

Hundreds to march 50 miles in battle to save W.Va.'s historic Blair Mountain from strip mining

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BLAIR, W.Va. — On this steep-sided mountain in West Virginia's southern coalfields, hundreds will retrace the steps of miners who waged the nation's largest armed uprising since the Civil War, hoping 90 years later to protect the site of that bloody battle.

The protesters will retell the story of the 7,500 to 10,000 unionizing coal miners who fought for principles that helped shape today's U.S. labor laws — and, they hope, keep Blair Mountain from becoming just another barren, flat-topped strip mine.

Much of the coal-rich mountain is owned by two energy companies fighting efforts to put it on the National Register of Historic Places. Such a designation wouldn't automatically stop mining, but it could complicate and slow down the review process.

Some proposed operations on Blair Mountain already have permits and one mine is active, but the coal companies haven't disclosed immediate plans to start blasting on the battlefield.

The protesters set out Monday from Marmet and will march 50 miles over five days, traversing narrow country roads where coal trucks often pass, walking the same route the miners took in the summer of 1921.

As they started down the street, State Police troopers told them not to display signs urging motorists to slow down. Such signs, the troopers said, can only be used by law enforcement and the Division of Highways. They also warned the group to march single-file when they got beyond city limits.

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As they walked, one trooper followed along, filming.

Wilma Steele, a 60-year-old art teacher at Gilbert High School and the wife of a retired underground miner, wants people to connect with the mountain's history and realize the cannonballs and shell casings that lie here are not merely artifacts.

"And Blair Mountain is more than just a mountain," Steele says. "It was a chance for people to get over their differences and stand up for what's right."

The miners marched for what was then unthinkable: They wanted to be paid by the hour, not the ton. They wanted a week that lasted five days, not seven. They wanted black miners and white miners paid the same.

They'd been trying to unionize for three years, and they'd had enough when a key ally, Matewan Police Chief Sid Hatfield, was killed by a coal company's private security guards.

On the battlefield of Blair Mountain — some 1,600 acres stretched across 10 miles of ridgeline — the miners met a dug-in army of law enforcement officers and hired guns who had fortified pickets, protective trenches, homemade bombs and machine guns.

At least 16 men died before the miners surrendered to the federal troops who arrived Sept. 5.

Back then, the marchers tied red bandannas around their necks to identify themselves. They scrambled through the brush carryi

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