



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Harlan County, KY, coal miners win affiliation with UMWA union, United States, 1973-1974

26 July

1973

to: 29 August

1974

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: Brookside, Harlan County, Kentucky

Goals:

The right to form a local of the United Mine Workers (UMW) union.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 030. Rude gestures
- 032. Taunting officials
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 051. Walk-outs
- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 030. Rude gestures
- 032. Taunting officials
- 034. Vigils
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 019. Wearing of symbols

- 030. Rude gestures
- 032. Taunting officials
- 034. Vigils
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 030. Rude gestures
- 032. Taunting officials
- 034. Vigils
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 030. Rude gestures
- 032. Taunting officials
- 034. Vigils
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 089. Severance of funds and credit
- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 030. Rude gestures
- 032. Taunting officials
- 034. Vigils
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 046. Homage at burial places
- 089. Severance of funds and credit
- 105. Establishment strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Women
- mine workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Miners & United Mine Workers (UMW)

Partners:

Brookside Women's Club (BWC)

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Citizens Public Inquiry into the Brookside Strike

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- coal miners
- the United Mine Workers

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Brookside Women's Club

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 2 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Eastover Coal Company & Duke Power Company

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Use of violence was never sanctioned nor forbidden by leadership. There were some minor physical attacks on scabs and police. Some picketers carried weapons that they did not use. Some women in the BWC stabbed a police officers after he had dragged one of them away from the picket line.

Repressive Violence:

Physical removal of protesters from picket lines, weapons fired into miners' homes, verbal threats, and one murder.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

In June of 1973, workers at the Brookside coal mine in Harlan County, Kentucky voted 113-55 to replace their membership in the Southern Labor Union (SLU) and join the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) union. The SLU was largely seen as serving the interests of the mine owners rather than the workers.

The owners of the mine, Eastover Coal Company, a subsidiary of Duke Power Company, refused to sign the new contracts, which would have established a UMWA local in Brookside.

After a month of negotiations with no success, the 180 miners walked off the job and began what would be a 13-month-long strike on 26 July 1973.

The main goal of the strike was the right of the workers to form a union as part of the UMWA. In doing so, they would also ensure two secondary objectives: establishing a worker's Safety Committee and increased hospital and medical benefits. The workers' salaries were comparable with other miners throughout the country, so the issue of salary was not addressed. Along with opposing the UMWA union, Eastover management also wanted a 'no-strike' clause to be included in any final contract.

Eastover and Duke brought in replacement workers at the beginning of the strike. The replacement workers often drove through the picket lines, injuring the striking workers. Eastover also hired prisoners to 'provide security' in and around the mine. Some of these prisoners had been convicted of serious crimes including manslaughter and homicide.

Throughout the strike, the campaigners set up picket lines to try to prevent replacement workers from working at the coal mine. This was partially successful until County Judge F. Byrd Hogg, a mine owner himself, issued an injunction against the miners allowing only 3 people to picket at each of the two entrances to the mine. Several men were arrested for violating the injunction and were sentenced to three months in prison.

Women of the community responded to Judge Bogg's injunction. The wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of the striking miners created the Brookside Women's Club (BWC) on 27 September 1973. Rather than see 'their men' imprisoned, they volunteered to staff the picket lines. They believed that the strikebreakers would be more hesitant to use violence against women.

The BWC had nearly 100 members. They maintained the picket lines, stopped traffic by moving their cars into the road or laying down in the road, heckled scabs, and at times were arrested for their actions.

The women were repeatedly assaulted and shot at. Although largely nonviolent, the BWC made no commitment to nonviolent discipline. Several members stabbed a local sheriff when he dragged a woman violently off the road on 28 February 1974.

The strikers made bumper stickers supporting their cause and drove around the community in a truck with loudspeakers to explain their grievances and hopefully gain support. UMWA itself assisted in larger actions. The union organized a divestment campaign, "Dump Duke," in which people were encouraged to sell any stock in Duke Power Company in May of 1974. The

UMWA also organized a march outside of Duke headquarters in North Carolina.

Throughout the campaign, strikers and supporters sang songs such as "Which Side Are You On?" written by Florence Reece in 1931 during strikes that earned the community the name 'Bloody Harlan.'

Violence continued against the workers and community. The strikers reported attempted bribery to denounce the union, being shot at numerous times, having dynamite thrown at them, shots fired into their homes, and constant verbal threats. The 'security guards' and local police often physically removed people from the picket line in order to let cars pass.

By the end of the campaign the miners had been subjected to over 90 arrests and 40 acts of violence.

The strikers were not themselves entirely nonviolent. Those on the picket line shouted insults at the replacement workers and some even carried weapons. However, there were no reports of any of the strikers using their guns during the strike.

Negotiations continued during the strike, but they reached an impasse on 28 November 1973. Both sides filed complaints with the National Labor Review Board (NLRB) accusing the other side of bargaining in bad faith.

On 30 April 1974, the NLRB sided with the workers but no specific action was taken. The NLRB Administrative Law Judge, Manrice Bush, concluded, "From the record as a whole, I find and conclude that Eastover deliberately insisted on the nonacceptable no strike clause for the purpose of avoiding coming to terms with the Respondent union on any kind of collective bargaining agreement."

Another factor in the strike was the presence of Barbara Kopple, a journalist who made a documentary *Harlan County, USA* about the struggle. Her presence, and the presence of her video camera, is believed to be a factor in decreasing the violence used against the strikers.

In March of 1974, the UMWA invited an independent group to investigate the strike. The Citizens Public Inquiry into the Brookside Strike, funded not by UMWA but by the Marshall Field Foundation, was composed of 11 prominent people, including Willard Wirtz, Secretary of Labor under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, Fred Harris, a former US Senator, and members of academic, religious, and community groups. The group met with approximately 50 members of the community and toured the area. They had invited executives from Duke Power and Eastover Mining to meet with them, but they refused.

On 24 August 1974 a mine supervisor named Billy C. Bruner shot and killed a 23-year-old striker, Lawrence D. Jones. The death shocked the community and received widespread attention throughout the nation.

The killing was a turning point. Shortly after Jones' death, 29 August 1974, the Eastover Mining Company offered a contract to the striking workers.

Shortly after the end of the strike, the UMW faced another national obstacle when their contracts across the country expired. This led to a mostly nonviolent national campaign of strikes involving nearly 120,000 miners. Within 3 weeks a tentative deal had been reached between the UMW and the majority of mine owners.

Research Notes

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