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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,