

## **War in West Virginia (August 17, 1912)**

Real war is raging in West Virginia. Few people know of this because West Virginia enforces strictly the rule of the coal barons within her borders and no report disclosing the true state of affairs is permitted to go to the outer world.

Having spent many weeks among the miners of West Virginia and having had an active part in their strike, with all the harrowing experiences still fresh in my memory, I know something of the conditions that prevail there and of the war that is being waged by Henry Gassaway Davis,<sup>1</sup> the Elkinses,<sup>2</sup> and other barons to beat down their miners, destroy their union, and crush their slaves into a mass of animal power without spirit of resistance.

Last spring, when the Cleveland conference between the operators and miners was held, a paltry advance of 5 percent in wages was granted by the operators of all the states with the single exception of West Virginia. The Davises, Elkinses, and other barons who finance the Republican, Democratic, and Progressive parties, knowing that the mine slaves of West Virginia were but poorly organized and already starving, and reckoning on their weak and helpless condition, refused the advance, notwithstanding their mines are among the richest in the country.

Contrary to their expectations, the ten thousand slaves of the pits went out on strike. That hour the barons resolved to punish them without mercy, and if there is anything that devilish ingenuity can devise that has not been employed to goad the miners into desperation and to torture them into submission I cannot conceive what it would be.

The miners and their wives and children, evicted from the hovels of the corporation, went to the hillsides, and there, in the one place not owned and controlled by the barons, reared tents and sought shelter in these tented villages. This enraged the greedy and murderous barons and they ordered an army of criminal thugs and ex-convicts, the refuse of the slums, to swoop down upon these helpless, homeless, starving slaves, shoot down the men in their tracks like dogs, and drive the women and children, terror-stricken, into the wilderness.

I have been appealed to by these striking miners and their famishing wives and children, and I am raising my voice in their behalf. If ever

there was an industrial situation which cried aloud for relief in a voice of desperation it is that of the mining hells of West Virginia.

We know of the frightful peonage that prevails among the timber workers in the lumber and turpentine camps of Louisiana and other southern states and of the murderous attacks made upon the strikers for protesting against rags and famine, and we know to what extent the powers of the state have been prostituted to destroy all attempts to unionize these slaves, but in some respects the conditions are even more terrible and more hopeless in West Virginia.

I have seen the palaces of the Davises and Elkinses and their enclosed estates covering entire mountain ranges, where the barons and their "elect" indulge themselves in riotous extravagance, and I have seen the hovels of their slaves, thousands of them, in which their masters would not kennel their dogs, nor an animal of any kind remain overnight unless chained there.

The contrast between plutocracy and poverty, between shameless wealth and abject misery, is not more shocking, more brutalizing anywhere on the face of the earth than it is here in the corporation-cursed state of West Virginia.

It is noteworthy that the governor of West Virginia, a state which is the private property of the coal barons, is a rampant reformer of the Roosevelt type and one of the original Bull Moose boosters. Governor Glasscock,<sup>3</sup> who is furnishing the coal barons with the armed thugs and convicts to assassinate the miners, is one of the "seven little governors" who originally launched the Bull Moose movement.

A correspondent who has recently been in the Kanawaha Valley, where this war is raging between the authorized murderers furnished by the state at the behest of the barons and the ten thousand miners with their wives and children, who have been driven into the wilderness and are fighting a guerrilla war against starvation, writes:

I find that this revolution is a revolt of American-born miners against the inhuman authority of the West Virginia mine-guard system. These miners did not wince when the coal companies evicted them in snowy April from their homes and compelled them to take their wives and babies to flimsy tents on the cold mountainside. Neither was there any thought of violence when hunger entered the tented villages.

But when the guards began a campaign of insult to women and assaults and shooting of men, and plainly said that it would stop if the men returned to the mines, then the miners hunted for guns....

In all the earlier fights, only miners were killed and hurt. It used to be a rare sport of an evening to shoot the gatlings up the hillside.... But these American miners finally obtained guns.... The battle of Mucklow, beginning July 28, lasted two days.

That morning 2,000 miners met at Holly Grove, where many lived in tents in the open field. That evening they marched up Paint Creek, through the dense forest, to Mucklow, the stronghold of the guards, where they were entrenched around the mines with machine guns.

The miners were well armed and it is true that they meant desperate business. A large force of guards was in the tipple house. The attacking forces started two loaded coal cars down the incline, intending to kill all the guards in the tipple, but the latter derailed them and escaped, but were met with a steady fire from up the mountains, where the miners lay in ambush....

Firing all night, both armies kept the valley in a roar. All Friday the firing continued and into Saturday morning, when the arrival of several companies of militia put and end to the battle....

That same Friday a squad of guards slipped to Holly Grove, where the miners' wives and children were. The guards hoped to draw the miners from the mountains. They attacked the miners' tent village and force the women and children, in front of their Winchesters, to wade Paint Creek and hide in the timber.

This description, horrifying as it is, gives but faint idea of the condition of actual warfare with all its savage horrors which piles disgrace upon disgrace upon the state of West Virginia. The wives and children of the strikers are starving in the trackless wilderness. No one knows how many miners have been killed. The inhuman beasts who are thus engaged in the massacre of the miners make up the private army of the coal barons, backed by the state militia, with Governor Glasscock, the Bull Moose reformer and Roosevelt boomer, as commander-in-chief.

Not a word in regard to this bloody revolt of the starving and desperate miners of West Virginia is permitted to touch a wire of the Associated Press or appear in the great capitalist newspapers. the country at large does not know that the state of West Virginia is in a state of war and that all the private armies of the coal barons and railroad magnates and all the armed forces of the state are engaged in overwhelming the miners, whose labor has filled the coffers of their rich masters to overflowing, and literally crushing them into subjection beneath the iron heel of capitalist despotism.

This war in West Virginia is of the most vital interest to the working class of the whole country. The socialist and labor press should give wide

publicity to the frightful state of affairs which exists in that state, the reports of which have until now been suppressed by the slimy sleuths of the corporations.

Be it remembered that it is West Virginia that is always relied upon to break the strikes of the miners in other states. The barons have made their boast for years that West Virginia miners should never be unionized. When a strike occurs in the coal fields, the non-union mines of West Virginia are worked overtime to supply the market and break the strike.

During all this time the United Mine Workers have been striving in vain to organize in West Virginia. the time has come to put all of the power of organized labor behind them and to unionize that field at whatever cost.

This is a fight that appeals with peculiar force to socialists and to the labor movement. The Socialist Party and the United Mine Workers are equally interested in the West Virginia situation and in going to the relief of the miners who in that accursed despotism are fighting for their lives.

Theodore Roosevelt, the great friend of the miners, will not go to the rescue of the starving coal diggers whose tented villages have been shot up and whose wives and children have been driven into the wilderness to perish.

The real friends of the miners and the workers in general, the workers themselves, must come to the front and save the day.

The Socialist Party and the United Mine Workers should work hand in hand in going to the rescue and backing up the fighting miners in the war now raging in the state of West Virginia.

In this great emergency prompt action should be taken to raise funds for the strikers and to feed their wives and children, and every available speaker and organizer of both the party and the union should enter the state under orders not to leave there until the strike has been won and the mining camps unionized.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Gassaway Davis (1823-1916) became a millionaire through railroad, mining, and banking interests. He was a partner with his son-in-law Stephen B. Elkins in the Davis Coal and Coke Company, which became one of the largest coal mining corporations in the United States. Davis was a Democrat who was elected to the first of two terms in the US senate in 1870. In 1904 he was the nominee of the Democratic Party for Vice-President, running a losing campaign with Alton B. Parker.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Benton Elkins (1841-1911) married into the family of West Virginia coal baron Henry Gassaway Davis in 1875 and soon thereafter became a major coal mine operator in his own right. The Republican Elkins was secretary of war under the administration of President Benjamin Harrison and was first elected to the US senate in 1895, later winning two full terms by reelection.

<sup>3</sup> William E. Glasscock (1862-1925) was elected to a single four-year term of governor of West Virginia in 1908. A former attorney for Stephen B. Elkins, the Republican Glasscock was launched on his political career by Theodore Roosevelt, who named him as tax collector for the West Virginia district in 1905.