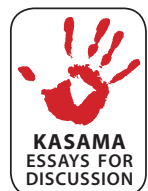


Ambush at Keystone No. 1



Inside the Coal Miners' Great Gas Protest of 1974

by Mike Ely



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Kasama
is a communist project that seeks to reconceive and
regroup for a profound revolutionary transformation of society.

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Contents

Introduction	4
Part 1: No Gas? No Coal.	5
Speaking Bitterness in the Courthouse	6
Meeting at the Welch Bypass	7
Roving Pickets and Wildcats	8
The Unexpected Color of Pickets.	9
Part 2: The First Picket	10
Home, Briefly	11
A Reckless Morning in Eureka Holler	11
Part 3: Injunctions and State Police.	13
The Fight Local by Local	14
Imagining Communist Work	14
A Flyer: Controversy Inside and Out	16
The Argument <i>Against</i> Explanations.	17
Fishing at Midnight	18
Part 4: Things Start to Crack	19
Bucket or Suitcase!.	19
Keystone's Outlaw History	20
A Darkly Revealing Moment	20
Part 5: Bullets of Hidden Gunmen	22
Waiting in Virginia.	22
Ambush from Company Property	22
"Let Him Die"	23
Springing the Jailhouse Doors	24
Afterward	25

Introduction

Coal miners in Appalachia waged a fierce ten-year movement of illegal walkouts called wildcat strikes, starting in the late 1960s. Tens of thousands of miners repeatedly confronted the federal and state authorities, the courts, the police, the mine owners, the media, and their own top union officials. Most strikes involved individual mines and local grievances—and lasted a day or two. But especially after 1974, some strikes started to spread from mine to mine, county to county, state to state—challenging government policies and court repression. The hard-fought strikes lasted for weeks. The leadership of these strikes was entirely at the grassroots, among the working miners and sometimes the local elected leaders at their mines.

This was one of greatest upsurges of working class struggle in modern U.S. history. And yet it is virtually unknown.¹

And there is a second story here that is also unknown: A small cadre of Maoist activists worked within that wildcat strike movement to promote revolutionary politics among the coal miners. Radical activists had been sent to the coalfields by the Revolutionary Union (RU) to get jobs in the mines and connect with the militant networks among the workers—both to help organize a distinct self-conscious pole of radical

struggle among miners, and to connect them to larger plans for a socialist revolution in the U.S.

Histories of the coal mines or 1960s radicalism barely mention that strike wave and the RU's Miners Right to Strike Committee, if at all. If you want a sense of the power of this wildcat strike movement, you still have to go burrow among the records of the federal courts and the coal operators themselves. Or you can leaf through the yellowing archives of the local newspapers—where the strikes were denounced in livid redbaiting tones.

The Bituminous Coal Operators Association (BCOA) reported that miners launched an average of 1,500 wildcats in each year from 1971 to 1974. Then the rate doubled for 1975-76 to more than 3,000 strikes per year.²

Files for federal restraining orders of the Charleston's U.S. District Court note that 2 locals were restrained for striking in 1970. In 1971, it was 20. Then: 1971, 20 ; 1972, 69; 1973, 127; 1974, 267; 1975, 295; 1976, 188.³

Often during the 1970s, the nightly local news was cut short, so that these federal court orders could be announced over TV—one after another—threatening specific mines and local officials with prison if they did not return to work.

Gina B. Fall and I were part of the revolutionary communist organizing project among coal miners during the 1970s. She was one of the writers and distributors for our local communist newspaper, the *Coalfield Worker*, and a leader in the local Black Lung Association. I worked in the mines from early 1973 until I was fired and blacklisted at the end of 1979. And during that time I was one of the core activists of the Miners Right to Strike Committee—a communist-led organization of coal miners that helped lead the biggest wildcats that broke out, in 1975 and 1976, challenging injunctions and demanding the right to strike.

There is new interest these days in the work of connecting revolutionary politics with working people.

1. *Fire in the Hole: Miners and Managers in the American Coal Industry*, Curtis Seltzer, University Press of Kentucky p. 136-138

"Wildcat strikes defined the three years following the 1974 contract, logging more than 5.6 million lost workdays, or almost 6 percent of all workdays in this period....The Revolutionary Communist party, through its Miners' Right to Strike Committee, played an important role in shaping several wildcats between 1974 and 1976...."

2. *Wildcat strikes in Bituminous Coal Mining* by Jeanne M. Brett and Stephen B. Goldberg, in *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, July 1970, Cornell University. <http://www.jstor.org/pss/2522962>.

3. Seltzer, p. 138

This essay explores one experience in service to that discussion.

This is the story of the first major strike that RU comrades participated in—shortly after we arrived in the coalfields. The strike erupted before we were widely known as communists and atheists. These were days when we were first learning the lay of the land and first meeting the main players in the rank-and-file struggle. In the raw experiences of this strike, new perceptions collided constantly with our own preconceptions.

Mao Zedong talks about how perceptual knowledge is the doorway to conception and insight. He describes how practical experience accumulates and makes leaps in our understanding possible.⁴ Those leaps from experience to insight are ongoing, and all around us, right now, are signs of new leaps demanding to be made.

This essay will not sum up the full arc of our communist work over the 1970s. That may come later. This is a description of events and people for the much more limited purpose of giving the reader a sense of the times and those struggles.

Gina, my close partner and comrade through those days, died not long ago, and so this report will not benefit from her sharp memory and insight. Thanks to Judy, Mike and Khia Branch for help in writing this piece. I welcome questions and criticism.⁵

Part 1: No Gas? No Coal.

I had to hitchhike down to the big mass meeting. Like so many other people, I simply had run out of gas. So I walked down the hill from our house to the main road and stuck out my thumb.

Jack P. picked me up in his beat-up green pickup. Jack was one of the safety committeeman at the Keystone #1 mine where I worked. He was a self-absorbed and extremely talkative man and in his eyes I was just a kid—so he chattered on, as we drove down the Tug Fork valley toward Welch. Pretending to listen made it easier for me to hide my excitement. It was early spring, and the steep hills were already filling the air with the smell of new sprouts and pollen.

There were also rumors of a strike hanging heavy in that air. And this was what we had come to southern West Virginia for—to connect with the wildcat strikes of the coal miners, to become one with the people. I had, by then, been in the mines a little over a year. After I made it through my “red hat” probationary months at the Itmann mine complex, our organization, the Revolutionary Union, had sent Gina, me and our son further south, into McDowell County along West Virginia’s southern border.

McDowell was one of the few places that had a high percentage of Black coal miners—in a band from Northfork Holler, down along the Tug Fork to Welch and then up U.S. Steel’s Gary Holler. We believed that connecting with radically-inclined people in that Black community was crucial for the political work we had in mind.⁶

4. Mao Zedong, *On Practice*, marxists.org.

5. Abbreviations are given in the place of people’s names for obvious reasons.

6. The Revolutionary Union had been founded in 1968 in the San Francisco Bay Area, and mushroomed nationally after the summer of 1970. It absorbed significant forces emerging

Keystone #1 had, so far, been a bit of a disappointment for me. It was a relatively large and long-established mine, and the old atmosphere of company town lingered strongly there. Keystone's workforce had a heavy percentage of older, Korean War generation men, and not as many of the unsettled and rebellious Viet vets. It was about a third African-American—as were the immediately surrounding coal camps.

The local union committees were almost all older Black workers (except for Jack P.), and they seemed to be on a friendly, almost familial, basis with local mine management. The younger workers there muttered in frustration that the “old sucks” were never willing to walk out—no matter what the provocation. Some quit, saying they wanted a mine where the workers had more backbone.

Speaking Bitterness in the Courthouse

It was early March 1974, and a county-wide protest meeting of miners had been called for the old stone courthouse in the middle of Welch.⁷

I don't know who opened the doors that Sunday, because by the time we arrived there was already a large crowd milling around in the main courtroom. And it didn't take long for things to start. One by one, people stood up to address the crowd.

The U.S. was generally gripped by a gasoline shortage—but here in southern West Virginia it had produced particularly sharp class conflict. The crisis was triggered by an embargo launched by oil producing countries in the Middle East. Nightly TV showed long lines of cars snaking out of gas stations.

In West Virginia, the state's governor, Arch Moore, declared an arrogant policy of statewide gas rationing. People in West Virginia would only be allowed to buy gas if their gas gauge showed a quarter tank or less. In

from the radicalization of SDS. The RU changed its name in 1975 to the Revolutionary Communist Party. At its height it probably included 1,200 to 2000 members or close supporters, and declined steadily in the decades after the 1970s. A small group still exists using that name. <http://revcom.us>

7. For history buffs—this is the same courthouse where the miners' hero, Two-Gun Sid Hatfield, was lured into an ambush and assassinated by Baldwin-Felts gunthugs in 1921—igniting armed clashes of miners and company gun thugs that culminated in the Battle of Blair Mountain.

a very American way, people were furious at the idea that some gas station attendant was being ordered by the state to stick his head into everyone's car. Government agents entering your private property (your car!) without your permission felt intolerable—even if they were just local teenagers pumping gas.

And more: this “quarter tank policy” didn't work for the many miners who drove the long narrow country roads to their jobs. People were simply running out of gas, unable to get to work or get home from work.

Here in the courthouse tempers were high. Several miners at the Maitland mine had been forced to spend the night in the bathhouse. And that story was mentioned again and again.

Some grievances have a deep symbolic meaning. For miners the memories are there, just under the surface, of how they and their parents and grandparents lived and died under the thumb of heartless coal operators. How their lives and suffering meant nothing, literally nothing, to those who rule the world. Such experiences shape you, and shape what is tolerable. They left many miners with a sense that whatever you put up with you would then live with.

Not so long ago, virtually all miners had lived trapped in company towns in these valleys—living in deep debt to the company stores, attending company churches, and moving under the watchful eyes of company gun thugs. By the 1960s, most miners had moved out of company housing, and had broken out of debt-peonage. But, knowing the mercilessness of coal operators, people felt that without continuous struggle, the lives of miners and their families could tumble into an abyss of horrors.

At this meeting, it was mainly young men of my generation running the show. These weren't that older generation with a hat-in-hand mentality and patriotic Korean War buzzcuts. These were rednecks with handlebar mustaches and hair over their collars, many of them Vietnam vets. A row of them was reared back with their boots propped up on the courtroom railing, reeking of insolence. And when they stood to speak, their blood ran hot.⁸

8. It is an irony that many communist organizers, including me, had “cleaned up” in order to “go to the working class”—

Miners had been forced to sleep at the Maitland mine—curled up in the bathhouse! It was infuriating. What are we supposed to do? Move back into small company towns gathered around the mines? Give up the right to live and move as we choose? Let Arch Moore's agents stick their faces into our cars to decide who gets gas and who doesn't?

People grabbed onto the absurdity and injustice of this: Here we went underground every day, risking our lives in the dust, the gas and the rock, to give the world endless trainloads of coal—the energy that lights the cities and makes that steel. And they couldn't even give us each a tank of gas in return? Were the company coal trucks on short rations? Obviously not!

Several women addressed the courtroom urging the men to strike hard and represent everyone by standing up to Governor Moore.

I wasn't yet known to anyone—certainly not yet as the notorious communist I would soon become. I don't remember my exact words, but when I spoke I embraced the determination to force the government back, spoke about the unbridgeable gulf between those who own and those who labor, and brought up the importance of supporting the rights of third world peoples to control their resources, like oil.

Meanwhile, it had been clear from the first moments where this meeting was going. A brother soon blurted out: "Here's what I say: No gas? No coal!" to shouts of agreement.

Then Young Hatter jumped up on a table. He was from U.S. Steel's Gary #10—one of the smaller, newer mines with a very young workforce. Jack P. leaned over and whispered to me, "Those hot-heads never work up there."

Hatter was a physically restless man, quick and muscular, with a pompadour curl hanging over his forehead. And he was short—jumping on that defense table made sense.

Hatter addressed the suddenly-hushed room:

"We all know what's needed. We meet at the bypass tonight, 9 o'clock. These bastards will have injunc-

cutting our hair, toning down our styles—to match certain pre-conceptions of working class culture, and then found out, on arrival, that many of the more militant workers were growing their own hair out and smoking lots of weed.

tions quickly if we strike. But this isn't a strike. It is a protest. We just don't have enough gas to get to work. And if one man can't get to work—none of us get to work." He jumped down.

Men all around me were saying: "At the bypass tonight." I had no idea what that meant.

A couple shouted, "No gas, no coal," at the news reporters as we filed out.

The Great Gas Protest of 1974 had started.

Meeting at the Welch Bypass

Welch sits where Gary Holler feeds into the Tug Fork River. You can drive for hours in all directions, over narrow two-lane mountain roads, and run across mines scattered everywhere.

In its World War 2 heyday Welch had 100,000 inhabitants. But later the national railroads went diesel, and rapid mechanization of mining slashed the workforce in half. By 1974, Welch felt more like a ghost town. There were still mile-long trains of coal pouring out of the area. Welch was still the county seat and with 10,000 people it was still the biggest town around. But its hospital, movie theater, and small shopping district were weather-beaten, and surrounded by boarded windows.

Above the southern edge of Welch, cut halfway up the mountain, runs a bypass road. It was built so U.S. Steel trucks could rumble out of Bluefield and turn up Gary Holler without stopping for lights or driving through Welch's small streets. It is a long road without any turnoffs, ideal you want to see anyone coming from afar.

My heart was pounding as I drove up along the bypass that dark Sunday night. I was alone, and didn't know what to expect. There is one sharp curve in the road with an especially broad shoulder. And there were a hundred fifty men there—in a meeting lit by headlights.

Men stood in small groups talking. A few passed around bottles. People here have known each other all their lives, and now, at work, these men carried their lives in each others' hands every day.

A few words were said from the back of a pickup truck about "Why we are here." But we all knew of

course. Then different brief announcements from the crowd: "I'm from U.S. Steel #50, our boys are meeting in Pineville and will take out Wyoming County." And so on.

It was clear who was in charge, though no one discussed it. No one introduced the ringleaders. There were no votes. Three locals right around Welch were well known for their militancy—Capels, Maitland and the tiny Gary #10. A sizable crew had come from each of those mines. Their leaders conferred at the center of things. They sat together in a car, and would wave over a man they knew well. He leaned in the window, and in whispers instructions were given about which mines to picket. And he would take off with a small crew of five or six men.⁹

There were dozens of mines to pull out—and so the crews were sent out strategically. In some cases we just shut down a central cleaning plant—which meant that miners at a network of many small mines would stop work, and hear about the strike.

There would simply be no work until our demands were met. The state rationing had to be withdrawn and the gasoline had to flow. "*No gas? No coal.*"

Roving Pickets and Wildcats

As the strike erupted, we expected similar picket movements to develop at the edges of our territory—to spread the strike into new areas.

Under the national coal contracts, miners are required to work. The union officials at all levels are legally obligated to prevent and suppress walkouts. In other words, strikes and walkouts end up being illegal, period. Coal companies could get restraining orders demanding that miners return to work. The cops could be mobilized to enforce them. Refusing to comply means that the workers and their leaders were subject

9. Each coal mine has its own local and its own union committees— and with a workforce of only 15 to 500 men per mine, those representatives are all working miners. In the turmoil of these times, those local officials were often forced out when they didn't seem militant enough. When some circle of militants took over a mine local, it often led to wildcat strikes as the workers took on the many accumulated injustices of the company.

to punishment for "contempt of court"—fines, jail, and firings.

After the long awful corrupt decade of the 1950s, coal miners rediscovered their solidarity. It had something to do with the new upturn in coal production, and it had to do with fresh blood—the arrival of the 1960s and those Vietnam vets.

West Virginia sent more soldiers to Vietnam (per capita) than almost any other state, and more of those draftees came back AWOL, as deserters, than any other state. They brought with them a rebelliousness from that ugly war that didn't tolerate well the insults of old-school bosses or the reckless swap of human life for profit.

If someone was done wrong, he often only had to pour out his water at the mine—a symbol that he was going home. And one by one, the others would pour out their water too. At least that's how it worked at the more militant mines.

Illegal strikes of this kind, initiated by the miners themselves, were called wildcats. And at some mines, the grievances were so many and the solidarity so tight that the mine struck often—sometimes weekly—for months and years on end.

At those militant mines, the coal companies were soon able to quickly get court injunctions and restraining orders against walkouts. They threatened to bankrupt local treasuries with fines (so that the miners would not be able to pay elected safety committeemen for time away from work). Increasingly, they threatened individual local officials with contempt of court and jail.

As these threats came down, the workers would go stand in front of *neighboring* mines, calling them out too. There had already been several area-wide strikes spread in this way, starting with the walkout over the Black Lung disease in 1969. By the mid-70s, huge wildcats would shut down the whole industry, over and over, in long weeks of intense conflict.

The backbone of larger strikes was roving pickets—teams of militants who stopped work at neighboring mines. Sneaking in to scab, working when the rest were out, was seen as the act of a coward and a backstabber.

There was something straightforward and heartfelt in how most miners viewed this: If someone asked for help, you didn't say no. If someone set up a picket line you didn't cross. If a scab-hearted few didn't understand, well that's what beating and bullets were for.

As we walked out over the gas rationing, the workers tried to dream up a way to skirt the legalities. We were not striking, they said, we simply did not have enough gas to get to work. Or, they said, this was not a strike anyway, but a "protest." And the hope was that by packaging our work stoppage that way, we would make it harder for the companies to get injunctions.

I thought that was unlikely, but no one was asking me.

This picket meeting drew militants who knew they were going into a dangerous spot. And looking over things, you just have to say: West Virginia coal miners are some roughneck boys. They were pretty fearless, and a lot of them just liked to fight. They have accumulated anger over a thousand slights and outrages they have experienced at the hands of the coal operators. And many of them just believe deeply in sticking together, backing each other up—in a beer joint brawl, or in a struggle between classes.

This is rural America where people come well armed. Gina and I used to laugh a bit remembering how, in the wake of the SDS breakup, many of the radicals would debate, soberly, the important question of when a revolutionary movement should "initiate" armed struggle. Well here, in West Virginia, *everything* was armed.¹⁰

Down here many of the workers simply had guns with them all the time—a pistol stuck in a pocket or a glove box, a shotgun in a rack across the rear window. The strikes here were armed strikes, the meetings were

armed meetings, the picketing was armed picketing, even the picnics were armed picnics.

This had a certain undeniable effect. In intense moments, people were often very careful of their words. And the local police were very careful not to drive up suddenly on miners' picket lines—because that was a good way to die. (The town cops had often known these same boys all their lives, and everyone knew where you lived.)

If someone wanted to shut us miners up, well, they had to come in numbers and come "loaded for bear." There were lots of forces—backward workers, company foremen, state police, authorities at all levels, even FBI, who knows—that wished us ill. But the crews we sent out that night were ready. They knew each other and the terrain, and they were quite formidable.

The Unexpected Color of Pickets

I was surprised to see that the bypass meeting was all white. This was not what I expected.

History remembers that the miners union had (from its beginnings in the late 1890s) always organized Black and white together—locals had not been segregated like the rest of the union movement. I had met several older African-American miners active as leaders in the initial 1960s Black Lung movement. I knew that Black retirees and widows had been active, at least in some areas, during the 23-day 1969 Black Lung strike—the first wildcat strike to spread widely across the coalfields.

But here on the Welch bypass, I didn't see any Black workers at all, even though the county had several large mines with a significantly African-American workforces.

The revolutionary movement Gina and I came out of had been marked deeply by the militancy and consciousness of Black people. She and I had dropped out of school and spend the last years working as white supporters of the Black Panther Party. We had helped organize a collective that reached out to white working class youth with militant anti-racist politics—and we had then joined the Revolutionary Union (RU) which promised to carry out revolutionary prepara-

10. SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) was, one of the major radical organizations of the 1960s. As the student activists of SDS radicalized in the late 1960s, and as the organization's core increasingly identified with Maoism and communism, they dissolved the loose organization after sharp factional struggles and build several early communist organizations, often with the intention of taking their new politics to the working class. Some forces around SDS thought that the U.S. might be moving into a revolutionary situation. One current argued for immediately launching an armed struggle within the U.S., and soon broke away to wage a campaign of symbolic attacks on icons of U.S. imperialism and war.

tions among working people on a serious, systematic and nationally-organized basis.

Our small RU project gathering in West Virginia assumed from the beginning that the militant core of the wildcat strike movements would, naturally, attract the most politically radical and conscious workers. Our new communist movement had, at that time, embraced a saying that “Black workers take the lead”—meaning that we also assumed that those active workers would include (above all) the younger Black workers.

So the fact that this first bypass meeting was all-white was the kind of surprise that rocked you back a bit. It was the first inkling we had that the most militantly *active* miners were not necessarily the same as the most politically *advanced* miners. And it would take quite a while to dispel some stubborn preconceptions and assimilate the implications of what we were seeing.

Part 2: The First Picket

On the bypass that night, I didn’t at first notice anyone I knew. It was a bit awkward coming alone, and standing at the side looking around.

Then, to my relief, I saw Larry, a white guy I knew from Keystone. He was with the boys he grew up with farther east, near the town of Bluefield in Mercer County. I went out with his crew of friends that first night.

The Mercer boys and I rode in a small convoy down off the Welch bypass, east along the Tug Fork, past my house, and on to where the Eureka Holler opens up toward the south.

Our little line of cars moved in the darkness, up Eureka Holler. And there, where the flat bottom land starts to climb and the valley narrows, a small dirt road went up, off to the right, through the steep wooded slope. It was the road that led to the Eckman mine.

We simply unloaded on the main road, right where that dirt road turned off. From a nearby ditch, we gathered handfuls of mud, carefully smeared our license plates, and then just waited for the first shift of the week to turn up.

The first miners to arrive after the weekend, late on Sunday night, are the pump-men and those union men who inspect the mine faces for methane gas. And after them, one by one, the carloads of miners arrive.

Our picket crew arrayed itself simply. Five of us stood in the road, and one man approached each car, and explained that the whole county was out, that we were protesting the gas shortages and the Governor’s quarter tank rule. And that as long as one man didn’t have enough gas, then none of us did, and we were all staying at the house.

And many of the workers were openly supportive, and certainly all of them turned around without question. To those who said “it’s about time,” we explained that pickets were meeting at the Welch bypass each night, to send out teams of pickets as needed.

Protected behind our line of parked cars, five or six of us stood as visible backup, just watching the whole scene, ready for trouble.

After a couple hours, there were no more cars, and the valley settled into the silence of a forest at night. We piled into our cars and dispersed, after making arrangements to meet again in the morning for the day shift.

At the beginning of a strike you had to be there at each shift, so all the workers knew what was going on—so you could look each of them in the eye.

Home, Briefly

I barely slept that night, filling in Gina on all the details, and going over what I had said and done, and getting her advice.

I have to admit that in the excitement of all this, I really did not understand then all the ways that we were impacted by the way work and struggle here were centered among men.

Gina and I didn’t just have an *ideological* commitment to the equality of men and women—we had always been close partners in our previous years of political work. And we worked within radical circles that encouraged constantly digging at the habits and assumptions of male chauvinism.

But here in the West Virginia coalfields, life was strictly divided by sex roles. Only men worked in the mines. The women here sometimes found jobs in the schools, the hospitals or stores. Really, most women were confined to domestic chores and raising children in small ingrown coal camps. Even at parties in people’s homes, men and women would often separate off—each grouped in their own room—having very different conversations, based on very different experiences.

In ways I would not see for a long time, this impacted us communists too. Here I was—in the middle of all this exciting work—working in the mine every day surrounded by both danger and companionship,

and now jumping with both feet into the picket movement. Meanwhile, in ways completely out of character, Gina was watching a great deal of this from the outside, often stuck in the house with a new kid.

She was, of course, alive and active as always—making new friends in the community where we lived, seeking out the local Black Lung organization, and so on. But as long as our organization saw the struggle of the miners themselves as our “center of gravity,” the female comrades were often watching that work from the outside—especially during the waves of major strikes.

The male supremacy of the surrounding society impacted our own organizational dynamics (and even our marriages) in unexpected and unintended ways. And, it must be said, it affected the outlooks of male communists who saw themselves doing “the important work” at the center of the action.

In any case, after talking excitedly through the night, Gina and I separated. I went out to picket that day shift at Eckman. And she drove north to meet with our organization, to bring them a report, and discuss our efforts to help spread this strike in new areas.

A Reckless Morning in Eureka Holler

That next morning, when I pulled up near the Eckman mine, there was no else one else there to picket. That wouldn’t surprise anyone; I’m always early.

I just sat there in my car, looking up through dark forest at the blinking lights of the Eckman mine. The sun slowly started to brush the trees highest on the mountain. The smell of damp meadow grass poured in through my open windows. It was beautiful and calming.

Suddenly in the distance I saw headlights coming up the bottomland from the main road. The first car had arrived. The other pickets, I thought. As the car reached where I was parked, it suddenly turned off up the dirt road, heading for the mine. Minutes later a few more cars rolled up the valley, and also turned off, climbing that dirt road toward the mine parking lot.

Hmmm, I thought. This is no good. They can’t all be foremen. If Eckman’s union miners are already in the parking lot by the time the other pickets arrived... how would all that get sorted out?

So, largely on impulse, I just decided to start the picketing. I rolled out of my car and stood, alone, in the middle of the hardtop road. I was thinking, assuming, that the rest of my picket crew would arrive any moment.

And, within a few minutes, a pair of headlights were heading my way. The car rolled up with three guys inside. Seeing me they cranked down their window. I leaned in and repeated our short rap from the night before: We had met in Welch on Sunday, and the whole country was out protesting the gas shortage. As long as one miner didn't have gas, none of us had enough gas to go to work.

They nodded, taking it all in, rolled up their window and made a u-turn. But instead of driving back out the holler and going home, they pulled over about a hundred yards away, turned off their lights and waited.

A second car drove up. Same thing. I explained the protest was on, and there was no work today. They made a u-turn, and pulled in alongside the first car.

The traffic picked up, cars were coming rapidly, and five or six cars were soon lined up in front of me, as I leaned into one window after another. The sun was really coming up. The fog was dispersing. And down at that wide spot in the shoulder, there were now ten cars, and a meeting of miners was happening. And I could tell, by the way they were looking over my way, that they were deciding what to do with me.

You have to look at it through their eyes: They had not heard of any strike or protest. They were simply coming to work on a Monday morning and a boy, who none of them knew, barely old enough to shave, was standing there in the road telling them to go home. You could be fired for missing work. Your paycheck would come up short. The local could be fined for striking. And all they had was my word.

I started getting worried that some of them would simply decide to drive on in to work. And because I was determined to stand in their way, I could imagine two or three different ways things could end badly.

What to do?

I decided to change the plan. I hardened my face a bit, and walked up to the next car. As the window

rolled down, I leaned in aggressively and barked "Listen here, motherfucker. This county is on strike. There's no work for you here. You can turn around quick and go home, or you can join our picket meeting over here. Or, you can try to scab and get what's coming."

I waved my hand vaguely at the dozen cars gathered on the road shoulder. Thinking those men were my backup, and hearing my tone, this brother in the car just nodded sharply, rolled up his window and drove straight down the holler for home. I went to the next car and barked the same threat. He too turned around smartly and left the scene. And the next four or five cars followed, all heading home without stopping to debate or question.

I was 21 years old then, but had been a pretty hardcore Maoist for a while. I knew Mao's warning not to bluff or strike a pose to intimidate. I just assumed this moment called for an exception.

After seeing that long line of cars start to go home, the fifteen or twenty men gathered by the side of the road loaded up and headed home too—leaving me much relieved and alone once again at the entrance to Eckman. I never did find out what happened to the other pickets.

It was only my second time out, and it had almost gone terribly wrong. I had been a bit naïve and reckless.

At the same time, the incident had a positive side.

I was a complete outsider trying to be active within an illegal movement that was built around tight small-town friendships. This story of my one-man picketing made the rounds. There was some good-natured teasing, but also the beginnings of a certain acceptance among the other pickets that would prove valuable as things got a whole lot tougher.

Part 3: Injunctions and State Police

Over the first days of that week, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, the strike spread quickly. The newspapers soon reported that over 20,000 miners were out. The work stoppage pushed out of McDowell County into the surrounding areas, until much of southern West Virginia, the heart of the unionized coalfields, was affected.

Each night we gathered at the Welch bypass, to hear any rumors of mines or groups of scabs planning to return to work. And each night, we would send out squads of pickets to shut down the locals who would not stay out on their own.

The strike was, pretty obviously, a direct challenge to the Governor and state government. The walkouts were in direct violation of the national coal contract. The state's economy was at a standstill.

The militancy of the miners even inspired other protests against the gas rationing. For example, in the tiny town of War, deep in the maze of western McDowell valleys, the mayor had (at gunpoint I heard) hijacked a gasoline tanker truck passing through town, and was Robin Hood-like handing out free gas to residents.

So faced with all that, the machinery of law and repression started whirring and screeching. The court system started issuing injunctions against one union local after another, demanding that they go back to work, requiring them to show why they should not be held in contempt of court, and threatening a series of heavyhanded measures (including fines and possible jail for local officials). Every night you could turn on

the TV for local news, and suddenly there came a long list of "public service announcements" announcing injunctions against one set of miner after another ordering them to return back to work at the next available shift. Pickets were officially assumed to be conducting criminal activity—in contempt of court orders. The press denounced the strike as illegal (which was true) and said it was based on the raw threats from a small fringe (which I don't believe was true).

There were heated debates within the state government and coal establishment about how to suppress the rebellion. I remember hearing about one exchange in the state capital, where some official demanded that the National Guard be called out against us. A voice of caution asked what percentage of the National Guard was coal miners. The report gave me a passing fantasy of the state's tanks and soldiers "coming over" to us—since, obviously, the vast majority of the state's National Guardsmen were also coal miners.

The United Miner Workers (UMW) apparatus at the national level joined in denouncing the wildcat and (I suspect) in some areas the mid-level officials played some role in encouraging scabbing or identifying ring-leaders for the authorities.

And then, as his main move, the Governor deployed a small army of the West Virginia State Police into MacDowell County—to impose a form of martial law on the southern part of the state. Their plan was simple: Several hundred State Police took over the Welch National Guard armory—as their base of operations. State Police were teamed up with state mine inspectors—so the cops could find the many, often-hidden mine entrances and back roads. And they then fanned out across the area to find our roving pickets, to identify the active miners, to serve them injunctions and arrest them.

In reality these State Police carried out a suspension of basic civil rights. Any time men gathered in public in groups of three or more they were subject to surveillance and searches by these roaming cops. License numbers were taken down, names were recorded, searches were conducted for weapons, and increasingly the brothers started to be arrested and taken into the Welch armory for interrogations.

The Fight Local by Local

All of these repressive measures, unfolding quickly over a week or so, had a sharp impact on the struggle. For one thing, each local was ordered by the UMWA leadership to hold meetings that first weekend and officially order their men back to work Sunday night.

The results of those meetings varied greatly, depending on the political complexion of the workforce and their local officials.

In the more militant locals, such meetings were a chance to consolidate the ranks behind the strike, hear out problems, identify waverers, and (at the same time) gain a bit of legal cover. When local officials at mines like Maitland or Capels “ordered” their men back to work, there was an obvious wink involved—since everyone knew these same men were organizing the now-statewide strike from behind the scenes.

At the more conservative mines, like Keystone where I worked, the local meeting was a very different affair. Keystone’s grey cinderblock union hall, a short distance from the mine, was packed inside and out with about 150 men. Some (not all) of our local mine committeemen were encouraging miners to go into work on any shift where pickets did not appear. At the meeting, some of the most outspoken among the committeemen openly attacked the “radicals” who “keep honest men from working.” They argued for obeying the law, upholding the contract and following the back-to-work orders of both the judges and the national Union officials. And after that opening, a debate erupted over whether it was simply too dangerous to scab while the rest of the county was still on strike.¹¹

When I rose to defend the strike and its demands, it was (to say the least) quite controversial—since this anti-militant politics had had a tight hold on many of the older workers and the local union leadership. Some

11. We had entered the mines shortly after a new reform union leadership, the Miners for Democracy (MFRD) had overturned the murderous and corrupt union regime of Tony Boyle (1972). The new Union president Arnold Miller had been a genuine rank-and-file leader within the Black Lung movement but, to the great disappointment of the miners themselves, he would quickly be absorbed into the existing institutional structure of collective bargaining—and prove as hostile to militancy as the rest of the labor movement’s officialdom.

of this local’s officials (a little clique with their hands on the money) were determined not to let circles of militants gain a foothold. The argument got heated—and almost came to blows. Because so few others dared speak openly for the strike, it was hard for me to gauge where most of the workers actually stood.

In any case, after this wave of local union meetings, it became clearer *which* mines would require continuous picketing.

Clearly, this was a specific tactical plan by the authorities: They wanted the more conservative mines to force us to picket, and then they planned to unleash the state police to identify and persecute our hard-core activists—hoping to break the back of the movement. Once one or two mines were successfully back to work, it would have encouraged the more backward or financially desperate men to scab, and quickly end the strike.

And, just as clearly, this created a real tension among the miners: The militants thought that everyone knew the strike was on—so if there was still a need for us to run risks, it was only because of a few scab-hearted men, encouraged by corrupt union officials. They were increasingly frustrated and furious that they should risk jail every night just because some selfish cliques were determined to break the strike.

This frustration was focused at a few specific mines—like Gary #2 or Keystone #1—larger mines that tended to have an older workforce, and more outspokenly conservative local leadership.

Imagining Communist Work

We had at that time a small circle of communist activists in southern West Virginia, sent there in 1972 by the Revolutionary Union, one of several national new communist organizations that had emerged from the radical movements fighting for Black Liberation and an end to the Vietnam War.

We didn’t have much to guide us. We were trying something relatively new. And yet for inspiration, we had Mao’s concepts like mass line. Meanwhile, for theoretical detail, we generally reached further back, to the early days of the communist movement.

The RU's initial concept was to bring light into the struggles the workers were already waging. It was an idea lifted from an early passage by Lenin. "Light," in the enlightenment language of the Russian revolution, meant revolutionary ideas and socialist class consciousness.¹²

12. In the fall of 1972, as we were living out of sight, waiting to move down to West Virginia, Gina and I were instructed to study a passage known as B1, from Lenin's 1895 notes for a draft party program). <http://www.marx2mao.com/Lenin/DEP95.html>:

"The Party's activity must consist in promoting the workers' class struggle. The Party's task is not to concoct some fashionable means of helping the workers, but to join up with the workers' movement, to bring light into it, to assist the workers in the struggle they themselves have already begun to wage. The Party's task is to uphold the interests of the workers and to represent those of the entire working class movement... The program says that this assistance must consist, firstly, in developing the workers' class-consciousness. We have already spoken of how the workers' struggle against the employers becomes the class struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie... The workers' class-consciousness means the workers' understanding that the only way to improve their conditions and to achieve their emancipation is to conduct a struggle against the capitalist and factory-owner class created by the big factories. Further, the workers' class-consciousness means their understanding that the interests of all the workers of any particular country are identical, that they all constitute one class, separate from all the other classes in society. Finally, the class-consciousness of the workers means the workers' understanding that to achieve their aims they have to work to influence affairs of state, just as the landlords and the capitalists did, and are continuing to do now.

"Every strike concentrates all the attention and all the efforts of the workers on some particular aspect of the conditions under which the working class lives. Every strike gives rise to discussions about these conditions, helps the workers to appraise them, to understand what capitalist oppression consists in the particular case, and what means can be employed to combat this oppression. Every strike enriches the experience of the entire working class. If the strike is successful it shows them what a strong force working-class unity is, and impels others to make use of their comrades' success. If it is not successful, it gives rise to discussions about the causes of the failure and to the search for better methods of struggle. This transition of the workers to the steadfast struggle for their vital needs, the fight for concessions, for improved living conditions, wages and working hours, now begun all over Russia, means that the Russian workers are making tremendous progress, and that is why the attention of the Social-Democratic Party and all class-conscious workers should be concentrated mainly on this struggle, on its promotion."

There was an aspect of "bringing in" consciousness from outside—the "light" of anti-racism, women's liberation, internationalism, socialism and communist revolution that we had brought with us into the coalfields. And there was an aspect of "bringing out" the lessons that were supposedly there to extract within the workers' own experience. As their struggles produced controversy and repression, victory or defeat, their experiences would (we assumed) leave them open to a process of learning new, deeper, and rather radical political insights—especially about the "class nature of the state," the possibility of finding allies among other strata of the people, the importance of a broader internationalist view of our class struggle, and ultimately, the question of how to actually end the constant outrages of capitalism... meaning socialist revolution.¹³

In reality there proved to be rather significant differences over what we were doing—both between those of us on the ground in West Virginia and between different factions within the RU's leadership.

Gina and I had a view of winning over a section of the militant coal miners to the revolutionary move-

13. This concept of "bringing light into the struggles the workers were already waging" was soon criticized within the RU and, I believe for good reason. The problem was the formula's fixation with the "struggles the workers were already waging." As my Gas Protest story reveals, that is too narrow a framework and too limited a focus for revolutionary work. And in fact, many of the struggles that working people need to engage are rather different from the ones that they, themselves, will spontaneously start to wage. Clearly the miners were justified in launching this major movement of resistance. They were right to fight the injunctions and defend their right to strike—as repression grew over the 1970s. But the goals of liberation also require that struggle be built around the racist mistreatment of Black and immigrant people, around unjust wars, around the brutality of police, the liberation of women, and the ugly social conservatism of traditional "family values." Such necessary, more explicitly political struggles are essential means of developing broader revolutionary consciousness and organization among the people. And *they* often have to be creatively *initiated* by communists and more consciously radical people. They don't arise simply by bringing "light" into "the struggles the workers were already waging." Shortly after the 1974 strike, the RU's circles in the coalfield started to develop a two-track approach—where we continued to work deeply in the circles of militants waging the wildcat strikes, and also started to, independently, initiate various politically radical campaigns and struggles, that allowed for much more explicitly revolutionary work among the people—and not *just* among the employed male coal miners.

ment that had arisen, mainly among Black people, over the course of the 1960s. I thought there might be a second wave of 1968-style radical upheaval, perhaps in the early 1980s. And I thought that if we did our organizing well, we might be able to bring much larger sections of workers into the mix over time—perhaps making an actual socialist revolution possible. This was consciously a concept of “building off a 1905 for a coming 1917.”

Looking back, I can now see that BT (who helped initiate our coalfield project) had a significantly different concept: He saw coal miners as *already* the “most advanced section of the working class.” He saw in the wave of early wildcats over Black Lung as proof of *already-existing* “class consciousness.”

BT thought the miners were playing a special, leading role in the working class as a whole (and would continue that in whatever came next). He sometimes hinted that there was something special about miners historically and internationally—a special consciousness rooted in their difficult conditions.

His conception pretty openly confused (or equated) the militant us-against-them trade union solidarity common among miners with an openness to revolutionary political views. And within the RU generally there was a related notion that the most *active and militant* workers were also naturally the most politically “advanced.” We assumed that the workers operating at the core of the wildcat strike picket movements were most likely to become active supporters and organizers of a coming revolutionary movement for socialism.

Any radical project among coal miners had to face some obvious questions: How stubborn would the religious and social conservatism of the workers turn out to be? Would their picket militancy help “eat up” religious fundamentalism and patriotism when exposed to our revolutionary politics?

And the original, somewhat naïve, assumption was that such problems could be, relatively quickly, brushed aside. There was explicitly in the RU a saying that “taking Marxism-Leninism to the working class is bringing it home.” We were to discover that this home was

well-stocked in other ideologies, and the workers were relatively attached to them.¹⁴

But that discovery, and those experiences, still lay ahead of us when, in 1974, we dove into this Gas Protest.

A Flyer: Controversy Inside and Out

The RU had chosen to disperse its few cadre widely across southern West Virginia. The nearest comrades were an hour-and-a-half drive from where we lived. I was the only comrade employed in the mines of McDowell county. So, day to day, Gina and I were very much on our own.

Since this Gas Protest was centered in “our” county, Gina and I had a special responsibility to develop ties within that picket movement. We were mainly just learning the lay of the land and identifying who we would be seeking out (after the strike ended). Many of the strike leaders we met would be among the first circles involved in the Miners Right to Strike Committee that the RU would soon initiate.

At the same time, we were impatient to start injecting larger political lessons and ideas into this strike’s charged atmosphere. So Gina and I were excited when “the org” produced a leaflet within the first days of the strike. That seemed an ideal way to start acting *as communists* among the workers. It was the opening shot of our public work as a revolutionary organization—an announcement of revolutionary presence and politics—with all the attention and controversy that this would eventually bring with it.

The leaflet (which I may have buried in my files somewhere) described the justice of this strike. It refuted various lies circulating in the local media. It then went into a lengthy discussion of lessons we workers could draw from what was happening—about the oil embargo, the use of courts by the capitalists, and so on.

I have to admit my heart sank a bit when I saw *how wordy* it was. Our communist movement was always

14. Linc and Me: On the Material Basis of Incorrect Ideas by Mike Ely, on the Kasama site. <http://mikeely.wordpress.com/2008/02/28/understanding-the-material-basis-of-in-correct-ideas/>

long-winded, and its fetish for words would only get worse. The flyer's language was also stilted. I remember complaining that the strange expression "money bags" was used to describe the capitalist class. BT explained to me (with some pride) that this sentence had been lifted whole from a letter by Lenin.

So, as you can hear, the leaflet was a bit primitive—mixing important arguments with mechanical imitation and dogmatism.

To be honest, my reaction to the flyer also had to do with the pull of being so deeply involved in this strike. Coal miners could read, but generally not well. Complex arguments about capitalism would limit the flyer's audience and circulation—i.e. the very things that brought "light" into this struggle could make this leaflet less effective as an instrument for the strike itself. Now as always, there was a sharp tension between our work as communist revolutionaries and our work as enthusiastic activists of a particular struggle.

Still, it was exciting to have this first communist leaflet in our hands. It was something new and needed. How new it was came out in ways we never anticipated.

The Argument *Against* Explanations

Gina and I rolled up to one of the evening picket meetings which got smaller later as the week went on. We simply handed the leaflet to those standing around, saying it was something we had gotten from friends "up around Beckley" (which was true, if not the essential truth).

Several people read the opening, nodded approvingly, and tucked a copy away in their back pockets. No, we protested, there were lots more here in our trunk. The idea was to hand them out as we picketed, so that more people could understand what the protest was over and why their own activism were needed.

We had come from a world of campus politics, and cold mornings selling the *Black Panther* and other revolutionary newspapers at factory gates in the Midwest. The idea of flyers was (to put it mildly) second nature. But this was a much less literate world, where speaking face to face was how things were done.

One miner suggested that we might have the Welch paper print the statement—which was much

more possible than I understood. Others said that they knew people who would want this, and who would circulate this, and started taking bundles of the flyer out of our trunk.

But then came the real controversy. The crew from Capels arrived at the bypass, and they instantly had a real dislike of the whole idea of the flyers. It was not (as I might have expected) over the communist radicalism of our (read: Lenin's) argument. It was over the *very idea* of telling workers *what the strike was over*.

Now, the vibe of the various crews was very different.

The Maitand men were, like their leader DD, very sober and considered. They came off as "established," like family men, and had a bit of caution in the midst of leading this whole rather daring adventure.

The Gary #10 boys were younger and obviously wilder, and linked to wide circles of friends their age throughout the surrounding counties. Some of them would disappear for a day into nearby Wyoming or Mercer county and show up that night with ten or fifteen new pickets ready for action.

But the men from Capels were more like a biker gang—there's no other way to say it. Over the course of the strike, I just got the vibe that there was something sleazy about them. Not the workers of that whole mine, of course, an older operation on the west side of Welch. But the crew that ran that union local had a thuggish feel.

The Capels crew was led by Peewee, a squint-eyed, rail-skinny guy, who had alternated between being a notorious drunk and a spirit-filled Holiness preacher. He was a hustler and eagerly promoted himself as "the leader" of this Gas Protest with almost daily statements to the local press (all while DD, Young Hatter and others preferred to lead from the shadows). And Peewee's prominence wasn't that great for this strike, since the man had a reputation.

In any case, the Capels crew was *not* interested in bringing flyers with them on any picket lines.

"Why in the world do we need to tell those men what the strike is over?" one of them said. "All they need to know is that there is a picket standing on the road, and a brother is asking them for help."

I argued that it was important to put forward strong arguments that people could take up and embrace. And then the argument got to core of the matter.

The Capels guy came back:

“What you don’t understand is this: most men, almost all of them, are scabs in their hearts, cowards and sucks. You can explain this strike to them all day long, but the only way they will stay out of work is if it’s clear that we will kick their ass if they crawl in. And if you start explaining this-and-that to them, they will just get the notion that they have some *right* to decide if they should strike or not, and that would end it all.”

So there were two approaches running strong in our picket movement. The guys from some mines were eager to use the nightly picket lines to explain what the strike was over—while those influenced by the “Capels line” were a bit more heavy-handed.

Fishing at Midnight

One evening, DD called me into the backseat of his car. He explained that his local had now been hit by injunctions, and that he (as local president) had issued a public back-to-work order. Everyone at the mine knew it was insincere, of course, but if no picket line appeared at his mine the court would take it as evidence that he was secretly leading his miners to stay out on strike.

In short, he needed me to go picket his mine, at least one shift change. I had started in this strike as an outsider. And this was a sign of trust.

Another miner, Charlie, volunteered to go with me, and so we waited on that bridge at the usual time for the midnight shift. DD sat down the road, where he could watch but not be seen.

There was some real danger of arrest and jail. The state police were roaming the highways at night looking for pickets, and this mine sat just across the river from the main road. Because Charlie lived nearby, we wore bandanas to avoid identification. Charlie also carried a fishing pole. Lots of guys were doing that while picketing—in case of arrest, they planned to later claim they were “just fishing.”

So there we stood, pretending to fish at midnight, wearing bandanas, on that one lane bridge, with only the river sounds as company.

Maitland was one of the more militant mines, so none of the miners showed up for work. Only the pump men went in (who by mutual agreement keep the mine from flooding during strikes).

About half an hour after midnight, we got a bit tense when a lone car drove up on the bridge heading straight for us. Charlie leaned over the bridge railing, tending to his fishing line. I walked over to the car. Through the glass I saw the startled face of an old man. He was a bit drunk. He fumbled around, then cranked down his window—and, to my surprise, handed me a fistful of dollar bills. With my face wrapped in that handkerchief on that lonely road, he just assumed we were bandits trying to rob him—or perhaps jack his car. He was hoping his few bucks would satisfy us. Laughing, I handed him back the money, and explained we were there to serve the people, not rob them. He waved and drove off.

When Charlie and I arrived to meet up with DD, he was sitting slumped in his car with a wide-brimmed hat pulled over most of his face. His voice was low, almost a whisper as he spoke, and as I slid into the back seat alongside him, I saw his hand was actually shaking. I was bewildered at his emotional state. DD was always so calm—a leader by virtue of judgment.

Thinking about it later, I put together the pressure he was under—and suddenly confronted, much more clearly, the issues of life and death unfolding around me. I knew the dangers we were under of course, and (as communists) we had a sense of responsibility to the people, both here and around the world. But, inexperienced and a bit intoxicated with the excitement, I had not yet learned to read that larger chessboard on which moves were being made.

The state police were hammering our pickets hard. Numbers of men were being held for trial. DD and the strike’s other main leaders was targeted with injunctions—threatened with jail by the police and judges. And there was no hint from Charleston that the Governor was about to bend. The state was slowly tightening its grip on us. And DD knew well what a defeat could mean, for the miners generally, for the men at his mine, and (I’m sure) for himself, his personal hopes and his family.

It was sobering, and reminded me sharply, again, that real lives and hopes were in the balance. Our enemy was not a some distant abstraction but a very active malevolent force aiming straight for the organized core of this movement.

Part 4: Things Start to Crack

By the time the strike was two weeks old, the situation was incredibly tense. The state authorities were determined to crush the strike by hitting our picket movement hard. Miners broadly wanted to win, but as the days passed more workers felt desperate to return to work. That gave a new wind to the more conservative, law-abiding, and fearful among the workers.

Bucket or Suitcase!

The Welch papers started highlighting what they called “the bucket or suitcase movement.” They featured a rally held in Keystone where some miners’ wives were (supposedly) speaking out against the strike, and calling their husbands cowards for being intimidated by “a few radicals.” They showed a picture of someone waving a suitcase—since this supposed “movement” called on women to present their husbands with an ultimatum: take your bucket of food and water (to go to work), or take the suitcase of your clothes (and get kicked out of the house). Women were encouraged to put a lunch bucket and a suitcase side by side next to the front door.

It was, as you can imagine, hype orchestrated by the mine management at Keystone #1. But the fact that anyone *at all* felt emboldened to speak out to the press in this way says something about the climate at Keystone.

Behind the scenes, local union officials were encouraging men to confront pickets, saying “our mine” didn’t support the strike, and were being prevented from working by “outsiders” (meaning the pickets who were coming to Keystone from outside this little town).

We have to dig into the fact that there was a sharply racial element involved—in ways that were very startling for me and the rest of the communists. We had all learned much of our politics from the civil rights movements and the Black liberation struggles. So it was surprising for us to have stumbled onto a spot where, for various local reasons, Black people were generally alienated from most visible struggle.

I need to say this clearly: The fact that Black people were not represented among the most *active* miners hardly meant that they were not among the most politically *advanced* in this area. There were, as we are going to discuss, some real, historically specific reasons why the wildcat strike movement was disconnected from the Black communities. But, as we were going to learn when our communist work took up support for liberation struggles in Africa and as we organized to oppose the anti-textbook campaign of the early Religious Right—there was a real audience our revolutionary politics in the Black communities of this area, especially among the youth and the younger Black miners.

It would take us a while to understand this—and adjust our organization's work to identify and attract the more politically *advanced*. Certainly, developments within this Great Gas Protest shook some initial preconceptions hard.

Keystone's Outlaw History

Keystone #1, like several older mines in McDowell, had opened just as World War 1 stopped immigration from Europe. And so, with the oceans closed, the new coal companies had drawn much of their workforce from the plantation areas of the Deep South.

In other words, there was a strip of mines in McDowell, from Northfork Holler to Gary Holler, that had employed African Americans from their beginnings. There was a band of African-American coal camps, settled next to the white ones—and the town of Keystone was the largest of them.

Keystone had a raucous and even bawdy history. Some coal company towns had been set up as straight-arrow communities, with company churches and company inspections of housekeeping. But Keystone had emerged as a wide open town of (so-called) vice fueled

by the Prohibition-era moonshine. It once boasted of the world's longest-running poker game and the world-famous Cinder Bottom red light district.

By the time I started work there in 1973, the town of Keystone was just a shadow of its former self. A small housing project had replaced the brothel row of Cinder Bottom. The young boys who had run numbers and done errands for prostitutes now worked as old men alongside me in the main mine. And the remnants of that old town brotherhood dominated our local union—they still imagined a connection to the 1940s world of gangsters and saw themselves as major players in this town. And they didn't mind speaking their mind—to the press or to young white hell-raisers trying to shut down "their" mine.

There were reasons that the older Black miners weren't so eager to raise hell over (what they saw as) minor grievances: Eastern Associated Coal was one of the only companies that had ever hired Black miners in significant numbers. They had even promoted a few Black foremen. And Black workers often felt that if they were fired they would not easily find work at most other mines.

So, for a number of reasons, that layer of older Black miners at Keystone #1 (and similar groups at the other heavily-Black mines) just didn't like hot-tempered young rednecks telling them when to work and when to stay home. Meanwhile the younger Black miners, who were often quite influenced by the sixties, never did move to overthrow the old clique—as had happened in so many of the militant mines.

There was, as I mentioned, a real tension building:

The pickets were in danger whenever they went out, and all the local unions were under pressure to require picketing. The more conservative locals started actively encouraging their members to show up at each shift change, and urged them to work if there were no picket lines. And the militants on the bypass were becoming furious over this—and over having trouble with the same few mines over and over.

A Darkly Revealing Moment

It came to a head one night, as we gathered to send out pickets.

Our numbers were dwindling. Some militants had pulled back. Some faced personal injunctions. Some had court dates. Some just thought there should not be any more need for picketing.

As quiet conversations picked over rumors of a “back to work” push, a car squealed up among us. Two men tumbled out, badly beaten. They had been pistol-whipped while picketing at one of the larger U.S. Steel mines in Gary Holler. Three Black miners had confronted them there, pulled guns, hurt them pretty bad... and then just walked in to work. The faces of the pickets were bloody.

A silence fell over the crowd.

And then, suddenly, a voice shouted out: “That’s it. Let’s just go teach those n*ggers a lesson.”

To my horror, a second voice shouted out: “Let’s go down to that joint in Keystone and burn it out. These n*ggers need a lesson.”

The meeting shattered into a dozen conversations. Some, perhaps a quarter of the pickets, were shouting agreement. It included Larry who I knew from work, and had already been in tight spots with.

But quite a few others were muttering in obvious disagreement. One man, over my left shoulder said out loud, “If it goes this way, I’m out.”

What had been a strike meeting had become, in the blink of an eye, a debate over launching a racist attack. The outcome clearly hung in the balance. Everything could come unraveled—and I don’t just mean that strike.

I jumped up on the back of a pickup, and shouted as loud as I could: “No!”

Everyone’s eyes turned on me, and I suddenly knew what to say. I don’t remember the exact words, but I said that if we allow ourselves to be divided in this way, we had no future and our cause had no justice.

I said: “I’m going to go down to Keystone, to that poolhall, with anyone who will go with me. We will warn the people there and stand with them.”

Anyone who wanted to attack Cinder Bottom’s beer joint would have to come through us.

With that, the moment passed. The strike leaders stepped up, and started loudly organizing pickets.

There was no more talk that night of raiding the Black community.

As soon as the picket meeting broke up, I immediately called my RU leadership. It took a while for us to connect, and discuss the events.

This was obviously a huge development—and one where we communists had a special responsibility to act.

The next day, BT dropped everything and and drove down with a couple of others from Pinnacle Creek to Keystone. There, at the mouth of Cinder Bottom, was the town’s main hangout. I don’t remember why I didn’t go with them that day, but I wasn’t there. They went into the poolhall and explained to everyone what had happened at the bypass the night before. They convinced a number of the regulars to come with them that night to the bypass, to talk these things through and to clear the air. None of the men who came were even miners, and it took obvious courage for them to step into that meeting above Welch.

It helped make that moment pass—but the underlying contradictions were still raw, and intensifying. And in *our* work, cracks were appearing in the assumption that miners represented some special advanced section of the working class, or that strike militancy was an automatic marker for deeper class consciousness.

Part 5: Bullets of Hidden Gunmen

Two days later, the picket meeting was very small. Charles and I volunteered to go over Gary mountain, south to Bishop on the Virginia state line—where, according to a rumor, some miners were threatening to scab. A crew from Pinnacle Creek went to picket Keystone. And that was about all our picket movement was capable of that night.

It was a long drive over that mountain. Charlie and I hid my VW bug on a side road, and walked to Bishop's mine entrance. We stood there for an hour at shift change. No one came or went. Perhaps the rumors were wrong.

As we were about to leave, a man walked up. He whispered quickly that he was the son of a local sheriff. And he warned us that we were going to be tailed after leaving. A roadblock was planned for us on the lonely stretch to Gary. They planned to beat us hard before taking us to jail.

We thanked him (as you can imagine).

As soon as he left, two cop cars pulled up across from us and turned off their lights.

Charles and I exchanged glances and eased toward our car. As we drove off, the cop cars fell in behind us. Up ahead was a fork in the road. Left led back over Gary Mountain toward Welch. I had no intention of going there. Right turned east, over the farmland of Virginia.

I pulled the wheel hard to the right, turned east, and roared across that state line into Virginia—as fast as a little VW could go. To our relief, we saw the headlights of the West Virginia cops fade behind us.

We were jubilant—and drove east, and then north toward Bluefield. We would return home through a huge loop.

Waiting in Virginia

Our excitement stopped cold about forty minutes later, when we ran straight into a massive roadblock outside Bluefield. The Virginia State Police had been called out, and they were waiting for us.

We stopped, and they pulled us out of our car.

Within minutes they had taken the car apart—removing seats, emptying the trunk—obviously looking for guns. The West Virginia States had sent out a message that we were “armed and dangerous”—and the guns were supposed to be the grounds for our arrest in Virginia.

But by that point in the strike, the danger of police search was so intense that few pickets carried guns anymore.

When those Virginia cops couldn't find any guns on us, they didn't know what to do. So they put the car seats back in and let us go.

Relieved, we drove that last hour from Bluefield into the heart of McDowell.

As we passed through Keystone I saw the hillside completely lit up by flashing blue police lights. Something had gone down at the mine. But Charlie and I just drove home anyway and I fell into the sleep of the exhausted.

Ambush from Company Property

Someone banged on my door early. There had been a shooting at Keystone that night, and the details quickly came out.

At Keystone pickets gather on the road, just below the mine parking lot, in front of an old church. As five pickets stood there that night, under the glare of the town's streetlight, someone opened fire. The shots came from company property, from a service road above the church. They came from a repeating rifle (or perhaps two) shooting into the crowd. Jerry J, a young, heavysset mine committeeman from the west of Welch, went down hard. As the other pickets scattered for cover, hiding behind a church wall, the assassins

started pumping bullets into Jerry, slowly, one after another. The shots tore up his intestine from several sides. Blood started to pool up below him, and run to the side of the road. He would have died there on the ground if Roger D had not jumped out of cover, under fire, and dragged Jerry's limp body to safety.

By the next day, I heard a new report: Apparently someone in Keystone was worried that the assassins would be identified, named, arrested or perhaps hunted down. So the word went out that if anything happened to them, someone among the strikers would die. My name was the one mentioned. I was by then the best-known supporter of the strike at Keystone mine, and I guess they figured they'd know where to find me.¹⁵

There were also rumors that Pinnacle Creek crew had stopped in the Keystone pool hall before picketing, and that they had acted with bravado there. But Roger denied it, and I was never able to confirm what the truth was.

"Let Him Die"

The shooting stopped everything cold. It was as if the whole county dropped into a deep freeze.

No one dared picket. No one dared talk about working. The state police didn't dare patrol too far off the main road. As each of the following nights closed in, the roads were simply deserted.

During the days, we were all down at the Welch hospital, where Jerry J hung between life and death. In an ugly scene, one of the nurses had refused to treat Jer-

ry as he came in. "Let him die," she had said. That nurse was said to be the wife of Jack P., safety committeeman at Keystone #1. Alarmed, we organized a round-the-clock guard for Jerry, haunting the halls of the hospital, talking in subdued tones about what to do next.

When you study military history, you realize there is often a moment in many major battles when the generals of *both* sides think they are losing. They are each receiving awful reports—about shattered units, exhausted reserves, buckling flanks—and they are *rarely* seeing the same kinds of reports on the *other* side. Often each general thinks he alone is on the brink of collapse.

And to us, in this battle, sitting in that hospital corridor, things looked bad. Our militants were exhausted, and some felt like we were being beaten.

But then, we were not reading the grim reports that were stacking up on the *governor's* desk.

Suddenly, seemingly out of the blue, the announcement came:

Governor Moore had withdrawn his rationing order. The state police were going to be pulled out. If the gunmen at Keystone had intended to break the strike, they had failed terribly.

We had won. It was bewildering. Is this what victory looks like? Is that how it happens?

In my own primitive linear thinking, I always thought of a strike as an economic squeeze—we would stop production until the coal operators started screaming for coal and profit. But this moment revealed the powerful *independent* role of politics within class struggle. In the final analysis, the governor's retreat had not mainly come from an economic calculation, but from the realization that events were now careening in completely unpredictable directions—with his army of state police, hated and vulnerable, sitting right at the front lines.

Among us miners, there was immediately talk of returning to work in triumph on Sunday night. But there was one problem: Court hearings were scheduled for that Monday. Several were required to be in the Welch Courthouse. In a Kafkaesque touch, the only judge willing (and corrupt enough) to do this dirty

15. BT chose to put out a simplistic explanation of this shooting: He said this had almost certainly been a hit job organized by U.S. Steel, because Roger and most of the militants on that road were from U.S. Steel's brand new Pinnacle Creek #50 mine. I thought that explanation was overly tidy—especially since there was absolutely zero evidence other than BT's hunch. In fact, it was whispered that the trigger men that night were workers from Keystone #1—and two specific, very hard men were sometimes mentioned. I don't know precisely what motivated them to shoot, and I don't know who was really behind it—and I never pushed hard to dig out the answers to those questions. But on my return to work, I made a point of seeking those men out—and giving them a chance to know me, as a person and as an active communist. After all, I had to drive past that church wall, in front of that clump of woods every day, week after week, for years. One of them, at least, became, over the next years, a regular reader of revolutionary literature, and someone, I believe, who had my back.

work was the county's divorce judge. He was the one holding court.

Springing the Jailhouse Doors

As we gathered in the courthouse that Monday, we heard that some of the Gary mines had already started working late Sunday night. The courtroom was packed, and one by one, the pickets were called before the old bastard.

It was a farce. Miners stood up to give their explanations.

"I was not there, the police must have made a mistake."

"I was not picketing, I was fishing on the bridge that day."

"I live on the bottom land by the mine, I was returning home when I was arrested."

Several of the workers had brought their fishing poles as "evidence."

The judge was having none of it. The gimmicks were all thrown out of court. And one by one the sentences came down: Guilty with sizable jail time. These guys were obviously going to be jailed, then fired, then blacklisted—since they would be unable to return to work this week.

The group included many of our most solid militants—including DD and the heart of his crew.

Fifty of us met outside on the courthouse steps. The mood was hard, even grim. "We meet at the bypass tonight." Some left on the spot to start pulling Gary's mines. Gina and I volunteered to write a flyer explaining what had just happened. We drove home and typed up a draft.

It was late afternoon as we rolled back through Welch, heading north to meet with our comrades and mimeograph the announcement.

As we passed through northern Welch, we suddenly noticed a huge crowd of cars crammed in at the main burger drive-in. We pulled into the parking lot. There, sitting in the window, was DD and his boys—roaring with laughter and celebrating.

Someone high up—in the state or in the coal corporations—had heard that these jailings were reigniting the strike. And they had simply ordered the judge's

decisions be reversed. I have no idea exactly how that reversal happened—I don't know what laws were bent, or money exchanged hands. But it is clear that our threats had kicked open the jailhouse doors.

The Gas Protest of 1974 was over—a rare victory for a completely illegal strike.

And yet....

Afterward

Mao writes that to know the pear you must taste the pear.

Returning to work, after three weeks of strike, my mind was spinning with unanswered questions. I was trying to understand some truly writhing contradictions that had revealed themselves.

Clearly the struggle “the workers themselves are beginning to wage” had a more complex relationship with class consciousness than I had understood.

This would become even more clear when, shortly afterwards, a strike broke out around Charleston inspired by the religious right. Conservative fundamentalist preachers in patriotic three-cornered hats began pulling out mines—in a protest over the use of progressive textbooks in Kanawha County schools. The inclusion of radical Black authors and sex education outraged some, and confused others. And suddenly we communists found ourselves, not joining the next wild-cat strike, but uniting with a community organization of Black Vietnam veterans to expose the racism of this Textbook Protest and actively *stop* it from spreading to the whole state.

What emerged over the next years, and what remains to be fully summed up, was a real gap between our ability to lead militant strike activity, and our plans to develop a foothold for socialist, revolutionary politics.

In some ways “the crown lay in the gutter” in the coalfields—the miners were fighting hard for their future, generally using their own local trade union structures as their organization—and yet were desperately looking for uncorrupted, militant leadership, as an alternative to the betrayals of their salaried union ap-

paratus. A small serious group like the RU’s Miners Right to Strike Committee could emerge as a welcome vehicle and rallying point within that.

And yet, at the same time, our attempts at more *politically radical* activity—organizing of revolutionary May First celebrations, support for African liberation struggles, support for the 1979 Iranian revolution, informational work around socialist revolution and capitalist restoration in China, the work of our revolutionary newspaper, attempting to recruit into the Revolutionary Communist Party and more—all *that* landed on considerably less fertile ground, and often found its smaller audiences outside the ranks of the active miners.

Those two spheres of work—leading militant strike struggles and promoting revolutionary political campaigns—developed extremely different dynamics despite our many efforts to fuse them, to bring a section of the miners over to a consciously revolutionary pole. Instead of complementing each other, those different initiatives started to pull our work apart at a very basic level.

It proved inevitable that “one aspect will eat up the other” (as Maoists say).¹⁶

As the 1974 Gas Protest ended, many of those experiences—including the escalating COINTELPRO attacks and waves of anti-communist hysteria—lay in the future. So did the biggest strikes, of 1975 and 1976, where the Miners Right to Strike Committee helped this miners upsurge take the stage in an exceptionally powerful way. The discussion and summation of all that is yet to come.

16. Some parts of this dilemma have been explored in an initial way in letter 2 of 9 *Letters to Our Comrades*, by Mike Ely <http://mikeely.wordpress.com/9-letters/letter-2/>

Other pamphlets available at kasamaproject.org:

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