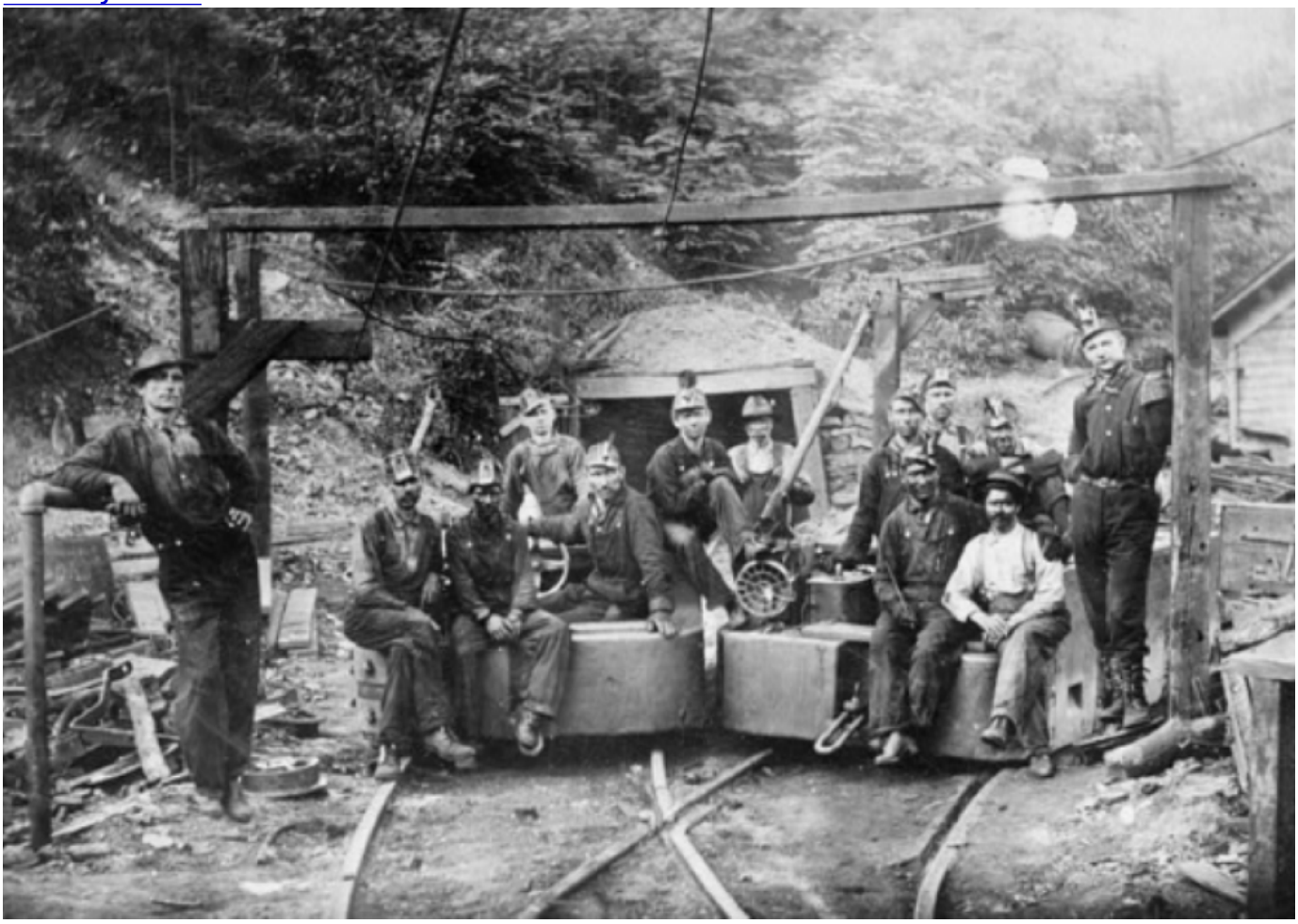
Columns
Social Justice



Coal miners are pictured at the entrance to the Richard Mine, owned by the Elkins Coal and Coke Company in Deckers Creek, West Virginia, in this 1976 photograph. (Library of Congress/Historic American Engineering Record)



by Janet M. Peterworth

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The quote "Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living" is attributed to Mother Jones, a fiery Irish woman and one of the best union organizers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States. Corporate bosses who feared Mary Harris Jones called her "the most dangerous woman in America."

I looked at that quote often in my 20 years of ministry in West Virginia because it hung in my office. And I think of it today as I read about restaurant workers, tech employees, delivery people and workers in the South forming unions. I think about it when I read of unaccompanied immigrant children working long hours in factories in violation of child labor laws. And I think about it when I remember my coal miner friends in West Virginia.

But are union organizers and unions to be feared? Are they dangerous? I would be in good company if I argued that they were neither dangerous nor to be feared! In his groundbreaking 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* Pope Leo XIII spoke to the dehumanizing conditions in which many workers labored. He affirmed workers' rights to just wages, rest and fair treatment. He stated that workers have the right to form unions — even to strike. He saw labor unions as key in our industrialized world.

While Leo was the first pope to speak out so strongly about worker rights, he was not the last. Ninety years later Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens* reminded us that labor should be prioritized over capital and emphasized the dignity and rights of workers.

As recently as June 2021, Pope Francis, speaking in a video message to the International Labor Organization, a United Nations agency based in Geneva, stressed the needs of the most vulnerable workers, including migrants. He said that efforts to rebuild economies after COVID-19 setbacks must aim at a future with "decent and dignified working conditions," originating in collective bargaining. He called the right to organize a fundamental protection for workers.

I saw that in the coal fields. One person going to demand that faulty or worn-out equipment was dangerous, one person confronting the owner about poor ventilation

in a mine or one person fighting for black lung compensation: One person was easy to ignore or threaten. However, when the union representative went to the boss, or when union members called a strike, justice was done — at least most of the time. But make no mistake: Justice sometimes did not come without a fight.

I became acutely aware of the important role of unions in Mingo County, West Virginia — known as "the heart of the billion dollar coal fields." Here I learned about the plight of mine workers in the early 1900s who generated huge profits for companies that cared little about what happened to the workers who went deep underground to blast, dig and load coal.

Nor did the companies care about what happened to those workers when their lungs got clogged with coal dust so that they could hardly breathe. Companies did not want workers to unionize. They did not see the need for improved living and working conditions. They did not seem to care about mine safety laws or child labor laws, and they often ignored them.

It was in "Bloody Mingo," as history calls it, that I learned of the May 1920 Matewan Massacre, a battle between company security guards and the miners who had formed a union. Ten died , including the mayor of that small town.

It was in Mingo that I learned about the August 1921 Battle of Blaire Mountain, the result of a conflict between pro-union miners and law enforcement officials who tried to stop miners from getting to Charleston to demand the release of arrested striking miners.

And it was in Mingo that I spoke directly to people who had been involved in Pittston Mine Strike of 1989-91, a long and heavily contested struggle. I learned union songs and came to know that a "jackrock" was the weapon of choice in this labor war.

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And it was in my 20 years in Mingo County that I saw coal companies break unions by closing their operations, claiming that a coal seam had been worked out and they had to close. Once a mine closed, the company was finished with the union.

On one occasion the husbands of some employees of the agency I was running were victims of this tactic. A significant number of union members were close to retirement in this particular mine. They would receive substantial benefits for the time they worked in the union mine.

They faced a choice: Stay with the company that was supposedly closing and eventually lose their benefits, or travel to Charleston (an hour and 40 minutes away) and work for a union mine for the remaining 18 months before retirement so they could keep their benefits. They traveled and lived in Charleston away from their families, coming home only late Friday and returning very early Monday.

There was a time in my life when I did not support unions. My father worked for a railroad company, and when the workers who kept the trains moving went on strike, my father had to go into the office, remain there for days, and sometimes work around the clock. I did not understand what was happening then. But I do now, and I see unions as necessary and important. And I am more than willing to support union organizing and to join Mother Jones to pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living.