

Blair Mountain March shows the power of people over industry obstacles.
By Bill Price

In WV the coal industry seems to always have the political power to get what they want. They use their influence to try to weaken rules by the federal EPA; to block the WV State Legislature from banning slurry impoundments and keep candidates for office from being seen as “attacking” the industry; and, too often, they use their power to intimidate residents from speaking out against the industry. But, there are times when that power is challenged in some of the simplest ways. One example of that was during the recent 90th anniversary of the Battle on Blair Mountain.

In August of 1921, over 10,000 miners responded to the murder of Sid Hatfield, on the steps of the McDowell County Courthouse by organizing a march to unionize the southern WV coalfields. Hatfield was a fervent supporter of coal miners and their efforts to unionize. His murder galvanized miners’ simmering frustration into an armed protest. The shooting war that followed in Logan County during August and September of 1921 became known as the Battle of Blair Mountain

In 2011, organizations, including the Sierra Club, came together to commemorate the 1921 march by re-enacting the original march as a protest against the current threats on Blair Mountain by the attempts of the coal industry to blow up Blair mountain by mountain top removal mining. The goals of this effort were multi-faceted. First was to advance the campaign to abolish mountain top removal and to preserve Blair Mountain. Another goal was to bring attention to the plight of working men and women whose rights to organize are under attack all through-out the United States. And finally, the connecting piece was the need for true sustainable economic development in Appalachia. The core organizers of the march re-enactment did a heck of a job joining all of these goals together in a coherent message about the future of WV and all of Appalachia. MTR destroys jobs, if we are going to have true prosperity, we need to end our over-dependence on the coal industry and begin to transition to clean energy. Yes, we need jobs in Appalachia, and we can’t continue to destroy our land to obtain those jobs. And Blair Mountain is the icon. The attempt to blast apart Blair Mountain shows the arrogance of the industry and indicates their wanton disregard for both land and labor. The Blair Mountain preservation efforts are an opportunity for people to come together with the common goal of pushing back on the coal industry and showing that power that people have when united.

One of my favorite moments from the six-day march came on day 5 as the marchers approached the base of Blair Mountain and were preparing the base-camp to spend the night and prepare for the rally and final two-mile section up to the top of the mountain. In my role as a peacekeeper for the march, I was asked to go up ahead with the team that was to set up the camp kitchen. That team had several support vehicles and three of those vehicles were pulling trailers with water and other supplies. The problem was that the occupant of the house next to the field we were camping at was not happy about our presence. He was an employee of a coal company and indeed his house and property

were actually owned by the company. He had already attempted to block the drive that went through that property and was the only access to our properly leased field. The police had told him he could not block the right of way, so he had moved his vehicles right up to the asphalt of this drive-way sized easement. The road through had two very sharp turns in it and he had strategically placed his vehicles to make it “impossible” for our support vehicles with trailers in tow to navigate around those turns. After a few attempts to get the water truck around the curve failed, the power of people came into action. Approximately 15 marchers came up and unhitched the trailer from the truck, which allowed the truck to move forward, then manually pushed the trailer around the curve (with video cameras rolling to document that we were not going onto the industry property) and hitched it back to the truck. Three times, people moved together in unison to assure that the marchers would have water, food and a safe place to sleep for the night. I couldn't help but think of how this simple act was indicative of how, when people work together in unity, we can overcome any obstacle that the industry puts in our way.

The next day, almost 800 people came together, marched those final few miles and planted a monument on Blair Mountain. There is much work that still needs to be done, but I will always remember standing on that mountain knowing that the industry is already defeated as long as we stand united.

A special thanks to Gwen Jones and Jim Sconyers for coming to march. Also thanks go to the WV and Cumberland Chapters for contributing to pay for gasoline for shuttles that became needed because many of our campgrounds became “unavailable” during the week.