When Miners United

In the early 1900s, coal miners and their families lived in company towns. In a company town, the coal company owned everything including the houses. The coal company also owned the only store in town. People came from near and far to work in the mines. Some local boys gave up farming to work in the mines. Some African Americans came from Alabama and other states looking for jobs in West Virginia. And some people left their homes in Italy, Poland, and Hungary in search of work.

As more and more companies mined coal they competed for the same customers. Companies lowered their prices to sell more coal, but then they had to pay the miners less. As miners made less money, their families sometimes did not have enough food to eat or money to fix their houses.

When one miner asked his boss for a pay raise, the boss always said, “No.” Miners knew the only way the bosses would listen is if they all refused to work for low pay, but the miners had many differences among them. What do you think were some of the differences?

The miners set aside their differences and formed a union known as the United Mine Workers of America. Working together as a union, they all asked for more money or their work, but the mine owners again said no and threw miners and their families out of the company’s houses. When the company’s guards tried to put miners in jail for forming the union, the miners fought back, and several miners and company guards died in the battles.

The biggest battle took place at Blair Mountain in Logan County, West Virginia. Thousands of miners marched together as an army to fight the mine guards and free other miners from a jail in Mingo County. Even though they came from many places, they worked together.

They had no way to tell who was a miner and who was a guard. The miners decided to tie a red bandanna around their neck, and they became known as the “red neck army.” The red handkerchief became a symbol of unity and solidarity.

The miners fought the guards at Blair Mountain for five days until the U.S. Army arrived. They would not fight the U.S. Army and lost this battle. More than ten years later, the laws changed, and they finally formed their union.
A red bandana like the miners army wore:

Logan County deputies fire at advancing miners from atop Blair Mountain, 1921.

Source http://www.wvculture.org/history/labor/mwnews.html
Newspaper article titled “Miners Battle Guards,” from the Seattle Star, August 31, 1921:

Miners attacked county forces at dawn near Ethel, Sheriff Chafin declared, after reports from scouts were received today.

The miners were driven back to Blair.

Chafin's forces now total 1,000 men, equipped with rifles and machine guns. They expected a renewed attempt to cross the mountains.

PLANE SCATTER PROCLAMATION

Battle planes soared over Boone county showering down upon the masses of armed miners lying behind the ridge dividing Boone and Logan counties copies of the proclamation issued by President Harding calling on them to disperse.

Logan county's first line of defense, 20 miles long, up and down the valley of the Guyandotte, bristled with rifles as hundreds of volunteers from the surrounding counties poured in to strengthen the force that will bear the brunt of the assault if the miners attack.

All thru the night groups of armed citizens, some partly clad in the old O. D., some with the “tin hats”—steel helmets of overseas days—tramped or rode into Logan county and scattered out along the river line.

On the other side of the ridge, where the miners waited for the dawn, great activity was reported early today. The miners' forces have been augmented by the arrival of hundreds of union men, carrying rifles, who passed thru Madison, in Boone county, in automobiles and trains.

Source: https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-blair-mountain/selected-articles
Writing Exercise: Think about what you have learned about West Virginia miners in the early 1900s by reading about them, reading part of a newspaper article, and looking at the photographs from that time. For this exercise, you will use what you have learned to complete sentences. Here is an example:

People came from Poland, Italy, and Hungary to West Virginia because they were searching for jobs and came to work in the coal mines.

Thousands of miners decided to form unions because ________________________________________

________________________________________________________.

Thousands of miners decided to form unions but ________________________________________

________________________________________________________.

Thousands of miners decided to form unions so ________________________________________

________________________________________________________.

There were many differences among miners because ________________________________________

________________________________________________________.

There were many differences among miners but ________________________________________

________________________________________________________.

There were many differences among miners so ________________________________________

________________________________________________________.

The miners lost the Battle of Blair Mountain because ________________________________________

________________________________________________________.

The miners lost the Battle of Blair Mountain but ________________________________________

________________________________________________________.

The miners lost the Battle of Blair Mountain so ________________________________________

________________________________________________________.
Decorate your own bandana!

The red bandana was a symbol of solidarity, and the miners wore it on the march to Blair Mountain as part of their uniform. Imagine you and your friends are working on a project for the greater good of your community and peers. What would be on your bandana?

If you’d like to share your designs and stories with us, you can send them to us at minewarsmuseum@gmail.com or mail them to PO Box 764, Matewan, WV 25678.
West Virginia Content Standards (4th Grade):
West Virginia History

**SS.4.2:** Identify the responsibilities and rights of United State citizens.

**SS.4.17:** Analyze the impact of West Virginia’s geography on transportation, settlement, jobs, clothing, food, shelter, services, and interaction with others outside the state.

**SS.4.19:** Pose, research, and answer student-generated questions relating to West Virginia (e.g. primary source documents, magazines, online resources, etc.)
Optional Videos:

- “The Battle of Blair Mountain was America’s largest insurrection since the Civil War,”  
  West Virginia: A Film History: 
  https://www.wvencyclopedia.org/media/29143?article_id=532
  https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/a135a48d-08db-4cc4-a8e9-ce9da7c4e071/sifting-through-blair-mountains-past/support-materials/

Sources for Further Reading:

- Clio, Miners March: https://theclio.com/entry/101171
- Clio, Blair Mountain: https://theclio.com/entry/22865
- William C. Blizzard, When Miners March (edited by Wess Harris; PM Press, 201