

1914: The Ludlow massacre



The history of the Ludlow Massacre of striking coal miners, which was one of the most brutal attacks on organised labour in North American history.

It was the pinnacle of efforts by the National Guard and local strike-breakers under the command of the Rockefeller family to suppress a strike of twelve thousand workers

Issues concerning labour had dogged the United States for many years preceding World War I and had resulted in widespread strike action, especially in the West of the country. Tensions rose to a melting point when a union activist was killed in late 1913 resulting in workers at the Rockefeller family owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Corporation's (CF+I) going on strike. Miners evacuated the coal camps on September 23rd in protest against low wages, poor working conditions and continued victimisation of union activists. This was to mark the beginning of what was to be a harsh seven months of continued brutality and repression at the hands of their bosses.

Miners of the CF+I were paid \$1.68 a day and were forced to work in extremely harsh conditions, this was particularly true for the Colorado miners, where fatality rates were often double the national average. What little wages the miners earned were paid in scrip, which was redeemable only at the company store where prices were high.

Attempts of unionisation by the Colorado miners dated back to the first strike of 1883 in which they tried to join the Western Federation of Miners, in 1913 they were attempting to organise into the United Mine Workers of America. (They later joined the Industrial Workers of the World in 1927.)

Demands of the UMWA to the CF+I 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 demands of the union and the continuing strike action enraged the Rockefeller family, which through mine ownership effectively ruled the region. They evicted striking workers from their company owned homes leaving them (along with their families) to face the harsh Colorado winter months without shelter. Assisted by UMWA groups across the US, the strikers organised 'tent cities' close to canyon mouths which lead to coal camps (in an

attempt to block strike-breakers replacing them) and continued their strike.

Through various agencies the company was able to hire men to take a more aggressive stance against the striking workers, armed guards were supplied to harass strikers and union organisers. An armoured car with a mounted machine gun was even built which was appropriately named the 'Death Special' by the company guards. As tensions escalated between CF+I and the strikers, miners dug protective pits beneath their tents to shield themselves and their families against random sniping and machine gun fire from the company guards. On October 17th the 'Death Special' was used to attack the Forbes tent colony resulting in the death of one miner. A young girl was shot in the face and another boy's legs riddled with machine gun bullets also. Confrontations between striking miners and scab workers were also resulting in additional deaths. On October 28th the Governor of Colorado, Elias M Ammons called out the National Guard to take control of the situation.

The miners however, persevered. Union members and organisers were kidnapped and beaten, shots being fired into the camps from strike-breakers and the National Guardsmen were a constant occurrence and the harsh winter was taking its toll. Worried about the continuing cost of keeping the National Guard in the field, Governor Ammons accepted an offer from the Rockefeller family to put their men in National Guard uniforms.

On March 10th the body of a strike-breaker was found near railroad tracks near the Forbes tents and the National Guard's General Chase ordered the colony to be destroyed. The strike was reaching a climax, and National Guardsmen were ordered to evict the remaining tent colonies around the mines, despite them being on private property leased by the UMWA.

Ludlow was the largest of the colonies, and on the morning of April 20th 1914, troops fired into the camp with machine guns, anyone who was seen moving in the camp was targeted. The miners fired back, and fighting raged for almost fourteen hours.



Red Cross workers sift through the wreckage of the strikers' camp after the attack

In the afternoon, a passing freight train stopped near the camp and allowed many miners and their families to escape to east to an area known as the 'Black Hills'. After many hours of exchanging fire with the militiamen, the camp's main organiser, Louis Tikas met with Lieutenant Linderfelt (the officer in charge of the National Guard assault on the Ludlow camp) to arrange a truce. Linderfelt hit Tikas with the butt of his rifle and soldiers fired several times into his back as he lay on the ground, killing him outright.

That evening, under cover of darkness, the militiamen entered the camp and set fire to tents, killing two women and eleven children who were sheltering from the shooting in a pit below a tent, thirteen other people were also shot dead during the fighting.

As news of the massacre spread, workers from around the country went on strike to show solidarity with the remaining miners on strike in Colorado and to express sympathy for those who had lost loved ones in Ludlow. Several cities in the state were taken over and occupied by miners and some National Guard units even laid down their arms and refused to fight.

However, the workers failed to obtain their demands along with union recognition and many were replaced with non-union workers. No National Guardsmen was ever prosecuted over the killings, even though sixty-six people had been killed by the time violence ended.

In 1918 a monument was erected to commemorate those who died during the strike. These individuals all died in the Ludlow Massacre, and are inscribed on the monument as follows:

Louis Tikas, age: 30 years

James Fyler, age: 43 years

John Bartolotti, age: 45 years

Charlie Costa, age: 31 years

Fedelina Costas, age: 27 years

Onafrio Costa, age: 4 years

Frank Rubino, age: 23 years

Patria Valdez, age: 37 years

Eulala Valdez, age: 8 years

Mary Valdez, age: 7 years

Elvira Valdez, age: 3 months

Joe Petrucci, age: 4 ½ years

Lucy Petrucci, age: 2 ½ years

Frank Petrucci, age: 4 months

William Snyder Jr, age: 11 years

Rodgerlo Pedregone, age: 6 years

Cloriva Pedregone, age: 4 year

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