



Art: John French Sloan, cover of *The Masses*, June 1914 edition

Remembering Ludlow 1914

*A commemoration of the
Ludlow Strike*

Join IWW and Bread & Roses Center
Friday, April 18, 7–10 pm
Mercury Cafe
2199 California St., Denver
Free Admission

Speaker: Scott Martelle

Author, *Blood Passion: The Ludlow Massacre
and Class War in the American West*

Screening: *Way Down in the Hole* and
Ludlow Massacre by local filmmakers

More Ludlow events: <http://workersbreadandroses.org/ludlow.html>



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About Ludlow

Imagine lying under a thin canvas tent on a cold Colorado winter night. To the west is a sprawl of stony foothills beneath the Spanish peaks connecting to the Sangre de Cristo mountains and within them two canyons, Berwind and Delagua, each containing a rugged trail to the coal mines.

On those trails an army of mine guards: not just the regulars hired in from Denver and Boulder, but the best of the scabs, and the worst hired in by the regional and national thug-magnet detective agencies, like Baldwin-Phelps and Pinkerton.

These forces boasted the same men who had viciously destroyed the Forbes miners' camp minutes away and days earlier with the armored machine gun on wheels known to the miners as the Death Special, and before that by a few months Cabin Creek and Matewan in West Virginia. Until one striker borrowed and employed a high powered rifle from his brother, a dentist, a searchlight at the Hastings guard encampment swept the Ludlow miners camp through the night, casting ominous shadows across tent walls and dusty camp walkways.

On the east runs the Colorado and Southern railroad track and the memory of the train that sped by the West Virginia colony a few months before firing bursts of machine gun bullets into the tents of sleeping strikers.

In the middle were miners laid bare on an open windswept plain. They dug out shelters under the tent floors to hide the women and children, and along dry ravines they dug rifle pits, even though many of them never got rifles, training for the inevitable with carved-wood substitutes instead. The veterans of the 1904 strike well recall how they were rounded up, shoved into rail cars, beaten and dumped into the desert with neither food nor water.

Why were the miners set in such peril? Here's the picture of the choice they had. As the bullets began to fly in the Colorado camps, just a few dozen miles south in Dawson, New Mexico, just over Raton pass, were a group of non-union coal mines owned by the Phelps-Dodge Corporation. On Oct. 22, a new shaft, inadequate circulation and an explosion, the same story that haunts the mines to this day, and 260 coalminers lay dead underground.

The miners were caught between mass death from negligence or deliberate death at the end of a gun. The same as was true in 1903 and 1904 up and down the Front Range and then again in 1927 and 1928 when the fighting broke out in the north at a mine called Columbine between Lafayette and Erie. The most notable change may have been that, thanks to the technology of World War I, the machine gun of 1927 was more deadly and the state had, and used, tanks and airplanes to intimidate strikers.

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The determination of the strikers through the series of conflicts and the eventual success in unionizing the mines in 1928 was not born of the sympathies of do-gooder progressives or the mullings of philosophers, though all played a role, but of the miners' necessity to choose between the inevitable fruitless death of passivity, or the possibility of death in active and armed resistance. At least with resistance lay the possibility of real victory, a life without exploitation and dehumanization. That is a struggle we share to this day, and a debt we owe to the women and men of Columbine, Cripple Creek and Ludlow, Colorado.

More needs to be said about the Columbine strike. After Ludlow, and the failure of the miners to win the key demand of the day, union recognition, the United Mine Workers of America pulled out of Colorado. This withdrawal was due not only to the stalemate from Ludlow but also to internal strife in the union and the demands of miners' struggles in the East, including the largest civil insurrection since the Civil War, the Battle of Blair Mountain. Workers' struggles do not stop with the retreat of unions, however. By the late 1920s the tensions had boiled over again and by late 1927 all the mines north of Denver were shut down except the Columbine. The union the miners turned to, despite the vicious attacks it was subjected to by both the government and owners' organizations after the War and the Communist takeover in Russia and near takeover in Germany, was the Industrial Workers of the World. In November the Columbine picketers were denied access to the municipal facilities in the mine village of Serene. A shoving match turned into perimeter breach and militiamen opened up machine guns from the top of the nearby tippie and water tower, killing at least six on the spot and injuring many more.

The ensuing open warfare spread to the southern fields, again including organized armed conflict on both sides, burning and looting of properties claimed by the companies, internal differences among the owners, and eventually a resolution that achieved for the miners the central demand of the era: union recognition, which provided a platform for resolving ongoing grievances, or at least raising them as more than a company directive. It also brought to the fore rank-and-file firebrands of the workers' movement and a great increase in the number of women directly involved. To go along with names like Louis Tikas and John Lawson at Ludlow, after Columbine we have added the names Santa Benash and "Flaming" Milka Sablich, and perhaps laid to rest the notion that the IWW died with the Palmer raids of 1919. The IWW, the most feared of all unions in the U.S., was feared not because of its numbers, although they did at one time reach into the hundreds of thousands with many more followers, but because it was the only union that openly opposed capitalism itself, and it continues steadfast in that stance to this day.

Refs: Martelle: *Blood Passion: The Ludlow Massacre and Class War in the American West*; Papanikolas: *Buried Unsong*; May & Myers, eds.: *Slaughter in Serene* (workersbreadandroses.org)

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