

April 20, 2014 Marks the 100th Anniversary of the LUDLOW MASSACRE

ON SEPTEMBER 23, 1913, hundreds of southern Colorado miners and their families walked out of the coal mines and mining camps striking for improved wages, elimination of payment in scrip, eight hour shifts, enforcement of state mining laws and union recognition. The strike led to a lengthy struggle that culminated in one of the most tragic events in U.S. labor history, the April 20, 1914, Ludlow Massacre.

Miners were forced to work under horrific and unsafe conditions, this while their families resided in deplorable company-owned housing. The Ludlow miners worked for \$1.68 per day and were paid in scrip. The various denominations of paper and token scrip had no legal value and were redeemable only at the company-owned store where everything was overpriced. The extreme and harsh working conditions resulted in many injuries. The Colorado miners' fatality rate doubled the national average. The miners raised objections and the company refused to address their issues. With no reasonable alternative, the miners went on strike. In response to the strike, miners and their families were evicted. The Rockefeller-owned company *Colorado Fuel and Iron Corporation* evicted striking workers and family members from the company owned homes, leaving them to fend for themselves in what proved to be a harsh Colorado winter. In turn, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) purchased land, tents and supplies that were used to construct a series of tent colonies for use in the area. The miners were entrenched and prepared for a lengthy stand-

off. Throughout the winter, tensions continued to rise.

Demands made by the UMWA to the Rockefeller family owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Corporation were as follows:

"...Recognition of the United Mineworkers of America as the bargaining agent for workers in coal mines throughout Colorado and northern New Mexico, an effective system of checkweighmen in all mines, compensation for digging coal at a ton-rate based on 2,000 pounds, semi-monthly payment of wages in lawful money, the abolition of scrip and the truck system, an end to discrimination against union members, and strict enforcement of state laws pertaining to operators' obligations in supplying miners with timbers, rails, and other materials in underground working places."

The Union's demands and the ongoing strike action infuriated the Rockefeller family, which by virtue of its vast mine ownership, effectively ruled the region. The company ratcheted the tension and unrest by hiring strike-breakers and armed guards to accost and harass strikers and union organizers.

As a result of the increased hostilities, the miners dug protective pits beneath their tents to shield them and their family members from random sniper and machine gun fire from the company guards. Union members and organizers were randomly kidnapped, and beaten. Several children were killed by this arbitrary gunfire during the days leading to April 20, 1914. Confrontations between striking miners and non-union scab labor also resulted in many deaths; notably, the greatest cause of picket line



violence during the Ludlow Strike was replacement workers.

On October 28, 1913, the Governor of Colorado, Elias M. Ammons, called out the National Guard to take control of the situation. From the onset, the Governor was greatly concerned about the cost of a lengthy field presence by the Colorado National Guard in view of the Union members and organizers sustained resistance. Initially, the miners believed that the National Guard was brought in to assist and protect the striking workers. They soon realized that the Colorado troops were not allies in their fight.

On March 10, 1914, the body of a strike-breaker was found near railroad tracks at one of the tent colonies. General Chase of the Colorado National Guard ordered everyone from the tent colonies to be evicted and the tent colony to be destroyed. The strike was reaching a climax, and National Guardsmen attempted to evict the remaining tent colonies around the mines, despite the fact that those colonies were on private property leased by the UMWA.

On the morning of April 14, 1914, Guardsman fired machine guns into the Ludlow tent colony. Anyone

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or anything moving was targeted and gunned down. The miners and organizers returned fire for nearly fourteen hours. Disingenuous truce talks between Louis Tikas, the main organizer of the mining camps, and National Guard Lieutenant Karl Linderfelt ended when Linderfelt cracked Tikas with the butt of his rifle. National Guard soldiers subsequently fired several times into Tikas's back as he lay dead on the ground. During the evening of April 14, 1914, the Colorado militiamen entered the camp setting fire to tents and killing thirteen. Two women and eleven children were asphyxiated and burned to death while seeking shelter in a pit below a tent. Thirteen others were also shot dead during the fighting; countless miners and organizers were injured during the battle. After the massacre,

miners armed themselves, and in the labor war that followed, 30 more people died. After ten days or so, at the request of Colorado's Governor, President Woodrow Wilson sent in Federal troops. The strike was broken, and the miners voted to return to work with only minor improvements to their working conditions. Not one militiaman or mine guard was indicted for any crime.

Although the UMWA lost the Colorado Strike, it was, and still is, seen as a victory in a broad sense of history for the union. It laid the foundation for the passage of the Wagner Act of the 1930s, which is now recognized as the National Labor Relations Act. That legislation gave workers the right to organize and eliminated employers' interference with the autonomous organization of workers into unions.

The Ludlow Massacre was influential in promoting child labor laws. It also provided a future President of the UMWA, John L. Lewis, the necessary tools and the ability to create the Congress of Industrial Organizations (C.I.O.) and its affiliated labor unions during the great Industrial Revolution. Many labor historians believe that the Ludlow Massacre eventually came to symbolize the wave of industrial violence that led to the progressive era reforms in labor relations.

The issues that occurred at the time of the Ludlow Massacre are some of the same issues that we face today. To be sure, gone are the issues of the company towns, company guards, scrip (coal company money) and tent colonies; however, the attack on collective bargaining rights and the right to organize; economic injus-

tice; immigration; worker health and safety; corporate, political, and media attacks on labor unions; 8-hour work days; and numerous other issues related to the Ludlow Massacre continue to face all of us today.

Despite the efforts of many family survivors, historians and labor activists, there was no state or national commemoration of the site of the Ludlow Massacre until 2009, when the U.S. Department of the Interior designated Ludlow a National Historic Landmark. On April 19, 2013, Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper signed an Executive Order establishing the Ludlow Centennial Commemoration Commission.

Men, women and children died in the Ludlow struggle for economic justice. The Ludlow workers took on the battle one hundred years ago, and the NPMHU is reminding you to honor them now by making the centennial events of the strike and massacre our opportunity to reinvigorate the labor movement and to take our rightful place in today's society. The UMWA and the Ludlow Commemorations Commission will host a 100th Anniversary Commemoration ceremony in Ludlow, Colorado on the weekend of May 18, 2014.