miners were individuals freely entering into a contract that handed to the employer the right to hire, fire, determine conditions, and set coal tonnage rates. West Virginia miners responded by attempting to build the UMW, which had by the first decade of the 20th century successfully organized the vast bituminous "soft coal" fields stretching from western Pennsylvania to Iowa, and the anthracite "hard coal" mining area of northeastern Pennsylvania. To protect its gains in these regions, the UMW was compelled to organize the southern West Virginia fields and their superabundance of cheap and high-quality bituminous coal.

The operators ran the coalfields like dictatorships, a state of affairs abetted by judges and politicians, who bestowed on them virtually unlimited control of mining towns "owned" by outside capital interests. A mine operator could, Green explains,

a warrant... He hired and fired his hands at will. He built the schools and selected the teachers, built the churches and selected the ministers, built the store and selected the store manager. He owned or leased every acre of land... He controlled access to the town and all activity within it, and hit down with a heavy hand on any activity that might menace his business... West Virginia mine managers issued their own private currency, called scrip, redeemable only at the company store.

Green notes that these company towns housed 79 percent of West Virginia coal miners, as opposed to only 24 percent of coal miners in neighboring Ohio. Coal miners who sought to organize faced summary firing, eviction, and beatings and even murder at the hands of private mine guards and Baldwin-Felts "detective" agents.

On top of this there was the brutal work itself. Every day underground brought the threat of death or maiming through cave-ins, explosions, and other accidents. For those miners who avoided these, and large-scale disasters like the Monongah explosion of 1907 that killed at least 361 men and boys, there awaited a retirement of chronic pain and ailments including "black lung" or coal pneumoconiosis.

It was in response to these conditions that West Virginia coal miners banded together and took up arms. Green documents numerous examples of this, culminating in the Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921, in which some 10,000 armed coal miners set out to free miners who had been imprisoned in Mingo County under a martial law decree. The miners were dispersed under attack by the US Air Force, "the first and only time," Green notes, "American citizens were subjected to aerial bombardment on their own soil."

A component of the portrayal of Appalachian workers as backwards is the claim that the white workers among them are racist. Yet Green documents many instances of interracial cooperation among coal miners, and there is nothing in the volume to suggest unbridgeable barriers.

There were, first of all, the native West Virginians, who were drawn from the state's poor rural population and were the grandchildren of the generation that separated from Virginia when it seceded from the Union in 1861 and joined the Confederacy to preserve slavery in the Civil War. There were also a large number of African Americans, drawn out of the Jim Crow South to the state's mines, many recruited by mine operators hopeful of fomenting racial divisions among the miners. Finally there were eastern and southern European immigrants, especially Italians and Hungarians.

Their shared exploitation fused the miners. Green notes that although

[s]ummarily evict families [and] inspect miners' houses without

coal firms attempted to segregate workers to promote racial divisions, “African Americans, Italians, and Hungarians never lived more than a few hundred yards ‘up the hollow’ from native born whites, with whom they worked every day in close proximity and mutual dependency.”

It is noteworthy that the word “redneck,” a derogatory term usually reserved for poor and rural whites, emerged in the West Virginia mine wars, where it was first used to describe the red bandana worn by armed coal miners to differentiate their own from detectives, mine guards, and strikebreakers. Green further notes, “the fact that many of these workers were socialists probably added meaning to the epithet.”

Green’s focus is not on socialism among the workers, but neither does he elide it. If the volume has protagonists, they are Fred Mooney and Frank Keeney, who rose to be the leading union figures in the southern West Virginia coalfields. Both drawn from rural West Virginia families, for the first decades of their careers they believed that the struggle of the coal miners required a break with both capitalist parties.

Green also notes that Eugene Debs drew large crowds on his campaign visits, and the Socialist Party managed to win some local elections in West Virginia, including in 1912 when its “candidates swept the Cabin Creek district, outpolling the Democrats and Republicans combined.” Mary “Mother” Jones, a socialist and another central figure in the book, earned her moniker “the coal miners’ angel” on her trips to the state. Green alludes to the influence of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or “Wobblies”) and its revolutionary syndicalism, especially among Italian miners.

American socialism before WWI was, to be sure, not the socialism of Lenin and Trotsky. It was socially and politically undifferentiated. The Socialist Party was heavily influenced by reformist and middle-class layers, though its healthiest elements were among the industrial working class in the factories, mills, and mines. Here Green’s book adds still more evidence pointing to the immense influence of socialists in the struggle for industrial organization among America’s workers. In West Virginia’s coalmines, just as was the case among the garment workers of New York City and Chicago, it was socialist workers that led in the building of the first unions.

Green has not set out to critically analyze trade unionism, though he does acknowledge the national trend towards the bureaucratization of the unions in the period:

During the early 1900s most American trade unions were democratic institutions governed by officers elected by their fellow workers; but as these unions became formal organizations dedicated to institutionalized bargaining with employers and to the thankless task of “policing” no-strike contracts, a cadre of career-minded officials emerged. Once elected or appointed to office, many ambitious workmen clung to their positions, isolated their critics and assembled political machines to ensure that they would not have to return to the drudgery of wage labor... In most cases, discontented members could be silenced or co-opted, and internal movements for union democracy could often be Red-baited and defeated.

Here Green is juxtaposing figures like Mooney and Keeney to national bureaucrats such as John Mitchell, a famed early president of the UMW, and John L. Lewis, who consolidated his hold over the union during WWI. Yet in spite of their self-identification as socialists and their militant tactics, both Mooney and Keeney supported American entry into WWI and the de facto no-strike pledge given the Wilson administration by the AFL and its head, Samuel Gompers.

This was no mere personal failing. Mooney and Keeney, in spite of their

democratic and socialist sympathies, behaved as nearly all union officials did in WWI, in the US and Europe. They broke with the most basic of socialist principles and fell in line behind their “own” capitalists in the fratricidal conflagration that killed millions.

Acting on behalf of the no-strike pledge and believing that they would be rewarded after the war for their efforts, Mooney and Keeney critically undermined the necessary organization in southern West Virginia at great cost to the UMW and the coal miners.

After the war mine operators refused all concessions—part of a massive antiunion and “open shop” campaign in the wake of the first Red Scare. Mooney and Keeney felt betrayed, Green shows. The union cause for which they had fought was thrown back years, and reaction prevailed in West Virginia as it did throughout the US in the 1920s.

Historians take on risks in choosing when they begin and end their studies. Green sensibly begins his volume in the 1890s, with the rapid growth of West Virginia’s mining industry, its domination by finance capital, and the emergence of class conflict in the coalfields. His choice of an ending, however, serves an interpretive agenda that would be undone had he gone farther. Green’s final chapter deals with the establishment of the UMW in the 1930s after the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). In this he would have it that the miners’ “battle for freedom” had finally been won.

The victory of the UMW in southern West Virginia no doubt led to improved conditions and better wages for a time. But it in no way resolved the oppression of the coal miners and the poverty of West Virginia.

The industry’s decline in the wake of World War II accelerated and Appalachia remained one of the regions largely passed over by the limited gains of the long post-World War II boom.

The UMW, which like the rest of the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) embraced anticommunism after WWII and subordinated the workers it represented to the Democratic Party, had no answer for the decline of coal. John L. Lewis declared there were “too many mines and too many miners” as the union rejected any call for the nationalization of the industry and accepted Depression-like mass layoffs due to mechanization in the 1950s.

The 1960s and 1970s saw repeated rebellions by the coal miners against Lewis’s successors, culminating in the 110-day strike in 1977-78 when miners defied UMW President Arnold Miller and the Taft Hartley back-to-work order by US President Jimmy Carter.

The 1980s—a decade of union busting and mass layoffs—culminated in the betrayal and defeat of the 1989 Pittston strike in West Virginia, Virginia and Kentucky. The UMW bureaucracy, led then by current AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, collaborated with the coal interests and Democratic politicians to isolate and crush the Pittston miners and the tens of thousands of miners who came to their aid in wildcat strikes in defiance of the UMW.

The history of this betrayal and the decades-long degeneration of the UMW leading up to it, is told in the volume *Death on the Picket Line: The Story of John McCoy* by World Socialist Web Site writer Jerry White. The defeat of the last major coal strike led to a further attack on miners’ jobs and their conditions, which today increasingly resemble the type of exploitation seen in the first years of the last century. The UMW today is nothing but a hollow shell—which “represents” a mere 20,000 workers in 2014, and few, if any, in its former strongholds of southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky.

What is thus revealed by the long struggle of the West Virginia coal miners—including the history brought forth in *The Devil is Here in These Hills*, in spite of Green’s own conceptions—is that their “battle for freedom” is not to build trade unions, but for a movement that articulates their class interests, that is, the fight for international socialism.



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