

# NEW MASSES

1910—Sixth Year of the New Masses -- 1926 -- Twenty First Year of the Masses—1931

VOLUME 7

DECEMBER, 1931

NUMBER 7

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Published monthly by NEW MASSES, Inc., Office of publication, 63 West 15 St., New York. Copyright 1931, by NEW MASSES, Inc., Reg. U. S. Patent Office. Drawings and text may not be reprinted without permission. Entered as second class matter, June 24, 1926, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879.

Subscribers are notified that no change of address can be effected in less than a month. The NEW MASSES is a co-operative venture. It does not pay for contributions.

Subscription \$1.50 a year in U. S. and Colonies and Mexi co. Foreign, \$2.00. Canada, \$3.50. Single Copies, 15 Cents

## CHARLES RUMFORD WALKER

# WE WENT TO HARLAN

News services in the past month have ticked off the "terror" of Harlan County to all the principal newspapers in Europe and the United States. To the news reading world Harlan has become a sort of temporary capital of violence and disorder. The metropolitan dailies and a handful of liberal newspapers have even excavated part of the hideous but less dramatic background of Harlan violence. They have published wage scales and statistics of starvation. Readers of these papers are made abruptly aware that last summer in Straight Creek, Kentucky four to seven babies died each week from hunger. And finally for another strata of readers the legal terror in Harlan has been dramatized through the indictment for "criminal syndicalism" of Theodore Dreiser and his committee of writers who went to Harlan to "test free speech!" But to date neither the newspapers or the releases of the Dreiser committee have emphasized the actual significance of Harlan. That lies in the miners' answer. On their condition of nakedness, starvation, and terror, on the whole problem of coal, the miner has his own "findings."

I shall put them into this article.

As a member of the "Dreiser committee" I went to Kentucky and investigated the Harlan violence and its starvation background. Before the committee, came Jeff Baldwin who told of his brother's killing. He was sworn before a notary. I shan't forget that story. It runs this way. One night a deputy sheriff drove up to the strikers' soup kitchen, flashed his head lights into the miners' eyes and shot dead Julius Baldwin and Joe Moore. The sheriff's name was Lee Fleener. He was on the pay roll of the coal companies. This was a big day—he had killed two union organizers and one of them (Baldwin) was secretary of the National Miners' union, who had been feeding the women and children of striking miners. The committee proceeded to check up the story. Before the committee Attorney Brock admitted that Fleener had been arraigned on the day that Jeff Baldwin, witness of his brother's killing was absent *burying his brother*... No effort made to call him as witness, although he had seen the murderer. Court records show that Fleener gave himself up, admitted killing both men, and pled self-defense. The Committee went to Sheriff Blair. Cornered, he admitted that *Fleener was still in his employ as deputy sheriff*—"ready" as the miners put it "to kill a few more strikers." This was a start for the Committee. We kept digging till the whole narrative of terror unfolded; the soup kitchen dynamiting, use of the militia to bring in scabs by the carload, repeated raids on homes, the blacklisting of 3000 miners, with hundreds in jail for criminal syndicalism, and thirty-four

under indictment for murder. Testimony showed with precision the invaluable assistance of courts to gun men, for no deputy was indicted, though five miners were shot dead. Judge Baby-face Jones handpicked his own juries. Attorney and Judge together offered prisoners release on promise to "quit working for the union, and to leave the county."

After hearings Dreiser and the committee went out to the mines and mining towns. There we ate with miners, visited their houses, talked with their wives and children. Here was the economic background for intimidation by Court and shot gun. Here were children without clothes, polluted drinking water, the houses unfit for animals, and everywhere "flux," the disease of starvation. In Straight Creek the only roof which didn't leak was the operator's barn. Low wages and a virtual peonage were all over Harlan. Twenty-five to thirty-five dollars a month in many cases—for families of three to eight—and "cuts" for mine expense, doctor and burial fund, diminishing actual cash payment to a dollar or two or three a month. I visited one town where the miners built coffins and buried their own dead, although the company still collected the "burial fees." But these conditions are not in themselves remarkable. There has been a terror before in the coal fields. Government reports for thirty years are full of them. Nor are they a Kentucky specialty. West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Illinois boast of their own brutalities. And back of it always, the condition of low wages, starvation, polluted water, cattle shacks for homes, a decimation of children from disease and starvation. No, the fact which amazes the investigator is not "bad conditions" or gun-thug terror but the character of the miner in the face of them. One might expect a loss of vitality, slow brutalization, the cowed mind of the peon. What actually? In Kentucky despite hunger, strength, despite peonage, independence, a live intelligence, a shrewd knowledge of rights, and a fighting spirit. Most of the Kentucky miners are of Anglo-Saxon stock. One hundred percenters! "My grandpappy came to Kaintuck, jes after he helped George Washington in the war." And again: "My folks fit for freedom in the Revolution, and by the Lord I'll fight for it again!" Standing on their feet in open meeting men and women—speak in flowing periods, an eloquent Biblical speech, that mixes easily with revolutionary phrases which come to them from their own Kentucky experience.

What has been their answer to starvation and the terror? Here is part of it.

After two hundred thug deputies were quartered among them,

4  
after the battle of Evarts, after the arrest of sixty miners for murder, after dynamiting of their soup kitchen—4000 men joined the miners' union—in six days.

After the destruction of five relief kitchens for women and children a signing up of most of the women in the union.

Against the effort of courts and operators to "break the desire to strike" a universal demand for a general coal strike throughout the whole south.

Individual voices giving this answer echo in my mind:

"We aren't afraid of Judge Baby-face Jones and he knows it. —They'll get me sometime (from an organizer beaten up and threatened with death) but I don't care; I'm going to organize that union.—We aren't afraid of the "tin horns" (soldiers). We aren't afraid of gun thugs—they're afraid of us.—I love my children ten thousand times more than I love the coal operators or President Hoover! (This from an old miner of fifty at the Wallins Creek Union meeting). And I say that the man who isn't willing to support and stand by his children is ten times worse than an infidel!—If they won't let us march under the American flag (the operators had broken up a thousand union men—United Mine Workers—marching under the stars and stripes!) we'll march under the Red Flag!

This is the answer of Harlan.

**Sam Ornitz**

## MINERS & MULES

In 1920, EDWIN P. MORROW, THEN GOVERNOR OF KENTUCKY, PROPHESED THE INDICTMENT OF THE DREISER COMMITTEE IN 1931. HE MADE THE PROPHECY JUST BEFORE HE SIGNED THE CRIMINAL SYNDICALISM LAW. HE HATED TO SIGN IT BUT HE WASN'T MAN ENOUGH TO RESIST THE PRESSURE OF COAL OPERATORS, CHURCHMEN, AND THE AMERICAN LEGION. JUST BEFORE HE SIGNED THE BILL, HE SAID, "EVERY ABOLITIONIST, INCLUDING HENRY WARD BEECHER AND THEODORE PARKER COULD, AND DOUBTLESS WOULD, HAVE BEEN CONVICTED AS FELONS UNDER THIS LAW."

HIS PROPHECY CAME TO PASS IN NOVEMBER 1921, WHEN DREISER AND HIS COMMITTEE WERE INDICTED FOR CRIMINAL SYNDICALISM, MERELY BECAUSE THEY PROTESTED AGAINST AND EXPOSED MODERN SLAVERY ENFORCED BY GUN THUGS, THE COURTS, THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY, THE SHERIFF AND THE PRESS OF KENTUCKY.

THREE THOUSAND MINERS WITH THEIR WIVES AND CHILDREN ARE STARVING AND FREEZING TO DEATH IN THE COAL HOLLOWES OF KENTUCKY. THESE ARE THE BLACKLISTED MINERS. THEY AREN'T ALLOWED TO WORK AND THEY CAN'T LEAVE. THEY HAVEN'T MONEY NOR STRENGTH ENOUGH TO MIGRATE A MILE. EVEN THE MINERS WHO ARE ALLOWED TO WORK AT 80c A DAY ARE WASTING AWAY FROM MALNUTRITION. THEIR CHILDREN ARE DYING OF THE FLUX. THE CHILDREN WHO SURVIVE CAN'T GO TO SCHOOL BECAUSE THEY HAVE NO CLOTHES. IN ALL, THIRTY THOUSAND PEOPLE FACE A HORRIBLE WINTER—ALL BECAUSE THEY DARE TO ASK FOR STALLS AND FODDER AS GOOD AS THOSE THE COAL OPERATORS PROVIDE FOR THE MINE MULES.

THE RED CROSS REFUSES TO HELP THEM. THE PROSPEROUS BOURGEOIS COMMUNITIES THAT SURROUND THEM ENCOURAGE THE COURTS AND GUN THUGS TO HARASS THEM INTO SUBMISSION. ORGANIZED CHARITY REFUSES TO HELP ANYONE TAINTED WITH RADICALISM. THESE MINERS WILL BE PERMITTED TO EXIST ONLY IF THEY WILL ACCEPT WAGES, HOURS AND CONDITIONS, NO MATTER HOW TERRIBLE, THAT WILL ENABLE THE COAL MINERS TO RETURN FAT DIVIDENDS. THIS IS THE MORAL ISSUE TO THE GOOD PEOPLE OF KENTUCKY,—THE MINERS MUST PAY EVEN IF THE MINERS AND THEIR FAMILIES HAVE TO STARVE.

THE SWORN TESTIMONY TAKEN BY THE DREISER COMMITTEE IS GOING TO BE PUBLISHED IN BOOK FORM. HERE ARE A FEW EXCERPTS FROM THE DREISER RECORD THAT SHOW THE CHARACTER, COURAGE AND CONDITION OF THE KENTUCKY MINERS. FIRST WE ARE REPRINTING THE SONG THAT AUNT MOLLY JACKSON COMPOSED AS A BATTLE CRY FOR THE STARVING MINERS, AND WHICH SHE HERSELF SANG FOR THE DREISER COMMITTEE AT A MASS MEETING HELD IN STRAIGHT CREEK. AUNT MOLLY IS THE WIFE OF A MINER, SIXTY YEARS OF AGE AND THE LOCAL MID-WIFE.

## THE HUNGRY BLUES

By AUNT MOLLY JACKSON

*I am sad and wearied, I have got the hungry ragged blues.  
Not a penny in my pocket to buy one thing I need to use.  
I was up this morning with the worst blues I ever had in my life  
Not a bite to cook for breakfast, or for a coal miners' wife.*

*When my husband works in the coal mines he loads a car on every trip,  
Then he goes to the office that evenin' and gits denied of scrip  
Just because it took all he had made that day to pay his mine expenses,  
Just because it took all he had made that day to pay his mine expenses  
A man that will just work for coal light and carbide, he aint got a speck of sense.*

*All the women in this coal camp are a-sittin' with bowed down heads  
Ragged and barefooted and their children a-cryin' for bread.  
No food, no clothes for our children.  
I am sure this aint no lie.  
If we caint get no more for our labor, we will starve to death and die.*

*Please dont go under those mountains, with the slate a-hangin' over your head.  
Please dont go under those mountains with the slate a-hangin' over your head.  
And work for just coal light and carbide, and your children a-cryin' for bread.  
I pray you take my counsel, please take a friend's advice,  
Dont load no more, dont put out no more till you can get a livin price.*

*This minin town I live in is a sad and a lonely place;  
This minin' town I live in is a sad and a lonely place;  
For pity and starvation is pictured on every face,  
Everybody hungry and ragged, no slippers on their feet,  
Everybody hungry and ragged, no slippers on their feet  
All a-go'in round from place to place bummin for a little food to eat.*

*Listen my friends and comrade's, please take a friend's advice,  
Dont put out no more of your labor till you get a livin price.*

*Please dont go under those mountains, with the slate a-hangin' over your head.  
Please dont go under those mountains with the slate a-hanging' over your head.  
And work for just coal light and carbide, and your children a-cryin' for bread.  
I pray you take my counsel, please take a friend's advice,  
Dont load no more, dont put out no more till you can get a livin price.*



William Gropper

## THE HARLAN MINERS SPEAK

*Speech of Miner Donaldson at the Wallins Creek, Mass Meeting:*

I have been a miner for the past 33 years. During this time under the ground, I have had some terribly trying times. In this period of time I have shot at gun thugs and been shot by them. I spent some days in the prison because of violation of corrupt laws. The results of these laws against the laborers is that it is impossible to live in Kentucky without violating some of the laws. *I love the flag of United States and America but I hate the men who handle this country; these men have so taken away our privileges that it is impossible to live . . . I love my children ten thousand times better than I love Hoover and the coal operators . . . The coal operators say the Roossian Red has been down in this here country . . . Well, a man that won't support and stand by his children is ten times worse than an infidel. There is no place for a capitalist sympathizer but Hell. . . I want to say that the miners are today worse off than slaves during slave time. . . You go into the mines to slave for \$1.00 or 80¢ a day. You eat pinto beans and corn beans. You go to bed in a bag of rags but the well bound Criminal Syndicalist law forbids you to speak. . . The National Miners Union stands for the principles that our forefathers fought for us.*

The United Mine Workers in their day was a success but we got traitors in and they sold us out. The labor leader has led you into captivity. . . I know some time men will have to make a complete sacrifice; hundreds of men's lives will be sacrificed but nothing good ever came without somebody making a sacrifice. I love my children but this is the only reason that I would leave

my children and make the great sacrifice . . . I am going to feed my children. I am going to kill, murder, rob for my children because I won't let my children starve. If you give me a show, I will work it out. The National Miners Union is the only thing that has not failed us. I just made up my mind that I won't work and go hungry any more. Last winter was a cold winter and I want to say to you that during the winter I worked every day at such poor wages and could hardly buy food for my children, who had to go out without a bit of underwear. And then you say that this is a good country. I say that it is not a good country that denies a man a good fair wage. We don't want to get rich. We want to eat. If you put a man into poverty then you send him down to Hell and sin.

*Speech of Sula Gates at Glendon Baptist Church, Straight Creek, Kentucky:*

We, the miners' wives, have to go to the company stores to draw the scrip what their husband made the day before. If they got any, they only got a small allowance. The biggest part is taken out for carbide. They cannot get much to eat because they have to buy this. When we go to the company stores the prices are so high, we cannot buy our groceries or anything. Our children, they go without lunch. Sometimes they have a little beans and corn-bread but without anything on it. We have all kinds of disease because of that. No nourishment or food. That is the reason why we have Flux. There are many cases of Flux. We don't even

SIGN YOUR NAME to Receipt Below Before You Come to Office for Money

No. 6 Cary, Ky. 9/3/1938 103...

**Old Straight Creek Coal Corporation**  
Incorporated  
IN ACCOUNT WITH

Name Ford Bundy

CHARGES		CREDIT	
Store	600	Tons at	
Lights		Tons at	
Rent	250	797 Tons at	94 31.88
Coal		Hours at	
Smithing		Hours at	
Doctor	100	Hours at	
Hospital		Yards at	
Insurance		Yards at	
Car Checks		Yards at	
Transfers	2200	Car Checks Returned	
Prev. Overdraft		Transfers	
Burial Fund		Cash Retained	
Paid first pay day			
Cash Advanced			
	3150		
Bal. Due Workman	38	Balance Due Company	
Total	3188	Total	3188

RETAIN THIS STATEMENT

**PORTRAIT OF ONE MONTH'S HARD LABOR IN A KENTUCKY COAL MINE—"BALANCE DUE WORKMAN" 38 CENTS!**—Note: Bear in mind that Ford Bundy had a "good" month. Other miners were lucky to average \$14 to \$20 a month on the "book." The "scrip slaves" received only about fifty cents on every dollar they earned by being forced to cash their "scrip" in company stores.

know how many. We have had many deaths. The conditions of our drinking water is so impure that the County nurse reported that it was very bad and impure, yet we have no better water yet. The conditions of our houses are very bad. The houses are so bad they are about to fall down. So rotten and cold, we nearly freeze to death. You can ask the boss to fix the house but he tells us he cannot and won't do it. . . There was a case of a little kid. The doctor saw it and said nothing was wrong, to give it a dose of castor oil. Then when he saw the funeral of the kid he said "Did that kid finally die and git out of the way?" That is the kind of doctor we have here. We are cut wages for the doctor; the men are cut \$2 a month for the doctor. You get very bad service from the doctor. What's the good of calling a doctor, if he doesn't come around when you call him. You call him one day and he doesn't come around for a few days. You can be dead in the meantime. And the company, if they know a man is honest and pays back his debts, then they give him scrip and get him into debt and then he works and pays the debt. And then if he refuses to get in debt then he won't let him work. We go to Pineville to buy where the stuff is much cheaper but he doesn't want us to go there but he wants us to buy in his store and if we refuse he doesn't let us work for him so we have to do it. When we git scrip we have to buy in his store and we have to pay much more for everything and then we can't buy anything after we pay for the carbide. The National Miners Union, which has come into this country, we never realized what it was to have someone help us until they came in here and got us poor miners together. The wives must be organized because she has to suffer, she and the children has to go without clothes and she has to see her children starve. . . The miners yet cannot see when they won't need their bosses. The thing for everyone is to unite and stick together and fight these conditions and fight for better wages and better food and more of it and milk and stuff for the children. The children are so cold, they turn blue. They try to go to school and try to learn but they have not got the energy to learn. We have to fight these wage cuts. Everytime you turn around you get a wage cut. Everytime

they cut the prices in the store a little, we know that we are going to get a wage cut. They cut the prices a little bit and give us a big wage cut. That is the reason we must organize a union and stick together to fight this thing. The wives here, you don't see a one to have sufficient clothes to go out in public.

Their shoes is off their feet. They have them tied with strings. In the summer, if they happen to have a pair of shoes, they don't wear them, they save them for the cold winter. The kids they go around with no shoes and no food, and you wonder why we are losing children. I don't see how they can stand it. It is hard for grown persons to stand. Many people say why don't you buy. We have nothing to buy with. If we git some money, we go to the store and when we buy, we can't buy less than 25¢ worth of carbide and we have to buy carbide. I ask all the women and all the men of this place to stick together. All the wives must join with us. Now is the time that the women has some right to fight with her husband and by both fighting we can win in time to come. The good thing about the National Miners Union is that they don't leave the women out and so, not like in the other times, many times the wives would make the husbands go back to work. The wives must meet with their husbands and together plan because it is as much to the wives as to the miners. In the National Miners Union the wives know just as much what is going on. We are not going to say, "Go on Johnny, go back to work." We are going to stand right along with them and fight. We are thankful to the National Miners Union for this. We never had nothing to do before but cook some beans. Now we have something to do. Now we have something else to do. We are going to have John win the strike. We were naked long enough and we are going to fight for something. We are going to keep this organization and we are going to fight. I appreciate the writers' committee so much, I don't know how to express it.

**Aunt Molly Jackson:**

The people in this country is destitute of anything that is really nourishing to the body. That is the truth. Even the babies have lost their lives, and we have buried from four to seven a week all along, during the warm weather, on account of cholera, famine, flux-stomach trouble brought on by undernourishment. Their food is very bad, such as beans and harsh foods fried in this lard that is so hard to digest. It is impossible for a little baby's stomach to digest them. They can only get beans.

The Red Cross put out some beans and corn. No milk at all. A lot of families have depended on the Red Cross. Now Thea Bennett could tell you about the Red Cross, what they allowed a week. Just beans and potatoes. The Red Cross does not give to everyone. I always thought they was selfish; they didn't have the right kind of heart. The Red Cross is against a man who is trying to better conditions. They are for the operators, and they want the mines to be going so they won't give anything to a man unless he does what the operators want him to. There is a lot of little children in destitution. Their feet are on the ground. They are going to get pneumonia and flu this winter that will kill them children off. But the Red Cross refused relief because they was members of the National Miners Union. They says, "We are not responsible for those men out on strike. They should go back to work and work for any price that they will take them for." The children die. Seven each week, up and down this creek. They cut off the men's wages to bury them. But all the miners buries their own dead. They cut \$2 a month, and you cannot get this money. If I had a cow or a horse I certainly would be more interested in them than the coal operators is in these people. . . My husband is a member of the National Miners Union, and I am too, and I have never stopped, brother, since I know of this work for the N.M.U.

**Bourgeois Scholar**

*The arm-chair genius who can contemplate  
The speed of light and weigh the distant stars  
Is "blind" to brutal structure of the State  
And vulture shadows of impending wars.  
His task: to hide, obscure and confuse,  
Muddle the minds of those in honest toil—  
Half-drunk himself upon his phrasey booze;  
Warmed by the musty heat of midnight oil,  
His tent, pitched in the bosses' camp,  
Topped by the white flag of passivity,  
Houses a bat that circumnavigates a lamp.*

PORTER MYRON CHAFFEE