

This essay is a compilation of my own reflections growing up in rural Southwest Virginia, accounts from workers during the Bolshevik Revolution, and other snapshots from union coal miners.

- By Kassidy S.

For decades, coal company towns exploited Southwest Virginians and stripped our communities of their autonomy. These companies forced residents into dangerous mining jobs, taking advantage of workers who were desperate to provide for themselves and their families. Despite these conditions, rural laborers ignited some of the most notable labor movements in the country and put their lives on the line to gain a better future for generations to come.

During these rural revolts, Russian miners in similar conditions fought for workers' liberation against imperialism, leading up to the Bolshevik revolution. The Southern working class still echoes the anti-communist sentiment penetrating America, but without the mobilization of the global proletariat, the freedoms Appalachian laborers died for could not have succeeded.

“They shot one of those Bolsheviks up in Knox County this morning, Harry Sims his name was. . . . That deputy knew his business. He didn't give the redneck a chance to talk, he just plugged him in the stomach. We need some shooting like that down here in Pineville.”[1]

ЗДРАВСТВУЕТ
СОВЕТЪ РАБОНИХЪ
И СОЛДТСКИХЪ
ДЕПУТОВЪ
ПРИБАВЪ ПО НК
ДА 'О. Р. У. Т.

I wasn't taught much about communism growing up, but I do remember one Saturday. My grandpa made omelets in the little kitchen facing their flower garden. We were decorating the Christmas tree that morning. I hung each ornament on the tree carefully. These were the same ornaments my mom decorated the tree with when she was little; most were handcrafted by our distant relatives. The smell of a home-cooked breakfast, the sunlight warming the kitchen table as we gathered, the lights on the tree twinkling to welcome the holiday season, and, of course, lessons on how the brave Americans eradicate communism...

"You do not know how we are beaten and how we suffer... we are constantly weary... almost killing ourselves, only to remain in hunger and suffering." [2]



"All you do is complain! We give you a little bit and you're never satisfied. The contract is as good as y'all will get, Management's trying to be fair to y'all, and all this rioting won't get us anywhere."

Today, there's a disconnect between labor history and the present condition of the Appalachian working class. Due to the poverty resulting from corporate influence, workers take jobs at companies who devote themselves to demolishing organizing. Rural people know they'll be cheated out of fair wages, but the risk of not having a job is too great a fear.

"This is our principal request, upon which everything else depends. This is the main and the only balm for our (ailing) wounds, without which they will continue to fester and will soon bring us death." [3]

In May 2020, I heard Southerners go on about "rioters." They went on and on about how violence never gets anyone anywhere. "Destroying property is never acceptable, regardless of which side does it." Even during the height of the labor movement, many white miners perpetuated segregation. The South has to reckon with its history and pay tribute to the miners that they denied solidarity.

"When certain provisions were read, workers raised their hands, fingers forming the sign of the cross, 'in order to indicate that these demands were sacred.'" [5]
"You saw how much blood he spilled, you saw?" [6]

"Keep all protests peaceful... violence is never acceptable... we must stand against violence in any form." [4]

“In February, 26-year-old Cody Maggard was crushed to death in a powered haulage incident at Immel (mine).”[7]

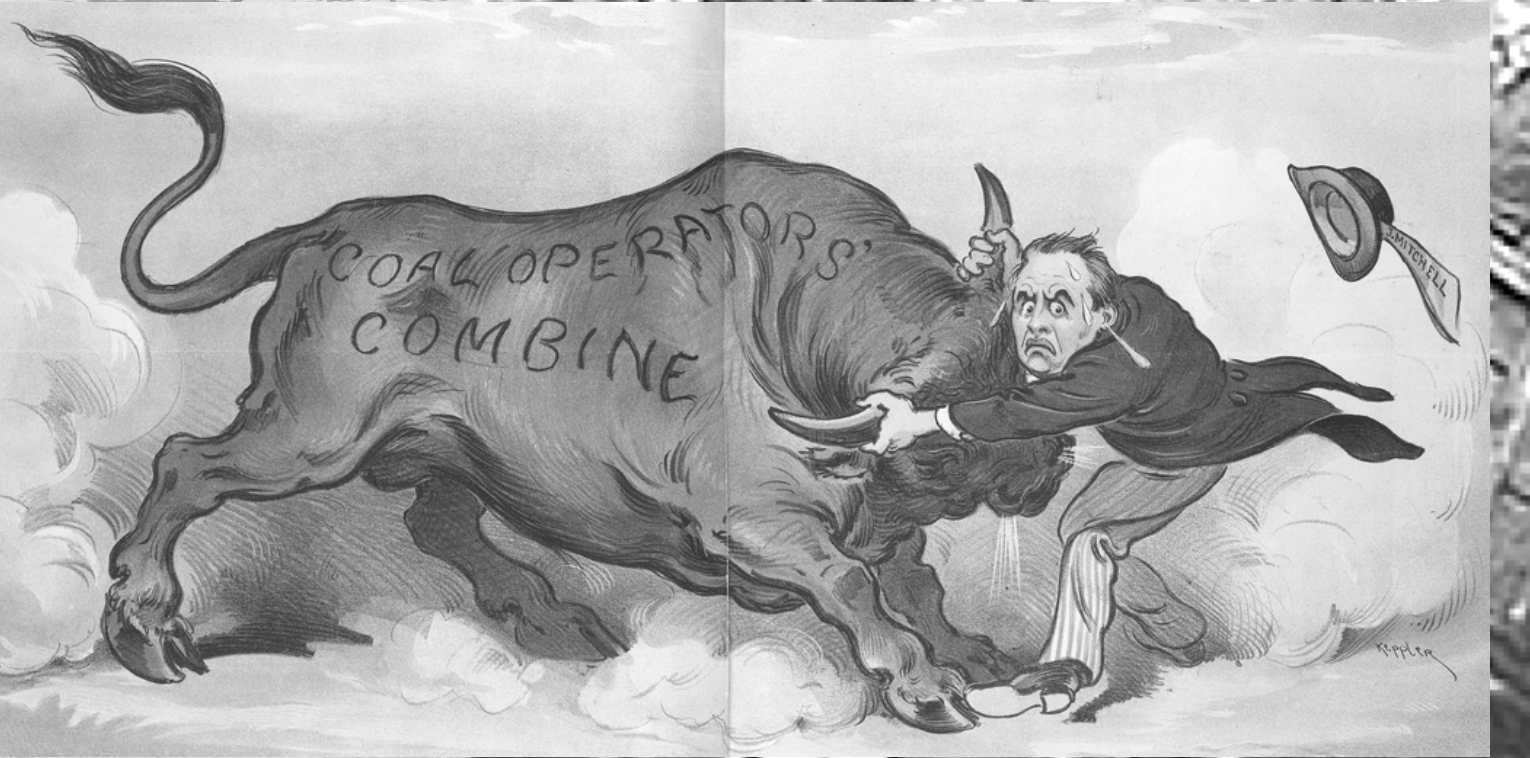
Many Southerners have “friend of coal” and pro-cop stickers on their trucks. It’s safer to go along with the status quo than risk being shunned, but my empathy's running low. How many deaths does it take for you to see? Workers willfully sacrifice their bodies for those who snap open spines with their heels. “Pray for our police. Wave to the brave officer as you walk to class!” The police have always been a force against workers. They resisted those who pushed for labor rights. If you, as a worker, are thankful for those who were killed for daring to protest the system and you support cops, you’re a class traitor.

“It is better for us to die for our demands than to live as we have lived until now.”[8] “Do the police and soldiers dare stop us from going through, comrades?”[9]

My ancestors who suffered in the mines deserve to hear their stories told. Pretending otherwise erases the sacrifices they made.

To my fellow Southerners who are afraid to stand up for your radical politics, you have support from comrades everywhere hoping to see a better future. Even if you feel like your community turns away from you, know that the radical miners of the coal strikes would be proud.

“It will be the workers, with their courage, resolution and self-sacrifice, who will be chiefly responsible for achieving victory.” - Karl Marx



[1] Patrick Huber, “Red Necks and Red Bandanas: Appalachian Coal Miners and the Coloring of Union Identity, 1912-1936,” *Western Folklore* 65, no. ½ (2006): 195–210, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25474784>.

[2] L. Gurevich, *9-e ianvaria: Po dannym ‘anketnoi komissii’* (St. Petersburg: 1906), 12, quoted in Walter Sablinsky, *The Road to Bloody Sunday* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), 171.

[3] Georgii Gapon and Ivan Vasimov, “Appendix II. The Petition of January 9” petition, 1905, quoted in Walter Sablinsky, *The Road to Bloody Sunday* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), 346.

[4] <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/white-house/biden-urges-peaceful-peaceful-protests-after-abortion-dobbs>

[5] L. Gurevich, *9-e ianvaria: Po dannym ‘anketnoi komissii’* (St. Petersburg: 1906), 11, quoted in Walter Sablinsky, *The Road to Bloody Sunday* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), 212.

[6] Protchenko, quoted in Zelikson-Bobrovskaiia, Ts., ed. *Pervaia russkaia revoliutsiia v Peterburge 1905 g. Vol. 1: Sbornik statei, vospominanii, mate-rialov I dokumentov* (Leningrad-Moscow: 1925), 25, quoted in Walter Sablinsky, *The Road to Bloody Sunday* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), 273.

[7] Shelley Connor, “Tennessee zinc mine collapse kills one, injures two,” *World Socialist Web Site*, July 17, 2021, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2021/07/07/zinc-j07.html>.

[8] *Vpered* no. 4, January 31/18, 1905, quoted in Walter Sablinsky, *The Road to Bloody Sunday* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), 213-14.

[9] *Vpered* no. 4, January 31/18, 1905, quoted in Walter Sablinsky, *The Road to Bloody Sunday* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), 213-14.

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