

“A strike like no other strike”

Pittston strike holds lessons for today

At the beginning, it looked like any other strike. Words were said, bluffs were called, folks said that it was all going to blow over pretty quickly.

That was then.

“They wanted to bust the union,” Jim Woody, a member of L.U. 1259 who worked at the Moss 3 Prep Plant said of Pittston Coal Group, the dominant operator in southwest Virginia in April 1989. “It was that simple.”

On April 5, 1989, then-UMWA President Richard Trumka called a selective strike at Pittston after UMWA members worked 14 months without a contract. Some 1,700 UMWA members in southwest Virginia, southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky were forced to strike over Pittston’s desire to gut the existing contract and especially the compa-

ny’s refusal to budge from its intent to permanently eliminate health care for retirees—a benefit promised by the federal government in the Truman White House.

Pittston’s first act after the strike began was to cut health care for retirees and widows. But if they thought that would scare the strikers into submission, they thought wrong. Instead, it demonstrated that Pittston’s attack wasn’t just on the

members of the union—it was also on the communities in which they lived.

“When they cancelled the health cards, that got everybody’s attention,” said James Hall, a L.U. 7950 mem-

ber who worked in the central shop. “When we struck, and they took away retirees’ health care, the communities saw what Pittston was doing with the retirees. More than anything else, that caused the communities to come out in support of us,” added Willard Dingus, a L.U. 1259 member at the Moss 3 Prep Plant.



Willard Dingus

DAVID KAMERAS



Jim Woody

DAVID KAMERAS

Open season on workers

In some ways, the Pittston strike was the conclusion to a series of attacks on working families that occurred



“They wanted to bust



DAVID KAMERAS

throughout the 1980s. Seven months after President Ronald Reagan began his first term in 1981, members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO), complaining of staff shortages and obsolete equipment, went out on strike.

Two days later, Reagan fired all 11,350 non-returning controllers and banned them for life from employment by the Federal Aviation Administration, the only viable employer for their skills—a ban only lifted 15 years later by President Bill Clinton.

“In the 1930s, the message was: ‘President Roosevelt wants you to join a union,’” said President Roberts. “In the 1980s, the message was: ‘President Reagan wants you to bust a union.’”



ILANA STORACE

Reagan’s message to employers was clear: They were free to cut wages, health care and pensions and not face serious consequences. And he sent a message to workers that exercising their legal workplace rights could cost them their job. What followed was an era of widespread union-busting—from Hormel meat-packing to Eastern Airlines to Bell Atlantic—that ruined lives and demoralized working families and their communities throughout America.

“The Pittston strike and the PATCO strike were bookends to a decade marked by attacks on organized labor across the board,” said President Roberts, who as International Vice President at the time was the union’s “field general” at Pittston. “With encouragement from the highest office in the land, Corporate America was determined to bury the labor movement once and for all. Those courageous men and women in southwest Virginia were all that stood in their way.”



JOE CORCORAN

“We truly believed that if we lost the strike at Pittston, then every company would go after all of the other unions,” agreed Freedom Fighter Shirley Hall.

A community in peril

The area of Appalachia where Pittston operated is a region where coal mining jobs have long been the best way to support a family. Thousands of families depended on wages from active miners or retiree benefits. So when the Pittston strike stopped the flow of weekly paychecks, the impact on the broader community was devastating.

“The strike affected all of us,” said John Sykes, the Postmaster of Clinchco, Va. “Everyone in this

community was involved and against the state troopers because the troopers supported Clinchfield Coal. People also knew the operators were against us.

“We had a rural delivery carrier whose work was impeded,” Sykes continued. “Her husband was a coal miner. The state police would say ‘You can’t go here’ for no reason. ▶

the union. **It was that simple.”**



MIKE WRIGHT, DICKENSON STAR



BO BOOKER



ELAINE OSOWSKI

“I don’t think our resolve and dedication

It was almost like Gestapo tactics. This affected everyone, and had repercussions on down the line. It was like a pebble tossed in the stream.”

Prior to the strike, management had UMWA members fill out a survey on strike sentiment. “They gave everyone a book to fill out, to find out whether we would strike or cross a picket line. They were making plans a year before the impasse,” said Harless Mullins, a L.U. 2274 member who worked at McClure. “They had the full intention of doing away with the union,” added Woody. “Every day during that period, they got bolder and bolder.”



Harless Mullins

DAVID KAMERAS

“I think they were hoping for a strike,” said James Clay, a L.U. 1470 member who worked in Pittston’s central lab. “They thought it was just a couple hundred angry miners they had to deal with. The press really noticed when we demonstrated outside the home of Paul Douglas,” the absentee CEO who ran Pittston from the wealthy New York suburb of Greenwich, Conn.

Clearly, the company was counting on a limitless supply of scab labor. “A lot of people were out of work then,” said David Jennings of L.U. 2888. “Pittston thought they could get them to replace us. And, in fact, they did take some of them on, fed them, housed them, escorted them past our lines. Then after the strike ended, of course, they started laying them off.”

“The scabs they brought in didn’t perform all that well,” said Kenneth Maples, a member of L.U. 1948 who worked at the Westmoreland Coal Complex. “They couldn’t run the equipment.”



Kenneth Maples

DAVID KAMERAS

The old union musical question “Which side are you on?” didn’t just apply to the miners themselves. “We’d go to the Main Street stores and ask the owners if they supported us,” said Peggy Dutton, a Freedom Fighter. “If they did, they’d put a sign in their window. If they didn’t, we wouldn’t trade with them.” “In Clintwood, a lot of service stations wouldn’t sell gas to troopers,” added Mullins.

“Overall, we had real good cooperation with the community,” said L.U. 2274 member Roy Kennedy. “Most of the communities around in this area were very supportive, and most of the businesses were very generous and very helpful.”

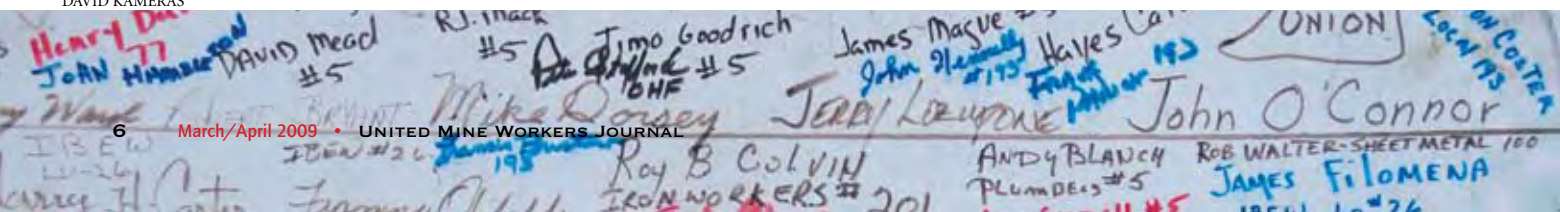
Building solidarity at home and around the world

The Pittston strike was a crash course on what a major corporation, with the assistance of sympathetic government agencies, can do to try to crush the people who created their wealth. What they didn’t count on was the strength and resolve of UMWA members to fight back.

Right off the bat, the company and state police tried to break the will of the strikers by arresting the union’s on-the-ground strike leaders, Marty Hudson, C.A. Phillips and Jackie Stump. But that strategy backfired, as then-President Trumka appointed Roberts to head up the strike.

The decision to arrest Stump became an even bigger headache for the anti-UMWA forces later, when he easily won a write-in campaign for the Virginia House of Delegates in November 1989, defeating a

DAVID KAMERAS



long-time incumbent who was not supportive of the strikers and their communities. Stump served in the House through 2005.

People all over the world were uplifted by the strikers' resolve. Delegations of union members and ordinary citizens poured into southwest Virginia by the carload and busload.

ing in the rain. Some of our younger members got their first taste of what real union solidarity is all about.”

“Think about this: Over 4,000 people got arrested during the Pittston strike for participating in nonviolent civil disobedience,” President Roberts said. “Four thousand people! And so many of them weren't

1259. “But when you go into a court and hear troopers and district attorneys tell one lie after another, and the judge thinks you're guilty until you prove yourself innocent, it's the reverse of how it's supposed to be. And when the company sent Vance Security thugs down here, because they thought we were just a bunch

has changed a bit in 20 years.”

Many famous leaders, like Rev. Jesse Jackson, Farmworkers founder Cesar Chavez, then-AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland and others came.

They picketed and prayed with the strikers and their families, ate with them and slept in tents and bunkhouses built by community members. They took the stories of courage and solidarity back home with them, prompting even more delegations to come.

By the time the strike ended, more than 50,000 people had come to southwest Virginia to support the Pittston strikers and their families. Thousands upon thousands more had sent money and messages of solidarity. Millions of people the world over had seen images of the strike in their newspapers and on their televisions. Anyone who paid attention to current affairs had heard about Pittston.

“I'll never forget the feeling when we went to Camp Solidarity,” Larry Scott, a member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers L.U. 16, told the *UMW Journal* in 1989. “Everyone was singing and chanting together with tears in our eyes, not caring that we were stand-

ing in the rain. Some of our younger members got their first taste of what real union solidarity is all about.”

“But they were there, literally putting their freedom on the line, because they understood that our fight was their fight,” Roberts said. “They knew that if we didn't win in the hollows of central Appalachia then it wouldn't be long before their employers were taking them on where they lived. So they came, they sat down and they got arrested with the rest of us.”

Those arrested included Kirkland, President Trumka and 17 other top leaders of U.S. labor unions on the courthouse steps in Lebanon, Va.

Stronger together

For the people of southwest Virginia, long-held attitudes were changing.

“I used to have a lot of faith in law enforcement,” said Larry Hicks, an electrician and member of L.U.

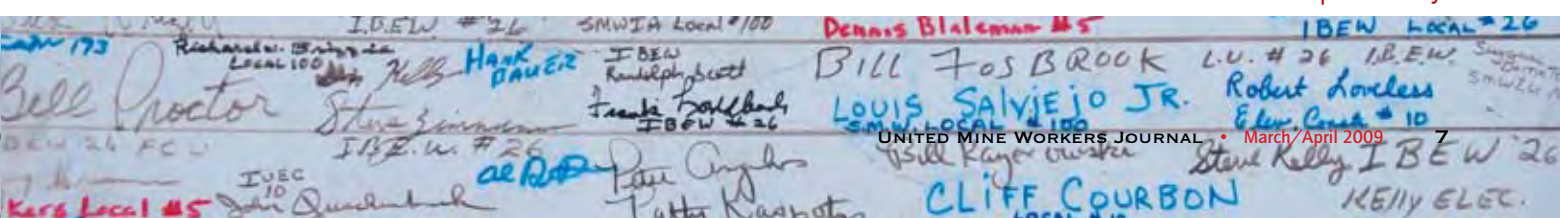


Then-Vice President Roberts addresses the crowd at Camp Solidarity.

of dumb hillbillies, that opened a lot of eyes.”

Sister Bernadette “Bernie” Kenny, of the Medical Missionaries of Mary, a certified nurse practitioner who drove a large mobile clinic van to provide outreach medical services to remote Dickenson County communities, was in the process of delivering supplies when she got stuck in traffic near a mine portal where pickets had set up a line. The police promptly arrested her as a suspected strike agitator. When ▶

Some of the union members who visited Camp Solidarity.



she explained that wasn't the case, things got even more interesting.

"They said I was resisting arrest, which was an extra charge," Sister Bernie said. "Some FBI or ATF guy asked what brothers and sisters I had, where they went to school. It was scary. I had to leave the bus on the side of the road." Sister Bernie was then handcuffed, shackled and taken to jail. Although released later that day, she was ordered not to leave the area or attend union meetings.

the hospital because I have a heart condition. Then I had to go back to the jail for my medicine."

"I had a Vance security guard come over and tell me that his group would make spike balls—jackrocks—then put them under school buses so that the union would get the blame," said Kennedy's son, International Representative Mike Kennedy. "He said, 'We would have meetings on how to make your people mad. My con-

High School, most of them dressed in camouflage and many of them miners' kin, discussed staging a protest. By the time they announced they were walking out and had reached the door, their number had swelled to 150, half the student body.

Within hours, they were joined by students from Ervinton and Haysi, Dickenson County's other high schools, to demonstrate their support for the jailed and picketing miners and their families. Undaunted



ELAINE OSOWSKI



The Womens' Auxiliary stands up for their families.

"My family background prepared me to be with the strikers, but I wasn't active until I was arrested," Sister Bernie said. "I didn't used to be against the law. This experience was an education. I learned a lot about standing up for myself."



DAVID KAMERAS

Peggy Dutton

One day Peggy Dutton learned from listening to a police scanner that a large number of Steelworkers and Auto Workers were coming in from Ohio, Michigan and West Virginia to support the strike. "The troopers were talking about getting ready for them. We knew there were going to be a lot of arrests."

"I was arrested in the first group at McClure," said Roy Kennedy. "Then I was taken from the jail to

science won't allow me to do this anymore."

Schoolchildren figured prominently during the strike. "We were told not to discuss it in the classroom, but it was their fathers and grandfathers who were going to jail," said teacher Ginger Patton. "The kids were often on the picket lines, and became schooled in civil disobedience. They willingly took their punishment, usually detention. They, like their parents, were involved in the strike every day."

Some students took matters into their own hands. On Apr. 25, 1989, the day after hundreds of miners were arrested for sitting down at the entrance to the McClure mine, a group of students at Clintwood

by the threat of suspensions of up to 10 days, "we stood up," Angie Mullins, a 16-year-old from Ervinton, told the *Roanoke Times and World News*. "We made a difference in the strike, a big difference, I think."

A courageous turning point

In 1989, the Moss 3 Preparation Plant was Pittston's largest coal-processing plant. Though not nearly as busy as it had been before the strike started, coal still continued to trickle into the plant from the production coming from supervisors and the few scabs working in the mines.

"It was time to make a statement that Pittston could not ignore," President Roberts said. "It was time to take bold action that would turn the tide in the strike."

Freedom Fighters

The Freedom Fighters is a group of women that worked at Camp Solidarity from start to finish. We had a phone bank set up to call people and tell them what we needed for the next day—cakes, a pot of beans or whatever—and we would pick it up the following morning and bring it back to the camp. We did this every day. We fed thousands of people that came in to support us during the strike. No one ever left the camp hungry.

We chose the name “Freedom Fighters” because the Mine Workers union has always had to work hard for what they got. We have stayed together for 20 years, and we are still active today. We are there when the union needs us to make phone calls, help with the annual Castlewood fish fry or whatever the need may be. We are what we are because of the UMWA.

I want to thank Cecil Roberts for his determination and the strength that he gave us to endure the daily struggles of the Pittston strike for a successful victory in the end. — **Shirley Hall**



DAVID KAMERAS

On the designated day, 99 strikers and one minister gathered in front of the gates at Moss 3, then marched in and occupied the plant. For four days, these courageous UMWA members engaged in the first sit-down strike in the U.S. since the 1930s. Thousands more gathered in front of the plant gates to support those inside.

“I remember the first night we occupied Moss 3,” said James Hall. “A school bus went by in the morning, taking the kids to school. The kids—seven, eight, ten years old—were all looking at us. On the way back after school, their windows were down, and they threw out the lunch money they had saved to help us. Most of their teachers had relatives in the Mine Workers too.”



DAVID KAMERAS

James Hall

“The Moss 3 takeover brought a lot of coverage,” said James Clay. “The company was really getting a black eye.”

After occupying the plant for four days, the strikers marched out peacefully. But the fight wasn’t over—not by any means.

Entire union at risk

As the strike continued, the stakes for the UMWA became enormous, not just in financial terms, but also in terms of future contracts covering every member of the union.

“The union was fined over \$64 million during the course of this strike,” President Roberts said. “President Trumka, myself and all the other union officers knew what a heavy burden that was, and what

the impact would be if we couldn’t get those fines dismissed. Shoot, they were fining me personally \$13,000 a day for part of that strike, \$50,000 for each day we were inside Moss 3.”

“We believed we could get all those fines reversed and eventually were successful in that, even though we had to go all the way to the Supreme Court,” Roberts said. “But it was a testament to the lengths we and the membership were prepared to go to stand up to Pittston and stand up for health care for our members and pensioners.

“Let’s face it: If we had lost that strike and Pittston had been successful in taking away their health care, then no miner’s health care, no pensioner’s health care, no widow’s health care would have been safe anywhere in our union,” Roberts said. “That was not the future any ▶

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of us wanted, and our members understood that from Pennsylvania to Illinois to Alabama to Utah. That's one reason so many of them came to stand with the strikers at Pittston."

Creative tactics

In Pittston, the UMWA faced a ferocious adversary that forced a 10-1/2 month strike and corralled the forces of state government and the courts to try to defeat the union. The UMWA responded by using new and innovative tactics needed for a new and threatening world.

"One of the biggest elements that helped us win was the Selective Strike Fund, which really held our fight together. Without it, it would have been really hard," said Jennings.

"The Strike Fund was a real blessing," added Shirley Hall. "Before, I didn't like it coming out of the check every month, but boy, I appreciated it after we went out on strike."

The Selective Strike Fund was at the time a relatively new innovation, designed to ensure that the union could endure strikes while deterring potential adversaries

from attempting one. In addition to weekly payments to strikers, the Fund also covered their health care and Pittston pensioners' health care as well. In all, over \$42 million was paid to the strikers and to cover health care premiums.

"There was a lot of controversy over the Selective Strike Fund, but that's what helped us survive," said Harless Mullins. "In addition, Justice for Pittston Miners got donations from around the world. The Daughters of Mother Jones really got families involved. These groups

The legacy of Pittston

For many years prior to the 1989 Pittston strike, coal operators aggressively searched for ways to walk away from their obligation to provide retiree health care, shifting that responsibility to other signatory companies. But none were as large and determined as the Pittston Co., which wouldn't budge from its position at the bargaining table, ultimately forcing a strike by the UMWA.

Just as the nation's ongoing need for coal prompted the federal government to intervene in the nationwide coal strike of 1946 in an action that resulted in the creation of the UMWA Health and Retirement Funds, the issues raised by the Pittston strike demanded that the government again play an important role. Secretary of Labor Elizabeth Dole appointed a predecessor of hers, Bill Usery, to act as a special mediator to facilitate an agreement.

As part of that agreement, Dole announced the formation of a commission, including representatives from the UMWA, the coal industry, the health insurance industry, the medical profession,

academia and the government, which became known as the Coal Commission, to recommend to the Secretary and the Congress a comprehensive resolution to the crisis facing the UMWA Funds, retirees and their families.

The commission's key finding was that "retired miners have legitimate expectations of health care benefits for life; that was the promise they received during their working lives, and that is how they planned their retirement years. That commitment should be honored." The panel believed that every company should pay for its own retirees.

Using the commission's findings, Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-W.Va.) introduced legislation, later called the Coal Act, that required that all companies (including those that had abandoned their retirees) pay for the cost of their retirees' health care benefits. Sponsored in the House by Rep. Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.), the legislation mandated that orphan retirees, or those whose employers had gone out of business—a growing problem—would be covered by transfers of surplus pension assets and interest from the Abandoned Mine Lands Reclamation Fund.

Following the 1992 enactment of the Coal Act, coal companies continued to try to ignore its intent through challenges in both the



JOE CORCORAN

did a great job by educating people that a strike was coming, that they shouldn't make big purchases. We got more from the Strike Fund than we ever put in."

The surrounding communities were also a tremendous asset. "Every Wednesday, there would be a huge solidarity rally in St. Paul, where a big stage was set up," said Jan Patton. "They would have music, and all of us met over there. That kept everyone together."

"And there in Russell County, we had Camp Solidarity," Patton

said. "My husband and I had to put up \$400,000 of property, but it was worth it. I knew miners are an elite group, because they put their lives on the line underground every day. Besides, we didn't have any choice. Bill had been a miner and I was a rebel."

"Camp Solidarity stayed open 24 hours a day," said James Hall, "and people from other unions were just amazed at the service that was provided by the Women's Auxiliary. Camp Solidarity was like a headquarters, a center where we could eat, and we had visitors from all over, in-

cluding Hawaii, Australia, Germany, Russia, Italy, France and Scotland."

"It was like putting together a puzzle," added Shirley Hall. "Everybody did their part. There was no big part or little part. Every part was important. And we fed over 40,000 people."

"I think our rallies helped too," said Dutton. "They played music and got all kinds of speakers to boost our morale."

With hundreds of supporters coming in continually to help out, it became a challenge for community activists to find them a safe place ▶

courts and Congress. Dozens of legal challenges were filed, and two cases went all the way to the Supreme Court.

Through the strong leadership of President Roberts and actions by Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.), the Funds received almost \$200 million in congressional appropriations between 1999 and 2003 to continue paying benefits. But a more stable, permanent funding vehicle was essential.

After a decade of intense lobbying by the UMWA, including the union's "Keep the Promise—Save the Coal Act" campaign and a huge march and rally in 2000 in front of the Capitol building in Washington, a solution was found.

The December 2006 reauthorization of the Abandoned Mine Lands program fixed the funding problems for the foreseeable future and for the first time extended coverage to beneficiaries in the UMWA 1993 Benefit Plan. Sen. Rockefeller, Sen. Byrd, Rep. Rahall and Rep. Rick Boucher (D-Va.) were key leaders in the congressional fight.

"Thanks to these friends in Congress, as well as the continued solidarity and militancy of the members of our union, Congress kept the promise made to John L. Lewis by President Truman more than 60 years ago," said President Roberts. "It paved the way to achieving a strong national contract the following year, and continues to allow

us to pursue our organizing and collective bargaining objectives.

"Most important, we have kept our own promise to more than 100,000 retired miners, their spouses and their widows by ensuring that their health care benefits are secure."



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to stay. “The Binns-Counts Community Development Center gave them a place to stay and a place to eat,” said Mary White, who still manages the nonprofit facility equipped with a large meeting area, kitchen and dormitories. Because the agency accepts no public money, “the state troopers could run them off the road, but they couldn’t run them off of here.”

“Everywhere in the community, people pulled together,” said Sister Bernie. “People helped one another in a beautiful way. The amount of energy that was generated was incredible. They would prepare poems and songs that were enriching for everyone’s life. It gave us hope, because we were often discouraged.”

Perhaps the most creative tactic of all was the use of nonviolent civil disobedience. “I think Pittston was hoping for a violent strike. When that didn’t happen, they didn’t know what to do,” said Clay.

“We believed that by adopting the tactics of nonviolent civil disobedience, like those taught and practiced by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we could prevail,” President Roberts said. “And that’s what we did. We sat in the road, we sat in front of the gates to mines and facilities, we sat in front of courthouses.

“When the police came to arrest us, we didn’t resist,” Roberts said. “Many, many people were arrested multiple times.”

“As long as we stuck to civil disobedience, it worked for us,” said Harless Mullins. “I think people in the community respected us for that.”

But tactics alone cannot win a struggle unless it is backed up by planning, organizing and strong leadership at the top. Strike veterans consistently point to the contrast in organization between Pittston and the UMWA. “The company even had to go to the state police to find out what was going on,” said James Clay.

“A police sergeant came to me and said, ‘I’ve done this thing for more than 20 years, and I’ve never seen a strike this well organized,’” said Mike Kennedy.

Every fight echoes Pittston

The Pittston strike was a major victory for the union, but also a cautionary tale for the continuing struggle to achieve worker rights and social justice.



DAVID KAMERAS

Herb Swift

“With a stroke of a pen, the employer can take everything away if you work nonunion,” said Mike Kennedy. “You need a contract in place.”

“If I didn’t have that health card, I’d be in bad shape,” said retiree Herb Swift. “You just don’t know when you’ll need it. If it wasn’t for that card, we couldn’t have made it.”

“I think that after the strike, we enjoyed some peace, but you see the bad stuff resurface now,” said Mullins. “The companies are up to it again. They spent these 20 years concentrating more on what they can do in Congress and the National Labor Relations Board. We’re going to have to get behind the Employee

Free Choice Act and be active politically.”

“The Employee Free Choice Act offers workers the opportunity to join a union without the kind of threats and intimidation so common in organizing elections these days,” President

Roberts said. “It’s not going to do away with the kind of rogue operator that Pittston was in 1989, but it will give workers more power to stand up and fight back against the Pittstons of the future.”

“The story continues,” said Sister Bernie. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way. You need to know that there’s strength in numbers.” ■



AFL-CIO