

“Citizens of this Great Republic”: Politics and the West Virginia Miners, 1900–1922¹

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Summary: The West Virginia Miners engaged in remarkable inter-ethnic rebellions in the early twentieth century, against the “feudal” conditions in the Mountain State’s coalfields. This paper challenges the view that these actions were backed by an equally radical and class-conscious language based on Americanism. It shows how due to various barriers, ranging from ethnic differences to electoral interference, political involvement on the part of the miners was sporadic and unsuccessful, and they were unable to form a common, coherent political identity. Instead they articulated a broad and ultimately ambiguous appeal to “American” rights and values, which focused on the exceptionalism of West Virginia, and took the interpretation of Americanism to be self-evident.

In John Sayles’ remarkable film *Matewan*,² the divergent workforce of the post-war southern West Virginia coalfields, made up of black American, immigrant and white American miners, overcome their differences and confront the brutal coal operators and their hired gunmen. Thrown together in tent colonies, forced to share the hardships of the strike, they learn to eat together, play music together and, through their experience of struggle, fight together.

Given the usual picture of inter-race relations in the US, and particularly the south, in this period, it might be tempting to think that such a picture had more to do with the director’s wishful thinking than the historical reality. However, unlike other recent bigger budget epics on US history, and notwithstanding certain adjustments and simplifications perhaps necessary for the making of a film, the central themes of *Matewan* ring true with the recent historiography on the West Virginia miners.³ These works have revealed that despite the formidable barriers

¹ My thanks to David Jarvis, Alastair Reid, Callum MacDonald, and two anonymous referees from *IRSH* for their constructive comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² *Matewan* (Dir. John Sayles, US, 1987) Cinecom Int./MGM.

³ See, for example, R.L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class and Community Conflict, 1780–1980* (Lexington, 1980), pp. 156–164; D.A. Corbin, *Life, Work and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880–1922* (Urbana, 1981), pp. 77–79, 195–224; J.W. Trotter Jr, *Coal, Class and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915–32* (Urbana, 1991), pp. 111–117 (which also discusses the limitations of inter-racial unity).

to collective action – whether ethnic, geographic, or in terms of power relationships – the West Virginia miners did mount remarkable inter-ethnic strikes and rebellions in the early twentieth century, culminating in the “civil war” of 1919–1921, which included the “Battle of Blair Mountain” in 1921, one of the largest working-class revolts in US history.

The ferocity of the conflict in this period – at the Battle of Blair Mountain, for example, over 1,000,000 shots were fired, and over 2,000 Federal troops, a chemical warfare unit, and the 88th air squadron were deployed before the fighting ceased – and its insurrectionary nature – the battle at Blair was the culmination of a huge armed march by as many as 12,000 miners and other members of the community⁴ – might suggest that the West Virginia miners shared a common, radical agenda to back up their actions. Indeed, in his work on the southern West Virginia counties, Corbin suggests that the miners were inspired by a “class consciousness” based on “a thirty year experience of shared styles of life and work, brotherhood, religion, love, and a common perception of not only what was wrong, but the way things should be”. The language they used was not one of traditional class politics, but “Americanism”, which contained within it “an ideology, containing values, beliefs, principles, and goals, as coherent, radical, and understanding of an exploitative and oppressive system as any ideology announced by Socialists, Communists, and Wobblies”.⁵ In many ways this would seem to correlate with the view of a class-conscious version of Americanism suggested by Sean Wilentz in his influential article, “Against Exceptionalism”.⁶

However, while not necessarily disputing the general point that working-class Americans could espouse a coherent, specific and radical language based on appeals to American values, this paper will suggest that, for the West Virginia miners in the years 1900–1922 at least, this was not the case. It will argue that despite the appearance of unity in the act of struggle, the West Virginia miners did not form a coherent or stable political position either in the electoral sense, or in terms of a radical identity to match their actions. Instead they articulated a vague and ill-defined version of Americanism which focused on the specific problems of West Virginia, and made broad appeals for law and order

⁴ For details of march on Blair, see Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, pp. 161–164; D.P. Jordan, “The Mingo War: Labor Violence in the Southern West Virginia Coal Fields, 1919–1922”, in G.M. Fink and M.E. Reed (eds), *Essays in Southern Labor History: Selected Papers, Southern Labor History Conference, 1976* (Westport, 1977), pp. 101–143; and R.J. Fagge, “Power, Culture and Conflict in the Coalfields of West Virginia and South Wales, 1900–1922” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1991; to be published by Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 282–294.

⁵ Corbin, *Life, Work and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, pp. 246, 244.

⁶ S. Wilentz, “Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement”, *International Labour and Working Class History*, 26 (1984), pp. 1–24.

and citizenship rights. However, these appeals were not located within a wider political or ideological framework, and were frequently presented as self-evident statements of faith, which ignored the fact that the rights and values associated with Americanism could be interpreted in very different ways.

All of the barriers against unity at an industrial level, which the West Virginia miners so spectacularly overcame, were even more potent in regard to forming a unified political stance. The majority of the state's miners lived in new, unincorporated communities, often company towns, created entirely for the purpose of producing coal. Carved into the Appalachian mountains they were often both geographically and culturally isolated.⁷ Particularly in the early years, they were not part of an established political framework, nor, as new communities, could they draw on an existing political culture. This was reinforced by the temporary, transitory nature of life in the communities, in particular the remarkable mobility of the inhabitants, many of whom resided only temporarily within the state. When it is further taken into account that the majority of the labour force came from rural origins, and that this mobility was often a sign of continued links with an agricultural past, it begins to become clear why, within the semi-agricultural mining towns, the formation of a common political identity would be an extremely difficult process.⁸

This prospect was further impeded by the cultural mix of the communities which, whilst surmountable around a set of demands relating to the specifics of the operators' abuses, was more significant on a political level. For example, the foreign-born miners were made up of various nationalities and hence, cultures and languages.⁹ At a practical level this would inhibit the spread of political ideas within the mining communities, beyond demands which clustered around the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Moreover, the fact that many of the foreign-born miners intended only a temporary stay in the coalfield had an important impact beyond its immediate effect, limiting the electoral strength of the miners as a whole. By the end of the period under discussion only 10 per cent of this group had become naturalized citizens, and thus able to vote.¹⁰

⁷ Fagge, "Power, Culture and Conflict", pp. 70–73.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 134–138; R.L. Lewis, "From Peasant to Proletarian: The Migration of Southern Blacks to Central Appalachia", *Journal of Southern History*, 55, 1 (1989), pp. 77–102.

⁹ In 1910 the West Virginia Department of Mines reported thirty different nationalities among immigrant miners. They made up approximately 30 per cent of the state's miners, compared with 46 per cent white American, and nearly 20 per cent black American: West Virginia Department of Mines, *Annual Report, 1910* (Charleston, 1910), p. 104.

¹⁰ E.E. Hunt, F.G. Tyrone and J.H. Willits (eds), *What the Coal Commission Found* (Baltimore, 1925), p. 137.

For the black miners the comparative equality that they found in West Virginia contrasted with their experience in other states, notably in the absence of electoral restrictions. As a consequence the vast majority of black miners voted along race lines for the Republican party. For historical reasons, the Democratic Party did not attract black votes, and the Socialist Party of America (SPA) with its at best equivocal line towards racism, also secured little black support.¹¹ Indeed, the link between the black vote and the Republican party was so strong that there were allegations throughout this period that the operators in southern West Virginia recruited blacks to shift the state's political balance.¹²

The most powerful example of the link with the Republican party was McDowell county, where in 1910 34.1 per cent of the voting population were black. There were 5,883 black voters compared with 7,172 native whites and only 250 naturalized foreign-born miners. The majority of blacks resided in the Browns Creek, Northfork, Elkhorn, and Adkin districts, all of which had branches of the "McDowell County Colored Republican Organisation" (founded in 1904). Commenting on this, the staunchly Republican black newspaper, the *McDowell Times*, said that "of the 6,000 Negro voters of McDowell County, 90% will support men and measures endorsed by their leaders and supported by the *McDowell Times*".¹³

This was underlined when John J. Cornwell, the sole Democratic Governor in this period, was elected in 1916. Complaining of the increased vote for the Democratic party in the county compared with 1912, an editorial proclaimed "Black man loyal to the Republican Party", going on to say that "with less than a dozen traitors, ingrates or jealous cowards among the Negroes, every black man in McDowell County voted the straight Republican ticket".¹⁴ Nor was black support a one way process. As Trotter has shown, the black community, particularly after the war, won concessions both in terms of representation and legislation. In the class sense, however, this tended to bind black miners into an alliance with the emerging black middle class and, in turn, with the coal operators who dominated the Republican Party.¹⁵

¹¹ F. Barkey, "The Socialist Party in West Virginia from 1898-1920: A Study in Working Class Radicalism" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1971), p. 168; I. Howe, *Socialism and America* (San Diego, 1985), pp. 19-22; S. Miller, "Socialism and Race" and T. Kornweiber, "A Reply", in J.H.M. Laslett and S.M. Lipset (eds), *Failure of a Dream?: Essays in the History of American Socialism* (Berkeley, 1984 ed.), pp. 223-228, 231-240.

¹² W.A. MacCorkle, *The Recollections of Fifty Years of West Virginia* (New York, 1928), p. 479; Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, pp. 126-127.

¹³ *McDowell Times*, 16 May 1913, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10 November 1916, p. 2.

¹⁵ Trotter, *Coal, Class and Color*, pp. 216-258.

The native West Virginians within the mining communities discovered that, as with every other aspect of their lives, the coming of the new industrial order destroyed the traditional pattern of politics. Previously their independent, rural way of life had been marked by local political identities, usually based on kinship. Elections were treated as social occasions, often taking place on Sundays or public holidays.¹⁶ The new political framework, created and dominated by the coal interests, ran counter to this in almost every sense. The former mountaineers, therefore, isolated within the coal towns, often clung to their identity as “descendants of the pioneers” who had first settled the region and who still had a right to own the land.¹⁷ Although this did not necessarily rule out the formation of a common politics with other groups, it did, when combined with the other barriers, make such a process more difficult.

Great though the above were as barriers against the formation of a common political identity, or political organization, it was inevitably the overarching power of the operators which proved most significant. From mining town to state government, a formidable network of repression was in place to deal with recalcitrant UMWA organizers, and any other what coal operator, Justus Collins, termed as “undesirable people”, from organizing meetings or distributing propaganda.¹⁸ This obviously applied equally to advocates of political change, particularly if they were outsiders. Thus when an IWW activist arrived in Logan Town in 1921, he was arrested and later “shot down in cold blood”.¹⁹

At the state level, particularly under the Governorship of Cornwell (1917–1921), the distinction between industrial and political activity became confused behind a blanket paranoia about “reds” and “radicals”. Thus the most limited of demands could lead to the deportation of foreign-born miners, while the response to small quantities of radical literature led to state/Federal activity, and the passing of legislation such as the iniquitous “Red Flag Act”.²⁰ Nor were these pressures restricted

¹⁶ J.C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (Lexington, 1969 ed.), pp. 100–103; R.D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880–1930* (Knoxville, 1981), p. 235.

¹⁷ F. Mooney, *Struggle in the Coal Fields* (Morgantown, 1967), p. 16; US Senate, *Conditions in the Paint Creek District, West Virginia*, 63 Congress, 1 Session (Washington DC, 1913), Pt. 1, p. 790; R. Chaplin, “Violence in West Virginia”, *International Socialist Review*, 13 (1913), pp. 730–731; J.L. Spivak, *A Man and His Time* (New York, 1967), p. 57.

¹⁸ Collins to Wolfe, 27 December 1915, Morgantown, West Virginia University (WVU), West Virginia and Regional History Collection, Justus Collins Papers (A+M 1824), Series 1, Box 13, File 93.

¹⁹ L.K. Savage, *Thunder in the Mountains: The West Virginia Mine War, 1920–21* (Charleston, 1984), pp. 123–124.

²⁰ The bill, passed in early 1919, was supposed to “foster the ideals, institutions and government of West Virginia and the United States, and to prohibit the teaching of

to the era of the “red scare”. Although the intensity of repression was greater then, other Governors were equally dismissive of the right to free speech. Thus Governor H.E. Hatfield responded to criticism of his imposed “settlement” of the 1912–1913 Paint Creek strike, by smashing the presses and arresting the editor of the Huntington *Socialist and Labor Star*. West Virginia was not welcome territory for the political organizer or activist.²¹

The operators also interfered with the conduct of elections, particularly those for county posts which provided the basis for the control of the local mining communities. In 1922, for example, a US attorney wrote to the Attorney-General to complain that politics in Logan county was under the control of the operators’ infamous appointee, Sheriff Don Chafin, with “election results figured up and given out in advance as to what the county will do”.²² While Logan was probably the worst example of such excesses, electoral abuses were rife, particularly in other southern counties. Thus in 1920, a store owner in McDowell county appealed to W.B. Wilson for Federal aid to ensure fair elections. He reported that mine guards had assaulted local citizens, leaving him concerned that some “voters in this county will be afraid to go to the poles (sic)”.²³ Similarly, in 1916 George Wolfe, manager of the Winding Gulf Colliery Company, wrote to Justus Collins to tell him that there was a “determined effort to get Robinson votes here, which we had to fight all day”, continuing later that “the net result of the election I cannot give you, except that we took care of our place here very well”.²⁴

Nor were the northern counties immune from such shenanigans. In 1908 “labor’s champion” Samuel B. Montgomery, state senator since 1904, was defeated in the Republican primary in Preston county. Having written and sponsored several bills sympathetic to labour’s interest, Montgomery had made enemies among the operators. Consequently when the primary took place there were allegations of vote rigging and

doctrines and display of flags antagonistic to the form and spirit of their constitution or laws”, *Journal of the House of Delegates of the State of West Virginia for the 34th Regular Session, Commencing January 14 1919, and the Extraordinary Session Commencing March 11 1919* (Charleston, 1919), p. 52. On the deportation of “aliens”, see Cornwell to Walker, 14 November 1919, WVU, John J. Cornwell Papers (A+M 952), Series 35, Box 137; Walker to Att. General, 17 November 1919, Washington DC, National Archive (NA), Dept. of Justice (RG 60), File 16-130-83, Part 1.

²¹ Fagge, “Power, Culture and Conflict”, pp. 226–227.

²² US Attorney Northcott to Attorney-General, 18 December 1922, NA, Department of Justice (RG 60), File 16-130-83, Folder 4; Walker Report, pp. 2–4, Daily Reports of Field Investigators, March–August 1923, Suitland, Washington National Records Center (WNRC), Records of US Coal Commission (RG 68), Division of Investigation of Labor Facts, Labour Relations Section, 161, Box 70.

²³ W.H. Cline to Wilson, Secretary of Labor, 12 October 1920, WNRC, Records of Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) (RG 280), File 170/1185, Part One.

²⁴ Wolfe to Collins, 7 June 1916, Collins papers, Box 14, File 96.

other malpractices. As the Charleston *Labor Argus* put it, the electoral officers allowed “beasts of the field, fowls of the air and reptiles of the earth to vote – if they voted for Flynn” (Montgomery’s opponent).²⁵

A similar fate befell Montgomery’s pursuit of the larger prize of the Republican nomination for state Governorship in the 1920 election. Backed by the state’s labour movement, which had been strengthened by the war, a vigorous campaign was launched against the operators’ candidate, E.F. Morgan. However, Montgomery was defeated by the narrow margin of 43,290 votes to 41,422, thanks to a poor showing in the state’s southern counties. John L. Spivak recalled District 17 President Frank Keeney complaining about this to one of the organizers, who replied, “you should look at the river and you’ll see what kind of showing we made [. . .] The ballots are still floating. They didn’t even bother to burn them.” They went on to discover that the ballots had been counted by mine guards who, as deputies, were responsible for the conduct of elections. They simply declared every Montgomery vote “invalid”, collected them together and tossed them into the river.²⁶

The operators’ domination of the political apparatus of the state, which the electoral frauds helped perpetuate, was also a cause of political alienation, and hence a barrier to political action. Both the Democratic and Republican parties were subservient to the coal interests, as were many of the county and state political offices.²⁷ This led to the defeat of legislation the operators deemed unsympathetic or, when such legislation was passed, as in the case of laws covering scrip and mine guards, ensuring non-enforcement.²⁸

Consequently there was a tendency for the miners to withdraw from the political process and instead turn to the UMWA.²⁹ This helps explain why the pattern of industrial conflict, most notably in the march on Blair, was so intense and, in many ways, amounted to politics by another means. Indeed the intensity itself helped further focus attention on the specifics of battles in the industrial arena at the expense of a broader, more politicized outlook.

²⁵ *Labor Argus*, 23 April 1908, p. 1; 30 April 1908, p. 1.

²⁶ Spivak, *A Man and His Time*, pp. 86–87; E.L.K. Harris and F.J. Krebs, *From Humble Beginnings: West Virginia State Federation of Labor 1903–1957* (Charleston, 1960), pp. 175–177.

²⁷ J.A. Williams, *West Virginia and the Captains of Industry* (Morgantown, 1976), pp. 3–16; Eller, *Miners, Millhands and Mountaineers*, pp. 211–217; Corbin, *Life, Work and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, pp. 12–13.

²⁸ H.B. Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia: The Story of West Virginia’s Four Major Mine Wars and Other Thrilling Incidents of its Coal Fields* (Morgantown, 1969), pp. 10–11; Eller, *Miners, Millhands and Mountaineers*, pp. 217–218; J.B. Thomas, “Coal Country: the Rise of the Southern Smokeless Coal Industry and its Effect on Area Development” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1971), pp. 224–225.

²⁹ Eller, *Miners, Millhands and Mountaineers*, pp. 234–235; J.A. Williams, *West Virginia: A History* (New York, 1976), pp. 142–143.

There is also a sense in which the lack of a common politics became a further barrier against its formation – a catch 22 so to speak – as political movements or parties not only reflect changes in political identities, but they themselves are agents that stimulate change, helping articulate identity itself.

Considering the remarkably inhospitable circumstances which have been described, it is perhaps surprising that the West Virginia miners engaged in the level of political organization they did, rather than vice versa. Although never consistently successful, this activity took place both within the existing party framework and through third party politics.

Prior to this period, in the late 1880s and 1890s, certain areas of the West Virginia coalfield had shown some interest in independent radical politics. Parts of the Kanawha region, in particular, supported the Greenback party, and later the Populists – the latter attracted support for their policy of government ownership of the mines.³⁰ However, with the failure nationally of such attempts, combined with the extension and consolidation of the coal industry, attention was focused on activity within the existing political framework. In addition to the election of Montgomery in 1904, two years later District 17 President, John Nugent, and UMWA attorney, Adam B. Littlepage, were added to the state senate on the Republican and Democratic tickets respectively. The latter elections led the editor of the *Labor Argus* to announce “we have elected two of labor’s greatest champions to offices where they can compel our enemies to show their hands”.³¹

This was certainly the case, although not quite in the way that the paper’s editor had meant. The following year Nugent resigned the District 17 leadership to become state Immigration Commissioner – a post financed and controlled by the operators.³² The following year also saw, alongside the defeat of Montgomery in the Preston county Republican primary, Littlepage fail to gain the Democratic nomination for the Governorship. Montgomery’s bill to remedy the abuses of the mine guards was also defeated.³³

These events underlined the operators’ stranglehold on the political system and the two established parties, and the difficulties of working within such a framework. Other politicians did run with labour support, such as Democrat Matthew M. Neely, former mayor of Fairmont and future state Governor, who established himself in northern West Virginia due to splits in the Republican vote during the “progressive era”. He

³⁰ Williams, *West Virginia and the Captains of Industry*, pp. 122–124; J.H.M. Laslett, *Labor and the Left: A Study of Socialist and Radical Influences in the American Labor Movement, 1881–1924* (New York, 1974), p. 201.

³¹ *Labor Argus*, 8 November 1906, pp. 1–2.

³² *Ibid.*, 30 May 1907, p. 1.

³³ Harris and Krebs, *From Humble Beginnings*, p. 47.

went on to become a federal senator in 1922, with UMWA support, although he reneged on this as the decade progressed.³⁴ Similarly, Mooney and Blizzard ran unsuccessfully for state office at the end of this period, with the former defeated in 1920 and 1922 as a Republican candidate for the House of Delegates.³⁵ The black coal miner, John V. Coleman, was slightly more successful, securing election to the House of Delegates in 1918, where he helped influence the passage of a limited anti-lynching law. However, according to Trotter, Coleman was a fairly rare example, with most black mining votes going to buttress the emerging black middle class.³⁶

The most vigorous challenge by labour, however, was Montgomery's campaign for the 1920 Republican nomination which, as we saw, ended with great acrimony. Indeed so strong was the disgust at the manipulations of the ballot that a "non-partisan" electoral ticket was drawn up for the subsequent elections, with Montgomery at the head, and six Republican and six Democratic candidates for the main state offices. Although defeated by Morgan who secured 150,000 votes, Montgomery came second with a remarkable 81,000 votes, beating the Democrat into third place on 42,500.³⁷ A similar independent campaign was run four years later when the veteran radical, Robert M. LaFollette, backed by various labor/left/progressive groups ran against the major parties for the Presidency, and secured nearly 5 million votes (16.5 per cent).³⁸ In West Virginia, however, despite efforts by local union leaders, including Mooney who once again ran for the House of Delegates, this time on an independent ticket, the total vote was only 37,724.³⁹

Notwithstanding the Montgomery and LaFollette campaigns, the most consistent attempt at creating a genuinely independent labour politics, outside the established parties, was made by the SPA which was at its strongest in the state around the middle of this period. Although partially a response to the disillusion with the political situation within West Virginia, the advance of the SPA was also linked to the national political context, where the party presented an increasingly powerful political alternative. Under the inspirational, if sometimes inconsistent, leadership of Eugene V. Debs, the SPA had not only made electoral advances,

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 82; Williams, *West Virginia*, p. 146.

³⁵ Mooney, *Struggle in the Coal Fields*, pp. 129–130.

³⁶ Trotter, *Coal, Class and Color*, pp. 47–49, 226–227, 251–252.

³⁷ Harris and Krebs, *From Humble Beginnings*, p. 177; Lunt, *Law and Order vs. The Miners: West Virginia* (Hamden, 1979), p. 117.

³⁸ D.P. Thelen, *Robert M. La Follette and the Insurgent Spirit* (Boston, 1976), pp. 181–192; N. Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, 1983), pp. 335–337.

³⁹ Harris and Krebs, *From Humble Beginnings*, pp. 179–180; Mooney put his own defeat down to familiar causes: "Against me were aligned both the Democrat and Republican political machines, the Ku Klux Klan, The Law and Order League, and the bankers and businessmen of the county". *Struggle in the Coal Fields*, pp. 129–130.

but increased its influence within the trade unions, including the powerful UMWA.⁴⁰ Thus at the 1912 annual conference the union voted in favour of “government ownership” of all industries, and added to the constitution the demand that miners be given “the full social value of our product”. They also, while heavily rejecting specific support of the SPA, struck out the clause within the UMWA constitution which demanded political neutrality.⁴¹ The more positive stance towards the SPA on behalf of the UMWA, the wider trade union movement, and the electorate generally, proved short lived, however, as divisions within the SPA, the war, state repression, and social and political changes led to a precipitous collapse in support.⁴² This affected West Virginia as much as the rest of the US.

The rise, and indeed fall, of the socialist vote in West Virginia may have mirrored the national pattern, but it did so at a lower level. This point should be stressed as there has been a tendency, in the sparse historiography on the subject, to overemphasize the level and significance of SPA support within the state. Thus Corbin, for example, claims that by the middle of this period the SPA had “made strong inroads among West Virginia’s industrial workers, especially among its coal miners”, helping to create “a growing, viable state Socialist movement”.⁴³

This view creates two problems. Firstly, it is permeated by the idea that there should have been an inevitable socialist advance: an idea which is historically inaccurate. Secondly, connected with this, the over-estimation of the socialist advance leads to the need to create an artificial explanation for its subsequent decline. In Corbin’s case this involves an

⁴⁰ Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*, pp. 220–302; R. Ginger, *Eugene V. Debs: A Biography* (originally published as *The Bending Cross*, New Brunswick, 1949. This edition, New York, 1962), pp. 220–332; Howe, *Socialism and America*, pp. 3–35.

⁴¹ UMWA, *Proceedings of 23rd Annual Convention, 1910*, pp. 191, 215–246, 433–441; Laslett, *Labor and the Left*, pp. 216–219.

⁴² Laslett, *Labor and the Left*, pp. 218–231; “End of an Alliance: Selected Correspondence between Socialist Party Secretary Adolph Germer, and UMW of A Leaders in World War One”, *Labor History*, 12, 4 (1977), pp. 570–595; Howe, *Socialism and America*, pp. 36–48; Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*, pp. 262–345; Ginger, *Eugene V. Debs*, pp. 335–482; J. Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912–1925* (New York, 1967).

⁴³ The most obvious examples of this is D.A. Corbin, “Betrayal in the West Virginia Coal Fields: Eugene V. Debs and the Socialist Party of America, 1912–1914”, *Journal of American History*, 64 (1978), pp. 987–1009. The quote is on p. 988. It must be noted, however, that Corbin himself downplays the influence of the SPA in the full length study, *Life, Work and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, pp. 240–247. Barkey’s “Socialist Party in West Virginia”, although less polemical than the Corbin article, also tends to overestimate the SPA strength, see in particular, chapter IV, “We had the Revolution”. See also M. Nash, *Conflict and Accommodation: Coal Miners, Steel Workers, and Socialism, 1890–1920* (Westport, Conn., 1982), pp. 139–148, which falls into a similar trap to the Corbin article. Part of the problem with the Corbin and Nash argument is their over-reliance on the accounts of contemporary socialists who due to the circumstances of struggle, and for reasons of propaganda, exaggerated socialist influence. See, for example, E.H. Kintzer, “Reconstruction in West Virginia”, *International Socialist Review*, 14 (1913), pp. 23–24.

unconvincing attempt to blame the demise on the “policies and actions” of Debs during, and in the immediate aftermath of, a short visit to the state during the Paint Creek strike.⁴⁴ On the contrary, as was established earlier, given the circumstances within West Virginia, any independent political activity was a remarkable achievement – rather than being somehow inadequate when compared with a mythical ideal type.

The level of the socialist vote in West Virginia is put into stark perspective if we look at the Presidential vote in this period. In 1904 Debs secured only 1,573 (0.7 per cent) votes in West Virginia compared with a national vote of 402,283 (2.98 per cent). This increased to 1.4 per cent (compared with 2.82 per cent nationally) four years later, reaching a high point of 15,248 (5.7 per cent) votes in the election of 1912. This coincided with the national SPA vote of 900,672 (5.99 per cent).⁴⁵ Even at the height of the SPA’s electoral power, therefore, West Virginia was recording less than the national average, and well below states which had a more vigorous socialist electoral presence. In the same election, for example, Debs received 16.5 per cent of the vote in Nevada, 16.4 per cent in Oklahoma, 13.5 per cent in Montana, 13.4 per cent in Arizona, 12.4 per cent in Washington, 11.7 per cent in California and 11.3 per cent in Idaho.⁴⁶

In the 1916 election the SPA candidate, Allan L. Benson, polled less than half the 1912 vote with 6,144 (2.1 per cent), while nationally the vote dropped to 518,113 (3.18 per cent). In 1920, with the incarcerated Debs again the candidate, a further drop to a dismal 5,609 (1.1 per cent) was recorded in West Virginia, compared with a small real increase nationally to 919,799 (3.42 per cent).⁴⁷

The weakness of the SPA vote revealed in these figures in many ways speaks for itself. However, state-wide results, particularly those in Presidential elections, tell only part of the story. If we look at individual counties in the 1912 election it becomes clear that the distribution of the vote was far from even. For example Kanawha and Fayette counties, both of which were embroiled in the Paint Creek dispute, recorded the first and third highest vote for Debs with 3,071 (20 per cent) and 1,428 (9 per cent) respectively. Similarly Ohio with 1,579 (10.35 per cent) and Harrison with 1,077 (7 per cent) polled over the average.⁴⁸ This was also reflected in the vote for state offices which, despite Debs’ popularity

⁴⁴ Corbin, “Betrayal in the West Virginia Coal Fields”. For a detailed critique of this view, see R.J. Fagge, “Eugene V. Debs in West Virginia, 1913: A Re-appraisal”, *West Virginia History*, 52 (1993), pp. 1–18.

⁴⁵ US Congress, *Presidential Elections since 1789* (Congressional Quarterly, Washington DC, 1983), pp. 99–107; M.A. Jones, *The Limits of Liberty: American History 1607–1980* (Oxford, 1983), p. 650.

⁴⁶ *Presidential Elections since 1789*, p. 102.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 99–107; Jones, *Limits of Liberty*, p. 650.

⁴⁸ *Wheeling Majority*, 5 December 1912, p. 1.

and personal appeal, kept pace with the Presidential vote.⁴⁹ On a state basis the socialist candidate for Governor, W.B. Hinton, polled 14,900 votes, compared with Debs' 15,248, while all the other major offices attracted over 15,000 votes.⁵⁰ On a county level Hinton's vote sometimes exceeded that of Debs, as in the case of Kanawha where 3,380 votes were cast for the former, compared with 3,071 for the latter.⁵¹

If we break down the vote within Kanawha county an even more interesting pattern emerges. Although the SPA came third overall, the party's ticket proved more successful within certain electoral districts. In the Cabin Creek district, heart of the strike zone, socialists were elected to every office, with the ticket polling 2,328 votes compared with 1,142 for the Republicans and 667 for the Democrats. The Democrats were also pushed into third place in two of the other eleven districts. All of this was in spite of allegations of electoral malpractice. Noting the failure to carry Kanawha county as a whole, the *Wheeling Majority* reported socialist allegations that their observers had been ejected from some polling stations, "so they don't know how many votes were stolen from them".⁵²

Nor was the SPA vote solely explained by the concurrent strike. The vote may have increased, proportionally, at a higher rate than any other county, but even prior to this certain Kanawha districts had elected socialists. Thus in 1910 two UMWA members were elected as, respectively, Justice of the Peace and constable in the Washington district.⁵³ Furthermore, if we recall, it was these districts which at the end of the previous century had voted for radical candidates; something which Williams believes provided the basis for the later socialist successes.⁵⁴

The 1914 elections, deprived of the possible distortion of a Presidential vote, illustrate many of these trends perfectly. While the state-wide vote dropped to 4 per cent,⁵⁵ in the vote for Congressman-at-large, Kanawha again recorded the highest vote with 18.42 per cent, followed by Fayette (14.62 per cent), Harrison (11.21 per cent), and Boone (10.91 per cent), which were the only other counties to poll over 10 per cent. In contrast, the socialist candidate E.H. Kintzer only secured 2.28 per cent in Logan and 0.41 per cent in McDowell.⁵⁶ Furthermore, scotching Corbin's claim that Debs damaged the SPA during the Paint Creek strike, the Cabin

⁴⁹ In West Virginia, as elsewhere, Debs' popularity was wider than those who defined themselves as socialists. See, for example, the warm reception he received during his visit to the state in 1913 – even from the local press: *Charleston Gazette*, 20 May 1913, p. 1; *Wheeling Register*, 20 May 1913, p. 1. See also Spivak, *A Man and His Time*, p. 62.

⁵⁰ *Wheeling Majority*, 5 December 1912, p. 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Wheeling Majority*, 14 November 1912, p. 1.

⁵³ *Labor Argus*, 17 November 1910, p. 1.

⁵⁴ Williams, *West Virginia and the Captains of Industry*, pp. 123–124.

⁵⁵ Barkey, "The Socialist Party in West Virginia from 1898–1920", p. 164.

⁵⁶ *Socialist and Labor Star*, 11 December 1914, p. 2.

Creek district again returned the complete socialist ticket, increasing their “straight vote”.⁵⁷

The significance of this pattern should not be missed. The overall socialist vote within the state was based on a disproportionate distribution between and within counties. The fact that these districts have attracted the attention of historians has helped create the distortion in the perceived strength of the socialist vote in the state as a whole.

Of course, this doesn't mean that the Kanawha socialist vote was insignificant. On the contrary, it reveals that a socialist presence could emerge, particularly where a “radical” tradition already existed. However, Kanawha, and more importantly, specific districts within the county, were an exception rather than the rule in this respect. Indeed, isolated amongst a largely non-socialist voting population, even Kanawha proved unable to sustain a significant socialist presence in subsequent years. Thus in 1916, as the SPA vote in the state dropped from 4 per cent to 2.1 per cent compared with 1914, Kanawha, for example, fell to only 3.2 per cent. Within this the socialist vote in Cabin Creek was only 11 per cent, compared with 47 per cent two years previously.⁵⁸

These voting figures also underline the lack of correlation between industrial conflict and socialist voting patterns with, once again, the rise in socialist support during the Paint Creek strike being an exception rather than the rule. After all at the height of the Mine Wars the SPA were conspicuous by their absence with the dismal 1.1 per cent vote – Logan, for example, only polled 27 votes for Debs.⁵⁹

Of course it would be wrong, especially if we take into account the difficulties involved in mounting an electoral challenge in West Virginia in these years, to completely write off the socialist influence solely on these electoral figures, revealing though they are. Certainly the socialist press, particularly the *Labor Argus* (which was converted to socialism in 1910), and the *Socialist and Labor Star*, at times played an active and influential part in not only publicizing the abuses within the state, but in encouraging the miners to resist them – hence the unsolicited attention of Hatfield during the Paint Creek strike and, on behalf of the conservative and corrupt local UMWA leadership, the rival *Miners' Herald*.⁶⁰

Furthermore, some of the newer generation of local leaders who came to the fore during the Paint Creek strike, most notably Keeney and Mooney were, for a time at least, associated with the SPA,⁶¹ as were some of the organizers sent in by the national organization like black

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 13 November 1914, p. 3.

⁵⁸ Barkey, “The Socialist Party in West Virginia from 1898–1920”, pp. 193–195, 251.

⁵⁹ Nash, *Conflict and Accommodation*, p. 146.

⁶⁰ Fagge, “Power, Culture and Conflict”, pp. 226, 230–231.

⁶¹ Corbin, *Life, Work and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, p. 240; Interview with Bert Castle, WVU, Oral History Collection.

SPA activist, George H. Edmunds.⁶² Similarly several visits by Debs and other socialist leaders, including in 1912 the MP for the Merthyr Boroughs, Keir Hardie, all raised the profile of the socialists. The latter meeting, for example, took place at Wheeling Fair Grounds after a march by 3,000 workers which proclaimed "Down with the Mine Guards", and "The Socialist Party. The only party that never took a cent from big business".⁶³

However, although Italians marched with a red flag at Boomer in 1913,⁶⁴ and a District 17 delegate to the UMWA national convention in 1914 declared "In West Virginia the struggles would not have been won if it had not been for the socialists in that state",⁶⁵ the majority of these examples are, as with the electoral pattern, restricted to the middle of this period, and involving events or protagonists from the Kanawha region. The overwhelming impression remains that socialist support was marginal, submerged within a broader non-class-based Americanism – the stars and stripes were more in evidence than the red flag.

This is further underlined by the lack of support for the IWW which, as the main left-wing revolutionary alternative, might have been expected to pick up support from socialists disillusioned with, or intimidated from using, the ballot box. However, although Cornwell, Debs, and some historians have seen the IWW hand lurking behind the coal tipples,⁶⁶ there is little evidence to support this. Within the local SPA, left-wing elements admitted some sympathy with Haywood but, at the same time, were not opposed to electoral activity.⁶⁷ More generally, as IWW activist Ralph Chaplin, in West Virginia at the time of the Paint Creek strike, wrote,

There was little use in proclaiming the virtues of the IWW to the striking coal miners or the hill folks [. . .](as) [. . .] The miners not only had a union already

⁶² Edmunds, however, also later left the party. R.L. Lewis, "The Black Presence in the Paint-Cabin Creek Strike 1912–1913", *West Virginia History*, 44 (1985–1986), p. 66.

⁶³ *Wheeling Register*, 6 October 1912, p. 20.

⁶⁴ Barkey, "The Socialist Party in West Virginia from 1898–1920", p. 152.

⁶⁵ UMWA, *Proceedings of 24th Convention, 1914*, p. 408.

⁶⁶ Debs made his accusations at the height of the controversy over his 1913 visit: see E.V. Debs, "Debs Denounces Critics", *International Socialist Review*, 14 (1913), pp. 105–106. Salvatore not only agrees, but believes that the Paint Creek strike "confirmed all his (Debs') worst fears concerning the nature of IWW organising drives", *Eugene V. Debs*, p. 257. Other historians suggesting a strong IWW presence are Nash, *Conflict and Accommodation*, p. 143; S. Bird, D. Georgakas and D. Shaffer (eds), *Solidarity Forever, The IWW: An Oral History of the Wobblies* (London, 1987), p. 126.

⁶⁷ See, for example, H.W. Houston's speech at Holly Grove, 4 August 1912, where he proposed both direct action, and use of the ballot box, *Conditions in the Paint Creek District*, Pt. 3, pp. 2258–2261; *Socialist and Labor Star*, 4 March 1914, p. 4; Barkey, "The Socialist Party in West Virginia from 1898–1920", pp. 146–150; M. Dubovsky's history of the IWW, *We Shall be All: A History of the IWW* (Chicago, 1969), has no mention of IWW activities in West Virginia.

and an industrial union of sorts, but, being in the middle of a two year strike, they were certainly more interested in remaining alive than in listening to arguments in favor of dual organisation.⁶⁸

This was something which even an FBI agent in Charleston at the end of this period agreed with. He reported that he “never believed that there has been much, if any, outside political agitation at work” in the state.⁶⁹

Not only did the FBI agent refute the suggestion of widespread outside agitation among the West Virginia miners, but he also described what he believed lay behind the miners’ actions – in terms not far removed from Chaplin. The local union leadership, he argued, was of “an extremely radical type”. However, crucially, he continued that,

All of the radicalism seems to find vent in State issues and the radical elements have been almost completely absorbed in this struggle [. . .] little or no interest has been manifested in radical issues having a national or international application. Their minds and lives are fully occupied with the struggle immediately at hand [. . .] teachings and propaganda are directed almost solely against the coal operators of the State, rather than against capitalistic interests everywhere.⁷⁰

The fact that an IWW activist and an FBI agent both stressed the way the miners focused on the specific state issues is as unusual as it is significant, underlining the previous evidence which suggested that due to the significant barriers within the state, the extension of the formidable displays of solidarity and direct action into a wider political movement did not take place, and there was no sustained political activity by the miners either within the existing political framework, or through independent alternatives.

Instead, the focus on the “struggle immediately at hand”, rather than broader class concerns, led to an emphasis on the denial of rights; particularly the right to join the UMWA. The union thus became doubly significant, both as an example of operator interference in the miner’s freedom of action, but also, as the only “alternative source of institutional power”, as the potential vehicle, symbolically and practically, for bringing about change.⁷¹ To those engaged in the struggle to establish the union in West Virginia the compromises and contradictions of union policy were often lost beneath a more general faith in the power of the idea of unionism, and its role in remedying the wrongs they experienced. As Winthrop D. Lane put it, “Keeney has no carefully thought out

⁶⁸ R. Chaplin, *Wobbly: The Rough-and-Tumble Story of an American Radical* (Chicago, 1948), p. 121.

⁶⁹ Report of Agent H. Nathan, NA, Records of War Department General Staff (RG165), Military Intelligence Division Correspondence, 1917–1941 (Entry 65), Box 3649, File 10634-793, Folder 5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, pp. 156–157.

philosophy of a class struggle [. . .] His experience is his philosophy. He believes in unionism."⁷²

This struggle for the union and the restoration of rights was placed within a loose frame of reference of what were seen as American values. The system of relations within the state was seen as a throwback to the past, or to the "old world", what Samuel Gompers stridently called "Russianized West Virginia".⁷³ UMWA Vice-President Frank J. Hayes spoke in 1913, of how "conditions in West Virginia are different from those in other states [. . .] These conditions have developed a feudal state in the coal mining regions that find no comparison except in the feudalism of the middle ages".⁷⁴ A similar comparison to that made eight years later by miners at Cannelton who complained of "inherited laws from the old days in Europe when Saxon or Norman earls administered justice direct with knotted clubs, cleavers and swords".⁷⁵

Miners at Mountclare compared the situation with British domination in the eighteenth century, complaining that, "the working people are getting very much agitated over the latest developements (sic) in Mingo; King George the III used the same tactics in '76".⁷⁶ Mother Jones also cited the abuses of monarchy when she was incarcerated during the Paint Creek dispute, claiming that it was "just what the old monarchy did (to) my grandparents 90 years ago in Ireland".⁷⁷ A Russian-born miner argued likewise when, in 1900, he wrote to the *UMWJ* to complain that miners were treated the same as "in the old country from the Russian government".⁷⁸

To both native born and foreign born this was seen as un-American, and a betrayal of the meaning of republican America – what Gompers called, in the subtitle to his 1913 piece, "Corporate perversion of American concepts of Liberty and Human Justice".⁷⁹ Polish-born UMWA organizer, Albert Manka, complained that "I always thought this was a free country, but I have found there isn't much liberty in the State of West Virginia for a poor working man".⁸⁰ Similarly underneath the headline "Slave Drivers", the *Labor Argus* reported that a mass meeting on Cabin Creek had described the guard system as "unnecessary and

⁷² W.D. Lane, *Civil War in West Virginia: A Story of Industrial Conflict in the Coal Mines* (New York, 1921), p. 85.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13; S. Gompers, "Russianized West Virginia", *American Federationist*, 20, 10 (1913), pp. 825–835.

⁷⁴ *Socialist and Labor Star*, 30 August 1913, p. 3.

⁷⁵ Letter from various locals at Mass Meeting to Keeney, 10 July 1921, WVU, E.F. Morgan Papers (A+M 203), Box 8, File 1.

⁷⁶ Mountclare Committee to Morgan, 15 July 1921, *ibid.*, Box 8, File 2.

⁷⁷ M. Jones to Borah, n.d., General Records of the Department of Labor, File 16-13 E, Box 24.

⁷⁸ *UMWJ*, 15 November 1900, p. 4.

⁷⁹ Gompers, "Russianized West Virginia", p. 825.

⁸⁰ *UMWJ*, 11 October 1900, p. 4.

un-American”.⁸¹ Most graphically, UMWA Vice-President Phillip Murray reported that the marchers on Logan had told him,

“We fought for America in France. We returned home to find that we, in West Virginia, are not really and truly in America. We have made up our minds to do battle in West Virginia for the purpose of returning the State to the country.” Everywhere you go along the fighting line, all that one will hear is “Let us win West Virginia back to America”.⁸²

On the surface at least, the evocation of America and its symbols seemed straightforward. Independence day was usually marked by marches,⁸³ and the flag was also prominent with, for example, protesting miners marching behind it during the Fairmont dispute.⁸⁴ A striker in the Paint Creek strike eleven years later, emboldened by the flag’s symbolic value, hung the stars and stripes outside his tent with the words: “I don’t know any better banner for Americans who are willing to starve for the sake of liberty, to fight under”.⁸⁵

During the same dispute 5,000 miners marching to hear Mother Jones speak did so to the tune of “America” and “Star Spangled Banner”.⁸⁶ All of the above would have agreed with the sentiments of the miners at Bower who, in a letter to Governor E.F. Morgan, called for a “course of education in Americanism” in West Virginia, ending with the assertion “America, the land of the free, is not a place for feudalism of any kind”.⁸⁷

More specifically the miners appealed for their rights as citizens via the application of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The Bower miners, for example, included in their letter a call for “a greater sense of justice and a full measure of the workers’ constitutional guarantees to the protection of their rights to organize and combine”.⁸⁸ In the same year a local union at Mammoth told the Secretary of Labor that the “miners ask little”, just fair weighing, the abolition of the mine guards and “to be treated as Citizens of this Great Republic and knot (sic) Slaves [. . .] all we wont (sic) is justice and fair play”.⁸⁹ As did a local union at Rosebud who demanded of President Harding that he “restore constitutional rights to the citizens of McDowell and Logan counties

⁸¹ *Labor Argus*, 8 July 1909, p. 1.

⁸² *Wheeling Register*, 3 September 1921, p. 6.

⁸³ For example, at the start of this period miners paraded at Loup Creek on Independence Day “wearing the miners badge”, *UMWJ*, 19 July 1900, p. 4.

⁸⁴ E.M. Steel, “Mother Jones in the Fairmont Field, 1902”, *Journal of American History*, 57 (1970), p. 294.

⁸⁵ *UMWJ*, 12 September 1912, p. 2.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸⁷ Bower Committee to Morgan, 14 July 1921, Morgan Papers, Box 8, File 2.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ L.U. 404 to Secretary of Labor, 12 September 1921, FMCS, File 170/1185 A.

and along the M and K railroad in Monongalia and Preston counties", as the miners were "being deprived of the rights to live as citizens".⁹⁰

In the same vein the Kanawha strikers, after a rally in August 1912, presented Governor W.E. Glasscock with a petition which claimed that the mine guards "beat, abuse, maim, and hold up citizens without process of law; deny freedom of speech, a provision guaranteed by the Constitution; deny the citizens the right to assemble in a peaceable manner".⁹¹ An almost identical appeal to that of the Cannelton miners who called for the implementation of "the Bill of Rights and the Constitution of the United States enjoyed by citizens in all other states of the union", in place of the "knotted clubs" mentioned earlier, as well as urging Keeney to organize a "Constitutional League".⁹²

Among the many other complaints, conveyed directly to Governor E. Morgan, a local union at Monclo threatened recall proceedings because, they claimed, "your acts as governor of this state in said strike indicates your intention to defeat the miners in gaining their statutory rights" which "is in violation of your oath of office".⁹³ This was typical, as was the appeal from Mountclare for the "granting to the miners of this state their lawful and citizens constitutional rights".⁹⁴

Heroic figures from the past were also cited in support of the miners' demands. The foreign-born miner who compared the state with his native Russia, for example, concluded, optimistically, that "as Lincoln said, we will come out on top".⁹⁵ Lincoln was also mentioned in a letter to President Harding in 1922. Margaret Fowles, a miner's wife from Scottdale, concluded her eloquent appeal with "no man is fit to preside over the destiny of this republic who does not recognize with Lincoln that the voice of the people is the voice of God".⁹⁶

Others, like Keeney, used the example of such historical figures to justify the miners' call to arms. Replying to criticism of a speech he made during which a revolver was inadvertently displayed, Keeney remarked,

I am still inclined to have my constitutional rights or raise hell. Patrick Henry hinted at the same conviction, and even Thomas Jefferson and a few of his fellow patriots not only believed in raising hell to secure their rights, but actually did so [. . .] In fact, I'm inclined to the conviction that any one who won't raise hell to protect his rights is a poor citizen.⁹⁷

⁹⁰ Resolutions Committee, Rosebud to President Harding, 2 September 1920, *ibid.*, File 170/1185, Part One.

⁹¹ *Conditions in the Paint Creek District*, Pt. 3, p. 2263.

⁹² Letter from various locals at mass meeting to Keeney, 10 July 1921, Morgan Papers, Box 8, File 1.

⁹³ Local 4384, Monclo to Morgan, 14 July 1921, *ibid.*, Box 8, File 2.

⁹⁴ Mountclare Committee to Morgan, 15 July 1921, *ibid.*, Box 8, File 2.

⁹⁵ *UMWJ*, 15 November 1900, p. 4.

⁹⁶ Fowles to Harding, 6 January 1922, FMCS, File 170/1185 A.

⁹⁷ *West Virginia Federationist*, 26 February 1920, p. 1.

A conviction shared by Mother Jones who in 1912, for example, told the Kanawha strikers how she led a group of miners up to Acme. After receiving loud cheers from the audience when she recalled that “we took a couple of guns because we knew we were going to meet some thugs”, she added, “we will prepare for the job, just like Lincoln and Washington did. We took lessons from them”.⁹⁸

The lessons taken from the past and, indeed, the whole appeal to American rights and values were, however, far more ambiguous than they at first seem. Were the miners fighting to receive the same treatment as the rest of America, or were they appealing to a more radical, historical, ideal of America? Moreover, what did this ideal mean – Gompers and Keeney, for example, had very different definitions. In fact these issues were never really worked out and instead the overwhelming impression is of the assertion of these rights and symbols as being somehow absolute and self-evident – as if the myth and reality of America somehow coincided, or were interchangeable.

Yet those responsible for the miners’ exploitation in West Virginia themselves espoused Americanism, and laid claim to the same rights and traditions as justification for their actions; as the Revd G.B. Hammer, who was seemingly reduced to apoplexy after hearing Mother Jones speak, put it, “Every true and thoughtful American citizen sees that America needs more Americanizing”.⁹⁹ This similarity in language is apparent, for example, in the operators’ involvement in the American Constitutional Association at the end of this period. They published *The American Citizen* twice monthly, and claimed to support “American Ideals”, “a greater respect for law and order”, “real patriotism and love of country”, as opposed to the (mythical) “tide of bolshevism”.¹⁰⁰

The claim that they were upholding law and order was central to the operator and state governments’ arguments. Thus Morgan replied to the miners at Bower, “I assure you that every effort possible is being made to secure the people, and when I say ‘people’ I mean *all the people* of Mingo county, the rights guaranteed to them by our state and federal constitutions”.¹⁰¹ It is clear that this definition of America, its constitution, and the meaning of citizenship, involved opposing unions, socialists and any others who attempted to protest against the unfettered excesses of business. In their view, it was the UMWA which was un-American.

And it was this definition of the meaning of America, rather than that of the miners, which was closest to that held by those in power in the US generally. In reality, the US labour movement had consistently appealed to the radical republican tradition and the constitutional order,

⁹⁸ *Conditions in the Paint Creek District*, Pt. 3, p. 2264.

⁹⁹ Statement enclosed with letter from A.R. Montgomery to Cornwell, Cornwell Papers, Series 35, Box 136.

¹⁰⁰ See leaflet “The Work of the American Constitutional Association”, *ibid.*, Box 135.

¹⁰¹ Morgan to A.M. Wimer, Bower Local, 16 July 1921, Morgan Papers, Box 8, File 2..

yet had been restrained by hostile court and government decisions. It was not only in West Virginia in this period, therefore, that workers discovered that they “did not live in a world shaped according to their preferred version of Americanism”.¹⁰²

If, therefore, it was this America which the West Virginia miners were wanting to return to, they would have encountered a reality which was far removed from the Bower miners’ demand for “full measure of the workers constitutional guarantees to the protection of their rights to organize and combine”. But such issues were never completely worked through. This was not a class-conscious version of Americanism, as suggested by Corbin, but rather a vague political language constructed against the odds amidst a severely fragmented social and political culture. With no political movement to help construct a genuinely radical language, or connect it to a wider political discourse, the heterogeneous workforce were only able to unite around a broad belief in law and order, and their rights as citizens of a “Great Republic” which submerged the ambiguity of such beliefs and failed to clarify, or place in context, the underlying economic basis for their exploitation.

¹⁰² L. Fink, “Labor, Liberty and the Law: Trade Unionism and the Problem of American Constitutional Order”, *Journal of American History*, 74, 1 (1987), pp. 904–925, 906.