



The Molly Brown House Museum

Ludlow and the Coal Field Wars

April 20th marks the anniversary of a labor strike in southern Colorado that ended tragically. In a Denver Post interview from May 1, 1914, Margaret “Molly” Brown said “The solution is for the people of Colorado to rise in a body and demand that Rockefeller put into practice that which he has been teaching his Sunday school class... ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ ”



The citizens of the Ludlow tent colony were a community of mine workers and their families that represented about thirty-two different racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups that included coal mine workers of Greek, Mexican, and Italian descent. Despite the likely barriers in communication, these families came together to demand better working conditions and benefits from their management.

Their list of seven demands included four stipulations that were already Colorado state laws. To make their needs known, they organized a strike that began on September 24, 1913 and brought together various other workers from neighboring colonies. This amassing of so many different types of people made the strike truly unique and mine owners feared what this unprecedented solidarity would mean for them. This fear caused many of them to put in requests for the presence of the National Guard.

In response, Margaret Brown chaired the newly founded Women’s Relief Committee alongside Senator Helen Ring Robinson and former legislator Alma Lafferty to aid the miners. Another prominent woman who responded to Ludlow was labor reformer, Mary “Mother” Jones, once known as the “Most Dangerous Woman in America.” In late 1913, Mother Jones urged for an independent Congressional investigation. When she tried to return to Colorado in early January of 1914, she was arrested.

Protesters urged her release, and over 1,000 women and children gathered in front of the militia offices. When a court case threatened Jones’ release the militia let her go. Mother Jones continued her crusade, and was again arrested by the militia and taken to a prison deemed uninhabitable. She was released again, and went to Washington, D.C. to testify in front of Congress.



Meanwhile, at Ludlow, mine guards opened fire on the miners' celebration of Greek Orthodox Easter. The strikers returned fire, but once their ammunition ran out, the guards entered the camp, executed strike leaders and their families, took prisoners, and set the camp on fire, resulting in the deaths of 25 people, including 11 children.



Ludlow became a catalyst over the summer of 1914 for Margaret Brown by elevating her political and social justice agendas. Like Mother Jones, she brokered talks between the unions and capitalists and she generated international attention in support of miners’ rights as she travelled all over the U.S. on a speaking tour. Ludlow also became a part of her campaign platform as she considered a bid for the US Senate with the support of many in both Colorado and Newport, RI.

In July, Margaret and her friends CO Senator Helen Ring Robinson and Judge Ben Lindsey, were asked to address the militia strike at Ludlow at the Conference of Great Women. Robinson opened her address by stating that, "Neighbors, I want to feel free to tell you unpleasant things. The shame of Colorado is your shame, your problem, just as truly as our problem." She ended by saying that, "It is men's duty to see that the wheels of industry go round, but women must see that there shall be no blood on the wheels."

The United Mine Workers of America purchased the site in 1915, and created a memorial. UMWA believed that Ludlow had immense significance, contending that: "The soil of Ludlow field has been consecrated by their blood, and to the miners of America it is hallowed ground." Those who died at Ludlow were considered "American heroes," in the long history of the miners' struggle for workplace rights.

Learn more at Colorado Encyclopedia: <https://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/ludlow-massacre>

Or at: <https://www.historycolorado.org/sites/default/files/media/document/2018/ludlow-resource-set-3-17-2014.pdf>

Discussion Questions:

Discuss these questions with your learners.

What issues did workers face 100 years ago?

How did businesses and the workers respond to the issues?

Were those "American heroes" at Ludlow perusing the American Dream?

What is your definition of the American Dream?

What would it take for you to consider taking action as a worker?

What lessons can current workers learn from history?

Which strategies would you recommend that workers use today?