

"UNLESS WE ORGANISE"

For those who think of the American working class as being thoroughly passive, the words of this song, popular among the coal miners in Harlan, a Southern town, will come as a surprise.

"Take a scab and kill it,  
And put it in the skillet  
Fry it up golden brown,  
That's union cooking and it's mighty fine."

For 11 months 180 miners and their families have been on strike over the right to organise in the union of their choice, The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA); Brookside, the centre of the strike, is a small mine in a part of the American South where horses still drag ploughs scratching across dry fields, chickens pecking the dust and the jukebox plays solid, sad music.

It's also a part of the world where votes can still be bought for a five-dollar bill, where the bootleggers have bigger houses than the preachers and where blacks keep themselves to themselves.

But it's here at Brookside that members of a union which has only just begun to untangle itself from 20 years of rusting and twisting of its democracy, face up to Duke Power, a giant North Carolina based electricity supply corporation, the sixth biggest public utility in America, declaring this year profits of £26 million.

It's a battle with a history. For generations companies like Duke have come into the Kentucky mountains looking for wealth. They have taken the mountain people's coal and timber, their health and sometimes their lives too.

Those who owned the coal have controlled the police, the legal system and the schools. They are passionately anti-union and don't care a damn if miners go home battered and broken. For them mining is non-union or not at all. And when they fight the unions they do not use the velvet glove or the aristocratic embrace.

In the 1930s the wife of a union organiser wrote a famous song on the back of a calendar when the sheriff, J.H. Blair, ransacked her home. It's called 'Which side are you on?'

"They say in Harlan County  
There are no neutrals here;  
You'll either be a bosses' man  
Or a thug with J H Blair.  
Don't scab for the bosses.  
Don't listen to their lies.  
Us poor folks haven't got a chance  
Unless we organise."

(Florence Rees)

Today the UMWA bumper stickers simply carry the question, 'Which side are you on?'

The strike is not about a wage increase. The contract put forward by the UMWA is more straightforward. It is about power, about the miners having some control of their union, their work and their lives.

Above all the strikers want a decent health programme which would provide good care for the family and modest but reliable pensions for retired miners, especially those injured by dust and accidents. They want a proper procedure for grievances and promotions. They want payment from the time they go underground, not the time they start cutting.

Scarcely extreme demands. But in Harlan, where corrupt company unionism and police violence has kept the miners on their knees for a generation, this would mean a small social revolution.

Take safety for example. First there are simply no decent local hospitals or doctors or public services. The old and not so old who come down with pneumoconiosis, 'Black Lung' the disease caused by coal dust, are left to fend for themselves without a guaranteed pension from either company or union. Even after an organised campaign over Black Lung which did much to revive the miners' union in the 1960s, only one in three of the Kentucky miners who apply have obtained a federal pension.

"Somebody said that's a strange tattoo  
You have on the back of your head,  
I said that's the blueprint left by the coal,  
Just a little more and I'd be dead."  
( 'Coal Tattoo', Billy Ed Wheeler ).

Accidents are notorious in this area and the owners are proud of their indifference. A few years ago 38 men were buried at nearby Hyden and a federal investigation found that the explosion that killed them was caused by illegal mining practices which the company knew were unsafe.

Brookside is said to be so dangerous that even the rats stay away. Limbless men and crutches are common in these parts, although you never know whether its the mines or Vietnam. There's an artificial limb shop on Main Street, Harlan.

Safety inspections are a farce and enforcement worse. Violations remain outstanding for years. A miner told me he knew the very hour and the very day when the mines inspectors were coming; "The boss would say; 'Let's make it look pretty now.'"

Among the pretty sights recently recorded by the miners at Brookside were missing fire alarms, missing brakes on coal locomotives, areas of flooding which prevented inspection altogether, fire sprinklers that don't work and missing roof bolts.

But effective safety means effective organisation and that means



a continual challenge to management's absolute rights. Norman Yardborough, the mine boss, understands this well; "I'm not going to abdicate the right to any final say on safety because I'm the responsible party. Ultimately, it has got to be a management decision", he says.

"There's no such animal as a safe coal mine. It just doesn't exist."

The miners don't agree. "I don't want my son to go into the mines. But I firmly believe that by the time my sons are old enough to go to work, this mine could be organised so that it's as safe as any factory," says Jerry Rainey.

"There's a man in a big house  
way up on the hill,  
Far from the shacks where the  
poor miners live.  
He's got plenty of money, Lord  
everything's fine,  
And he has forgotten the  
Mannington mine.

('Disaster at the Mannington Mine',  
Hazel Dickens.')

The union would not be just something inside the mines. It is needed to change the whole way the miners and their families live. Houston Elmore, the union organiser, says; "We have to start to make the union work for the people of Harlan, people we've let down badly in the past. But it's not just about coal. The education system, the housing, the courts, and the political system have got to change if the miners are to get justice. The judge here, now he's a scab coal operator. So how can he be impartial? The teachers in the local schools, they are the sons and daughters of the owners because they are the only people who can get to college. It's sort of like a feudal system."

Brookside is laid out like a cross between a company town and a medieval village. Norman Yardborough's mansion looks out over his mine and his miners separated only by a row of pine trees, a two-lane road and a little hill. Just beneath his home huddle the smaller but still luxurious homes of his managers and foremen, arranged according to rank.

The miner's homes are wooden, temporary-looking shacks, in rows along dirt trackways. The wood is unpainted, the faces pinched, the teeth yellow. Their living conditions are a kind of grim joke. They have a colour TV but no lavatory. They have cars but no dentists.

Large families sit on the porch, father in white T-shirt rocking

backwards and forward, mother in a beehive hair do and kids bathing in the creek. Behind them the coal gleams and a canopy of fir trees overhang the mine shaft. It all looks quite idyllic from a distance.

Until you look twice and see that underneath the veranda is a heap of shit and toilet paper which is only flushed away when the creek floods once a year. And you find that everyone boils all their tap water because last time the Harlan County Health Department tested the drinking water it was 'highly contaminated' with fecal coliform bacteria (a count of 24, permitted level 4).

"In the summer time we didn't  
have shoes to wear,  
But in the winter we'd all get a  
brand new pair  
From a mail order catalogue.  
Money made from selling a hog.  
Daddy always managed to get  
the money somewhere".

('Coalminers Daughter',  
Loretta Lynn.)

The schools are pretty foul too. When one of the strikers' children went to school with a UMWA button, it was torn off him. "When your father gets involved in the union, makes your brain go bad", draws another miner who has conducted his own survey to prove militants' children have got mysteriously bad grades at school since the strike.

Miners are locked into a whole series of social relationships which keep them down. Jerry Rainey says; "Now Mr. Yardborough ain't no factory dresser. To look at him, he might almost be a miner. But he sure does want to stand over us. He wants to stand over us like a mule master with a whip he does. Well I ain't no mule hauling plough. Them's just slavery."

In this situation a union is both last hope and first chance.

Now the strike's main enemy is time. The miners have been out for 11 months. The pickets squat playing cards in the hot dust, listening to the car radio and building a heap of empty beer cans. At night people whittle round camp fires and play mandolins and banjos.

But if the management try to pull a fast one, a whistle will summon 150 miners in two minutes.

The deadlock is tense. If they are beaten the pickets will have to leave for the auto and steel plants of the North. In a town where mining is the only work, the owner's blacklist is an order to leave.



They also know Duke is hungry for coal. Only two weeks ago the president of the 'yeller-dog' company union was photographed and taped attempting to bribe two strikers with 140 dollars in cash with a promise of a total pay off of 5000 dollars if the rest of the men could be 'persuaded' back to work.

Just underneath the calm and heat and the waiting is fear; Harlan is where the owners have always fought trade unionism with machine guns. It was in Harlan that miner's union reform candidate Yablonski was shot dead in his bed. So far during this strike the only shooting has been some high velocity bullets into the back of a picket van. The organiser has a revolver underneath his union briefcase.

"I can see the people stirring  
through the valleys and the hills,  
I can hear the people stirring as  
I go, as I go.  
I can feel the people stirring  
through the valleys and the hills  
Oh, I'm going home to Jesus,  
bless my soul, bless my soul".

(Traditional)

To get up spirits, the strike committee has equipped an old station wagon with loudspeakers and this 'booster van' cruises between Everts, Brookside and Harlan cheering people up and passing on the news and gossip. But it is demurely called the Brooklyn Women's Club which has been the most successful morale builder.

In September the male union members were prevented by a local court injunction from mounting effective pickets. This itself was a fraud, as a local doctor, himself active in the Black Lung movement snorted; "I am sick and tired of rule by injunctions, by the big money in this country. Do you ever see an injunction given in favour of a poor person?"

But while the men were banned, the women stopped the scabs. "At first they thought we were pretty funny, but finally they quit laughing," says Minnie Lunsford.

At first they tried talking but when a scab pulled a gun, all hell let loose. The state police moved in with squad cars and truncheon charges, the women retaliated with two-by-two clubs and hoe handles. One woman shouted at the police; "You can beat the shit out of me but you can't beat the union out of me".

Many women and children went to prison for two days. Other women picketed their court hearing. A woman told the judge; "You're a coal owner and I resent you trying me. And that clerk beside you, her son photographed union men at Brookside for the blacklist."

Their defence was clear; "We had to picket ourselves to prevent the coal-owners from getting round the law. We all know we doing what is right."

The strike has awoken new capacities and determination. "People listen better than they did before", says one striker. "We've met people who we didn't know existed on that picket line", says another. "Sure it's been worth it" says Minnie Lunsford. "It was just like a school, I've enjoyed every minute of it". "Sometimes I wonder if I knew anything before this strike". mused Betty Eldridge.

The strike has shaken the county up. The union idea is spreading. Employees of the Appalachian Hospitals have been out for union recognition. Waitresses in the town, including some of the strikers' daughters, are trying to form an association.

Personal relations have been changed too. Women who have won their husbands' grudging admiration for their courage on the picket line and their insolence in court are not going meekly back to the sink.

"I ain't got much money, not  
much of a home.  
We own our own land but the  
land's not our own,  
But if we all got together, we  
can work it all out,  
We'll take over the country and  
run 'em all out",

('Black Waters', Jean Ritchie)

Newest of all is a sense of power. "When miners move together, that's really something", one striker said of the British coal strike in 1974.

American miners took a close interest in the British coalfields and are amazed that British miners actually forced a general election. The Brookside strike may not yet have Duke Power and Richard Nixon on their knees but it does show again that if the working class doesn't change the world, even the world of East Kentucky, then nobody will. "We got the cat by the tail now, can't go but one way".

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Minnie Lunsford, of the Brookside Women's Club, who have been running the picket lines;

"Harlan got called Bloody when they started this union, when they started to organise. The owner then had his gun-thugs - he's pretty much like Norman Yarborough. He'd just get him a good bunch of



gun-thugs that weren't scared of anything.

They'd just come up to the organiser. They was wanting to get rid of him. They wasn't having no organising.

Three car-loads of thugs eased across the road and stopped in front of his house. They meant to kill. They just shot up the house. The bullets made big streaks about a foot long. All through the house.

The organiser's wife - they were good Christian people- she didn't realise what it was. She thought it was a drunk. Everything was quiet. She called out for her son whose name was Billy. She got her two daughters to be all calm and to clear up the dishes. She had got a bullet hole right through her wrist.

She called out, "Billy how are you?" His little brother said, "He went in the bedroom". She went in there holding her wrist. He was lying on the trunk with his head shot off.

They tried to get hold of the ambulance and the sheriff, the law you know. And they wouldn't come. They called up Harlan to come and get him. No possibility. People was afraid to go out to that house because the gun-thugs could have come back.

They'd do anything, those gun-thugs. They'd dynamite houses. They'd say, "Let's go up on the mountains to hear a ball-game on the radio". Next morning you'd hear on the news, so and so was killed. Shot. On the mountain.

Women's clubs didn't exist in the thirties. There was nothing. Hard times and starvation almost. We women had to stay in the house or near.

In the thirties, I saw people suffer. I suffered enough. Seeing my children, y'know. They didn't go too hungry but there's lots of things they needed that they didn't get. I suffered in that. And some others suffered more than me.

So now I'll go anywhere to get a contract, get a union, have it all nice and everything. Peaceable. Conditions right and everything. That's what I enjoy. Trying to do something, getting things to rights.

In what you might say is my last days I'm going to do something for others. Somebody said as old as me, how come you're going to be on the picket line? I said, "Age and looks don't count one bit. It's what you feel and what you have got in you and what you want other people to have, things that we never had. And what you believe in".

Me and my husband are up in years. If it hadn't been for the union

we'd not be here. We have children and they love us and would have helped, but it's through the union he draws his pension and we've got a good hospital card. And all those things. He's worked and slaved and now he's got this black lung.

So why shouldn't I feel? If I was a 90-year-old, I'd be out there. It's just how I feel about it. There's so many that hasn't got pension and hasn't got those cards yet."

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