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The Politics of Unionization:
The Impact of Politics on the
Strength of Kentucky
Coal Miners' Unions

By

Bayley Hope Amburgey

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation *magna cum laude*
and
for Graduation with Honors from the Department of Political Science

University of Louisville

March, 2020

Abstract

Extensive research has examined the decline of organized labor in the United States and the political implications that have accompanied it (Goldfield, 1989; Tope and Jacobs, 2009). However, only a small number of works have addressed the political implications specific to Kentucky's relationship with coal labor unions, and very few works have examined reasons for the current possible rebirth of labor organizing. By examining primary and secondary sources such as newspaper articles and previously conducted case studies, this study explores the ways, if at all, political affiliation or control of a state influences the existence and activity of labor unions, specifically when it comes to coal unions. It also builds on previous hypotheses that contend that the political shift Kentucky faced from Democratic to Republican control lead to a decline in coal unions, and argues that Democratic control has in the past been typically more union friendly than Republican control has been in the past. Finally, this study will explore whether a noticeable trend in recent years has developed that shows coal labor organizing is on the rise again in Kentucky.

Key words: Coal, coal miners, unions, unionization, political affiliation, labor organizing, organized labor, Democrat, Republican

Lay Summary

Previous research has shown a significant decline of organized labor and unions in the United States, and even the political implications which have accompanied it. My research in this study will address the political implications specific to Kentucky's relationship with coal labor unions, as well as what could be the current possible rebirth of labor organizing.

For my methodology, I collected newspaper articles, previously conducted interviews and more from and about those involved in Kentucky coal unions as primary sources, and explored existing case studies of Harlan County, Kentucky and research articles as secondary sources. My hypothesis explored the following: does political party affiliation or control affect the trend of unionization? If this is the case, does the shift from Democratic to Republican control in KY at least partially explain the decline of unionism in the coal industry? And lastly, is there a resurgence of unionism in coal recently? If so, how can that be explained?

With these hypotheses, I came across three major findings. The first is that there does seem to be evidence that political affiliation or control of a state could be an influence on the existence and activity of labor unions, and specifically coal unions, based on my findings. I also found some evidence that Democratic control has historically been more union friendly than Republican control has been in the past, based on the public opinion of miners, party legislation and programs, and how union trends seemingly line up with political affiliation in Kentucky and on the federal level. Finally, I was unable to discover a noticeable trend in recent years that shows labor organizing is on the rise again in Kentucky. In fact, when concerning recent labor organizing trends around coal, most research points in the opposite direction. While the Blackjewel Mining Blockade may have rekindled the organizing spirit for a brief moment in Eastern Kentucky, it appears to be an isolated incident, and has not appeared to have an effect on the trends of labor organizing or union membership. While we have not yet seen a resurgence, the possibility still remains as political parties and power shift and change over time.

Introduction

In the past century scholars have compiled a rich history of labor organizing in Kentucky, particularly regarding the coal miner's unions in Harlan County, Kentucky. From major coal strikes¹ to the development of the United Mine Workers,² in Kentucky coal unions were a major political force for decades. Before the 1930s, the state of Kentucky, under union-friendly Democratic control, created an atmosphere in which union development thrived. Despite continued Democratic control of the Kentucky legislature from the 1930s until nearly the turn of the century, labor unions weakened markedly.³ Curiously, Kentucky has witnessed a slight strengthening of labor unions in the last 25 years at a time when it was least expected because the Republicans have controlled the legislature during this time. Indeed, the recent labor strikes in Harlan County against the Blackjewel Mining Company exemplifies this modest revival. Apparently, the company had been withholding earned paychecks from the mine workers on strike. Miners created a blockade and camped on train tracks, which prevented one of the company's mining trains from passing through the county from late July until late September 2019.⁴ The combination of this recent strike, the already fascinating history of Harlan County coal unions, and the complex relationship between labor unions and political-party platforms piqued my interest and motivated me to conduct research on this topic. In addition to those

¹ Tony Bubka, "The Harlan county coal strike of 1931," *Labor History* 11, no. 1 (1970), 41-57.

² Henry C. Mayer, "Glimpses of Union Activity Among Coal Miners in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Kentucky," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 86, no. 3 (1988), 224.

³ Shaunna L Scott, *Two sides to everything: The cultural construction of class consciousness in Harlan County, Kentucky*, (SUNY Press, 1995), 132.

⁴ Campbell Robertson, "Unpaid Miners Blocked a Coal Train in Protest. Weeks Later, They're Still There," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, August 19, 2019).

reasons, coal can be seen as a microcosm of labor as a whole, as it was one of the largest labor unions throughout history and its demise closely follows the common trends that those who have studied labor previously seem to find time and time again.⁵

Research Questions

In my research I explored the politics surrounding labor organizing and unionization. Specifically, I examined whether political affiliation or political control of a state legislature affected the level and power of unionization within that region. The topic is important because it would allow me to account for the trends of labor organizing in Kentucky and predict the potential strength of unions in the coming years. The specific questions that I intend to explore in this essay are as follows: Has the identification of the political party in control of the state legislature had an impact on union strength? Does political-party affiliation or control affect the trend of unionization? If this is the case, then which party has appeared to have the most positive impact on labor unions in the state of Kentucky? Alternatively, has the weakening of labor unions in Kentucky reflected very little about state politics and more about broader economic and social issues? Finally, is Kentucky experiencing a resurgence of unionism in coal, and if so, why and will it endure?

⁵ Michael Goldfield, *The Decline of Organized Labor in the United States*, (University of Chicago Press, 1989), 3-7.

Methodology and Research Design

For my methodology, I collected newspaper articles and previously conducted interviews with individuals involved in Kentucky coal unions as primary sources and explored existing case studies of Harlan County, Kentucky, and research articles as secondary sources. I have taken all of my historical findings into account and used them to analyze my proposed research questions. The narrowed questions I have presented could give me leverage on the broader topic of diminishing unionization in the U.S. and even across the globe. More important, this study could also provide a basis for new discoveries about whether or not (or perhaps at least explain why) unionizing in coal is making a return within Kentucky based on recent news and labor trends.

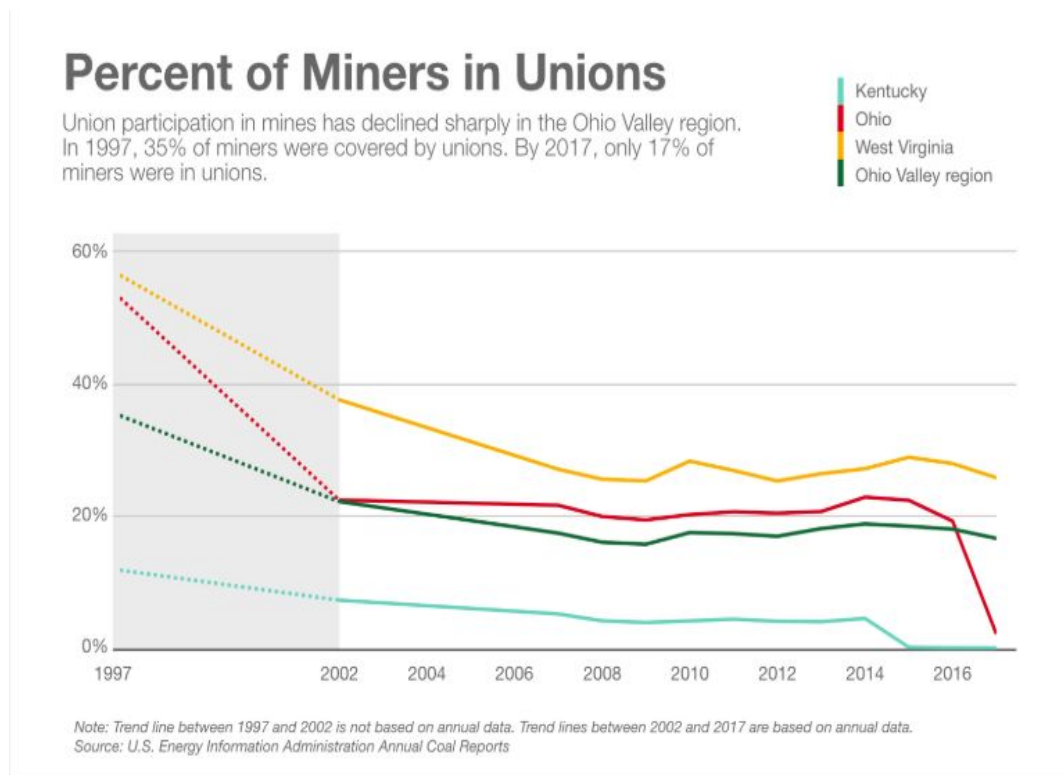
A large group of scholars of unionization and labor organization have argued that coal labor unions are declining in membership (shown in Figure 1 below), and, at least at the federal level, the political party in power has directly affected the strength of unions.⁶ However, after searching through the literature, I found that very little research had been conducted on the relationship between political-party influence and the strengths of labor unions in the state of Kentucky. Moreover, current research has failed to address the current possible rebirth of labor organizing.

The strength of unions has diminished over the past four decades, especially for coal miners, as the state has witnessed multiple mass firings, company closings, and political pressure from political interest organizations. This has resulted in pushback that often shows itself in the

⁶ Goldfield, *The Decline of Organized Labor in the United States*, 3-7.

form of populism that we see today. Populists often target organized labor in their appeals, and this is especially shown in the aforementioned recent strike against the Blackjewel Mining Company.

Figure 1⁷



Hypotheses

This thesis offers three central arguments. First, I argue that at the federal level it has mattered a great deal from the perspective of labor unions which political party wields the most power. Second, I argue that while one might assume that this would be the case in Kentucky, in fact, labor unions have declined markedly in the last century even though Republicans have

⁷ U.S. Energy Information Administration Annual Coal Reports, 2019.

exerted very little political power. Indeed, between 1932 and 1997, fully 65 years, the Democratic Party controlled both the Senate and the House in the state's general assembly. Only in the last 25 years have the Republicans gained control of the state's legislature, surprisingly the period during which labor unions have rebounded somewhat. Hence, in the case of Kentucky, the strength of labor unions has not reflected Republican political power. It lays squarely at the feet of Democratic politics. Finally, Kentucky has experienced a noticeable trend in recent years that shows coal labor organizing is on the rise, curiously under a Republican-controlled legislature. In summary, the broadly accepted scholarly argument that labor-union decline is generally the result of Republican policy-making simply does not hold up in the case of Kentucky. Indeed, the decline of labor unions appears to be the result of other factors unrelated to party politics.

I hope that my research will make a small contribution by testing a fairly widely accepted theory on a small scale. The results of this research might help us to predict the future of coal labor and union trends in Kentucky. Public policy makers may find my study useful because it will contribute to their understanding of the decline of labor unions, particularly in Kentucky, and suggest factors that contribute to the political implications or potential future of our labor force and labor unions.

Defining Commonly Used Terms

For clarity's sake, I would like to use this small section to define some of the terms that I will be using frequently throughout this essay, as these definitions may vary depending on subject area, culture, and other factors. For the purpose of my research, "organizing" can be

defined as the act of mobilizing people towards some sort of social change. An “action” can be defined as the specific acts and tasks created by organizers to make concrete strides toward that identified area of social change. One example of an action could be a labor strike or a protest. “Unionization” can be defined as the process of organizers creating close associations within their respective field, and “political affiliation” can be defined as the party or views with which a state or individual aligns.

Research Organization

Throughout this paper, I followed a set outline. The next section elaborates on the history in order to provide more context. It addresses the overall decline in the need of Kentucky coal itself, and how this has interacted with the results found in my research. From there, I have explored the periods and extent of both Republican and Democratic control in Kentucky and whether there is a correlation to the strength of coal unions. I was searching for a link that could point to the cause for the growth and then the demise of labor unions over the years. After this, I recap the results and insights I have gained on Harlan County and Kentucky’s coal union organizing and politics, as well as the implications that these insights may have on the future of the state’s coal-union politics and policy.

A Brief History of Kentucky Coal Unions and Labor Organizing

It is actually quite difficult to determine exactly how old coal mining unions are in Kentucky. Scholars have found evidence of coal unions dating back to 1873 where the Kentucky General Assembly adjourned session records point to a bill signed by the governor which incorporated the Miners' Union of Boyd and Carter counties.⁸ However, some argue that even earlier unionization activity in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky may have occurred. Local historian George Wolfford argued that 1852 saw the establishment of the first known coal camp. Coal camps can be defined as a residential area where coal miners and their families can reside close to where the miners work. This first camp consisted of miners who were immigrants from Ireland, Germany and Wales. A woman writer who visited the property indicated strikes may have brewed or threatened at the camp.⁹ Since the miners from the British Isles came after the failure of early unionization and the Chartist movement, it may have been that some who immigrated to Kentucky still had union inclinations. The closest thing to evidence that this was so was the presence of Andrew Roy, a lifelong advocate of unionism and mine safety.¹⁰

Another union advocate, a man named Billy Webb from Jacksboro, Tennessee, made it his lifetime commitment to "spread the gospel" of unionism. He played a pivotal role in labor organizing for coal miners in Kentucky. It is believed his first stop was at a newly opened coal camp in Rockcastle County, Kentucky where a strike began in June 1876 and did not end until

⁸ *United Mine Workers of America Journal*, December 30th, 1909 and June 23, 1982 (hereafter *Journal*); *Kentucky House Journal*, Adjourned Session (1873), 750.

⁹ Mayer, "Glimpses of Union Activity Among Coal Miners in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Kentucky," 216-218.

¹⁰ George Wolfford, *Lawrence County: A Pictorial History* (Ashland, Ky., 1972), 13, 35-36.

January 1878. Demanding a pay raise, more than 200 miners participated in the strike. Not long after, Webb assisted with the “Northeastern Kentucky Strike,” which lasted from October 1878 to February 1879. He married a woman and settled in Laurel County where he continued to organize unions in the area. An October strike at each of the county’s mines followed.¹¹ Later came the strikes of the Greenwood Miners and Beaver Creek Miners.

By 1885 the Kentucky General Assembly took a much more active role in labor issues. A special House committee was assigned to investigate the labor unrest occurring at coal camps. The chairman of this investigation, William R. Ramsey, became the chief spokesman for the miners and organized labor during the constitutional convention in 1890-91. He emphasized that labor was asking for justice, not a handout, and highly praised the 1886 protests by the miners at Greenwood against convict labor.¹²

Despite a growing body of worker-protection legislation, strikes continued throughout the eastern Kentucky region as miners continuously fought for safer working conditions and livable wages. Miners even began forming partnerships on strikes with railroad workers in the area.¹³ As coal unions began forming and gaining power, differences between miners and mine owners continued to persist. Moreover, we see differences occurring among those new coal unions. By 1900, unionization had a firm hold in eastern Kentucky, but many labor struggles were still ahead for the miners.¹⁴

¹¹ Mayer, 218-219.

¹² Ibid., 222.

¹³ Ibid., 227.

¹⁴ Ibid., 229.

The Case of Harlan County, Kentucky

Perhaps the most important coal strike of the first half of the twentieth century was the Harlan County Coal Strike of 1931. This strike stands out as perhaps one of the most violent and militant examples of labor organizing in the history of the United States. Many scholars have argued that this strike marked the peak moment in the unionization fight for coal miners, even serving as the inspiration for the popular labor organizing folk song “Which Side Are You On?” by Florence Reese, which is still sung at organizing movements today.¹⁵ Lasting more than eight years, this continuous strike was a long and brutal conflict that left a lasting impact on the region economically, politically, and culturally. The majority of those participants were coal miners and unions confronting coal mine owners and operators, coal firms, and law-enforcement officials. It is often referred to in the region as the “Harlan County War” or “Bloody Harlan” as it resulted in a significant number of deaths on both sides. The total number of fatalities that occurred during the strikes is indeterminable because data is insufficient and inconclusive.¹⁶

Coal’s importance continued to increase in Harlan County, Kentucky. In 1911, only six mines operated in Harlan County. By 1923, nearly 10,000 miners were employed in the county, and this number continued to rise until it peaked in the 1930s.¹⁷ As the need for coal grew massively during the years surrounding World War I, coal mining over-expansion in Harlan County began to occur. When new mines began opening in the county during what is called the 1915-1918 coal boom, the population increased rapidly as workers were being recruited from

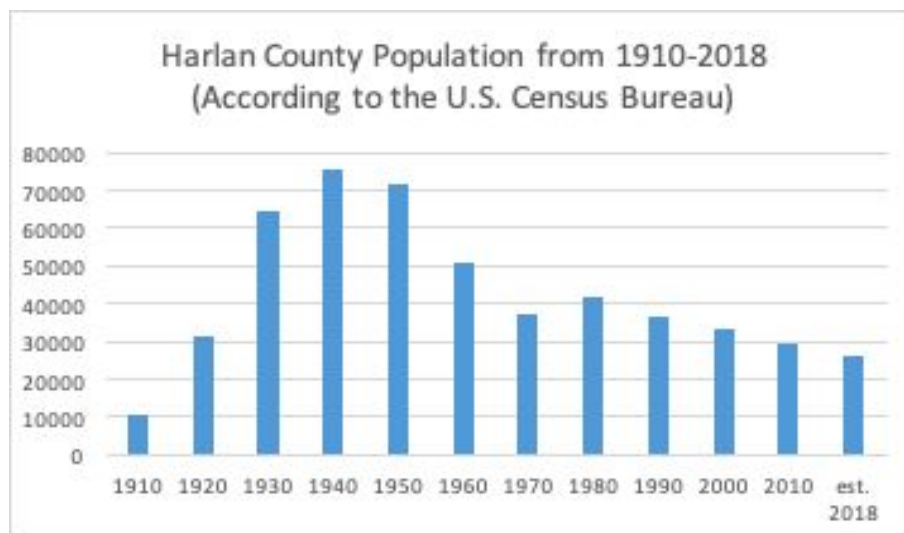
¹⁵ Boas Ellis, “Which Side Are You On?” Labor Notes, (LaborNotes.org, November 2007).

¹⁶ “Strife in Kentucky is Likened to War,” (*The New York Times*, November 18, 1931).

¹⁷ Bubka, "The Harlan county coal strike of 1931," 41.

surrounding counties to supply labor for the mines. According to the United States Census Bureau, from 1910-1920 the county's population grew 198.6 percent, and then rose another 104 percent from 1920-1930. The population went from approximately 10,500 people in 1910 to nearly 65,000 people in 1930. The population peaked in the 1940s, with more than 75,000 people inhabiting Harlan County, Kentucky.¹⁸ A visual representation of the county's population growth can be demonstrated in the chart below, labeled Figure 2.

Figure 2¹⁹



The strike is said to have begun after coal owners and operators in the county cut wages by 10 percent to prevent a loss as the country had recently spiraled into the Great Depression.²⁰ Because Harlan County's labor force was already impoverished, these wage cuts further propelled civil unrest in the region. To act upon this unrest, the United Mine Workers of America stepped onto the scene to try to organize the miners within the county by creating new unions

¹⁸ United States Census Bureau, "U.S. Decennial Census," 1910-1940.

¹⁹ Ibid., 1910-2018.

²⁰ Louis Stark, "Harlan War Traced to Pay-Cut Revolt," (*The New York Times*, September 29, 1931).

and training miners on how to participate safely and effectively in political actions.²¹ In the beginning, miners who were known by their bosses to be union members were fired and evicted from their company-owned homes. It did not take long before a majority of the remaining miners went on strike in solidarity with those who had been fired.

This triggered the violence. To the miners, encounters with law enforcement during strikes made it clear to them that the police were not impartial in this situation. To the miners, it seemed the police merely protected the interests of the coal firms and mines rather than the miners themselves.²² At some point, the miners on strike began to exchange gunshots with private guards and local law enforcement, and to hunt down “strikebreakers,” or miners who were not on strike.²³ The most violent action by the miners occurred on May 5, 1931 and became known as the Battle of Evarts. The miners devised a plan to ambush cars carrying “company men” by shooting at them. Three company men and one of the miners on strike were killed in an exchange of gunfire.²⁴ In response to this incident, the Governor called in the Kentucky National Guard. The strikers expected protection, but the National Guard broke the picket lines instead.²⁵ On May 24, 1931 law-enforcement officers tear-gassed a union rally, and the county sheriff rescinded the right to assemble.²⁶

Tensions within the county were high as actions by the strikers and violence continued to persist over the next couple of years. Over the next few years, the US passed the National

²¹ Louis Stark, “Limit in Wage Cuts Reached in Harlan,” (*The New York Times*, October 3, 1931).

²² John W. Hevener, *Which Side are You On? The Harlan County Coal Miners, 1931-39*, (University of Illinois Press, 2002), 42-45.

²³ “Harlan Man Lashed Until He Collapsed,” (*The New York Times*, November 27, 1931).

²⁴ See note 23 above.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, *Which Side are You On?: The Harlan County Coal Miners*, 42-45.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

Industrial Recovery Act and later the Wagner Act of 1935.²⁷ The National Industrial Recovery Act promoted the right to organize in the workplace and outlawed firing based on union membership, forcing approximately half of Harlan's coal mines to run as open shops (mines that allow union membership but do not mandate it).²⁸ However, the battle did not end here. The Wagner Act outlawed yellow-dog contracts (contracts in which workers agree to not join unions), company unions, blacklists (denying employment to someone based on their history of union activity), and overall discrimination on the basis of union activity. Coal companies heavily utilized these tactics at the time.²⁹

On July 7, 1935, a group of deputies who were allegedly enraged at a public celebration of the Wagner Act dispersed the crowd by beating several miners.³⁰ On September 29, troops were dispatched on behalf of the miners for the first time in the Harlan County War, with the governor referring to the beatings and harassment at the hands of the mine guards as "the worst reign of terror in the history of the county."³¹ The violence of Harlan County bloody war continued for another four years after this incident before its conclusion in 1939, when the strikes and violence eventually came to a halt. Bloody Harlan finally came to an official end in 1941 after the parties signed a labor contract that provided for a union shop and compulsory arbitration, helping to bring peace to industrial relations surrounding coal unions from that point forward.³²

²⁷ Ibid., 81-123.

²⁸ See note 27 above.

²⁹ See note 27.

³⁰ Henever, 129.

³¹ "Troops Again Move on Harlan County," (*The New York Times*, September 29, 1935).

³² Paul Frederick Cressey. "Social disorganization and reorganization in Harlan County, Kentucky," (*American Sociological Review* 14, no. 3 1949), 393.

The Beginning of the End: Examining the Rapid Decline of Coal Unions in Kentucky

By the 1950s, dozens (possibly hundreds) of strikes or civil actions took place in eastern Kentucky surrounding unionization of coal. This resulted in several different prominent coal unions to be created and many pieces of state legislation to be passed around labor and unions in Kentucky. It was in this decade, the 1950s, that the decline in Kentucky coal unions seemingly began. This timing correlates with the introduction of new machinery, which began to transform markedly underground mining at the expense of the coal miners themselves by automating many of their jobs.³³

At the same time, the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 ensured the right to unionize and provided for a system of workplace elections that many scholars have argue actually encouraged unions to organize on a smaller scale and individually – within each separate work place -- rather than by industry. This resulted in another blow against large industry-wide union organizations. In the end, the organizing effort could not keep pace with the rate at which job growth was occurring within the economy as a whole. From a political view, the fact that unions were shrinking caused them to lose much of their influence within the Democratic Party, and pro-union, more liberal Republicans lost interest in unions, given the diminishing influence of organized labor. Indeed by the 1960s already national social and political leaders and intellectuals from both political parties lost interest in unions, and began instead focusing their attention more on the impending Vietnam conflict, the Civil Rights Movement, Women’s Rights

³³ Cal Winslow, “A Brief History of Harlan County, USA,” Labor Notes, (LaborNotes.org, August 14, 2019).

protests, the anti-war movement, and rising levels of drug and alcohol abuse.³⁴ Indeed, at the federal level, new technologies, these and other political distractions, the continued disinterest of Republicans, and the loss even of some Democratic support contributed to the weakening of American labor unions.

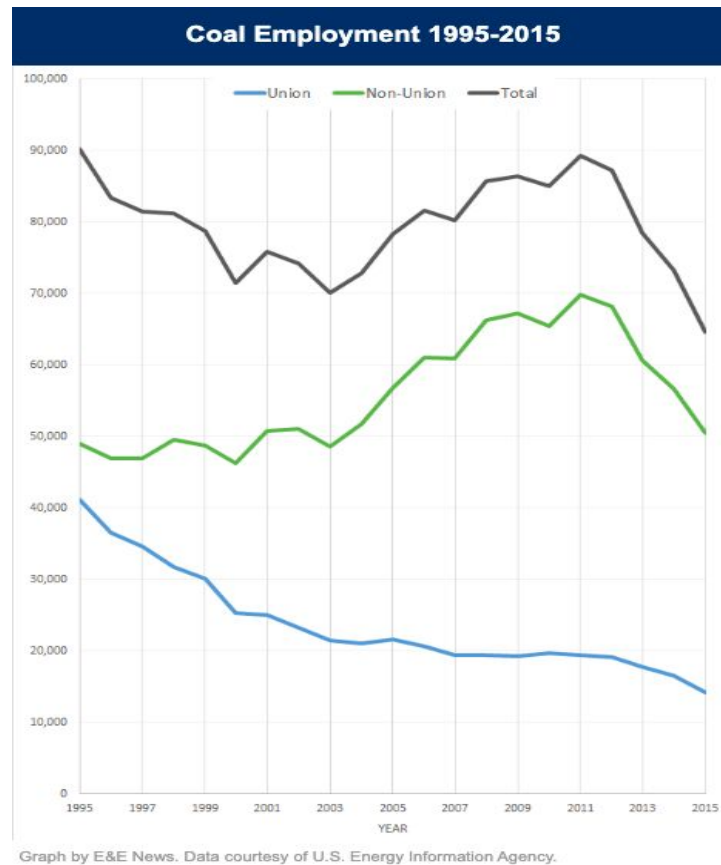
When the coal industry began to decline in Kentucky, it depressed Harlan County's economy and depleted its population. This large population decrease is apparent in Figure 1 (page 4). The coal mining industry has continued over the last several decades to experience a general downward trend nationally, especially regarding coal miner union membership, union power, and labor organizing.³⁵ This can be seen in the data presented in Figure 3 below. The blue (bottom) line represents employed coal unionized miners. The line appears to be following a pretty clear, steady downward trend. The green (middle) line represents non-union coal employment, and the gray (top) line represents total coal employment from 1995-2005. Fewer workers within an industry will naturally lead to a reduction in union strength, as fewer numbers create less power. I will touch on this more throughout my study, but these downward trends were the results of several factors. First, the mining industry steadily developed labor-replacing technologies. Second, industries across the U.S., including many that were part of the mining industry (such as those that handled marketing, transshipping, grading, and training) moved offshore to take advantage of cheaper costs. Third, the growing influence of right-to-work legislation in some coal-mining states weakened further unionism. Fourth, a plummet in the demand for coal and the shift to other energy sources such as natural gas further undermined coal

³⁴ Western, Bruce, and Jake Rosenfeld, "Workers of the world divide: The decline of labor and the future of the middle class," *Foreign Affairs*, (2012), 88-99.

³⁵ Goldfield, *The Decline of Organized Labor in the United States*, XV.

unionization. Finally, the strength of the anti-coal environmental movement and a broader shift in attitudes toward coal diminished the industry's unions. While this figure represents trends on the national level, the trends for coal union and non-union employment in Kentucky are very similar.³⁶

Figure 3³⁷



The effects of coal's decline on local economies in Kentucky like Harlan County are still heavily felt today. Today the county suffers from high levels of poverty and unemployment rates, with half of the county's income coming from transfers from the federal government such

³⁶ Dylan Lovan, "No Union Mines Left in Kentucky, Where Labor Wars Once Raged," *The Washington Post*, (WP Company, September 5, 2015).

³⁷ Graph by E&E News, data provided by U.S. Energy Information Agency.

as Social Security, Medicare and Food Stamps.³⁸ This has all happened after the rapid decline of coal, and the population continues to diminish as residents move elsewhere in search of stable work. Kentucky closed its last union mine in 2015,³⁹ and only a few non-union mines remain in the region. Little coal organizing has occurred in the past few years, especially in comparison to the level of organizing in the 1930s-1940s. In fact, only a few major coal miner's union strikes have occurred since the end of the 1950s. The most recent nationally recognized labor-organizing action around coal in Kentucky was the aforementioned blockade and strike against Blackjewel Mining Company, which ended in late September 2019. This strike brought forward many important questions and potential implications, which I will explore in this next section.

The Blackjewel Mining Blockade and Decline of the Coal Industry

This rapid decline in labor organizing was, in part, the cause of the Blackjewel Mining blockade. On July 1, 2019 Blackjewel LLC declared bankruptcy without warning, leaving nearly 1,700 miners out of work. The miners paychecks, which were supposed to come on June 28th, bounced and left many miners in thousands of dollars of debt. They were also supposed to receive a final paycheck on July 12th, but that paycheck never came.⁴⁰

³⁸ Porter, Eduardo, "Where Government Is a Dirty Word, but It's Checks Pay the Bills," *The New York Times*, (*The New York Times*, Dec. 21, 2018).

³⁹ Dylan Lovan, "No Union Mines Left in Kentucky, Where Labor Wars Once Raged," *The Washington Post*, (WP Company, September 5, 2015).

⁴⁰ Boles, Sydney. "Inside the Harlan County Coal Miner Protest." *Rolling Stone*, (*Rolling Stone Magazine*, Sept. 5, 2019).

Only July 29, a woman who lives near a prep plant owned by Blackjewel noticed one of the trains being loaded with coal. She informed some of the miners who worked for the company. Not long afterwards five miners had climbed on the train tracks and were preventing a train full of coal worth \$1.4 million from moving.⁴¹ After hearing of this on the news, dozens of people began stopping by to show support and offer supplies. These people were not just local, they came from across the state and the country. The blockade lasted for two months. Eventually the miners had to return to their families. Some moved to other states in search of work in the mines, and others began looking across the county and other parts of the state to find work.⁴² Although the miners never got paid for their labor, their story attracted international attention. In places as far away as Germany, the mistreatment of coal miners had attracted a great deal of focus.⁴³

This story highlighted the steep decline of the coal industry. Over the last several decades, fewer people are employed by the coal industry every year.⁴⁴ More than 100,000 people have been laid off from the coal industry nationwide in the last decade.⁴⁵ The industry has also experienced a decrease in the number of mines and the amount of coal produced in the United States in the last several years. The significant decline in the number of coal plants, coal production, and people employed by the coal industry is shown below in Figures 4 and 5. Many attribute this sharp decline to the growing use of natural gas and renewables and to the polluting

⁴¹ See note 40.

⁴² Kenning, Chris., “Laid-off Kentucky Coal Miners End Their Railroad Protest but Still Seek Their Back Pay,” *Courier Journal*, (Louisville Courier Journal, Sept. 26, 2019).

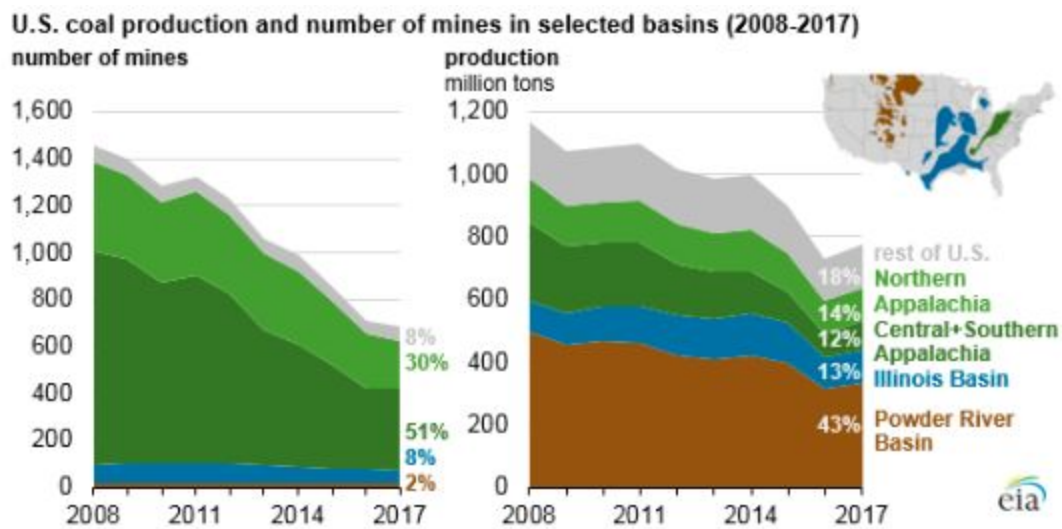
⁴³ Boles, “Inside the Harlan County Coal Miner Protest.”

⁴⁴ See note 43 above.

⁴⁵ DiChristopher, Tom, and John W. Schoen, “Trump Says 'the Coal Industry Is Back.' The Government's Jobs Numbers Say Otherwise,” *CNBC*, (CNBC, Aug. 23, 2018).

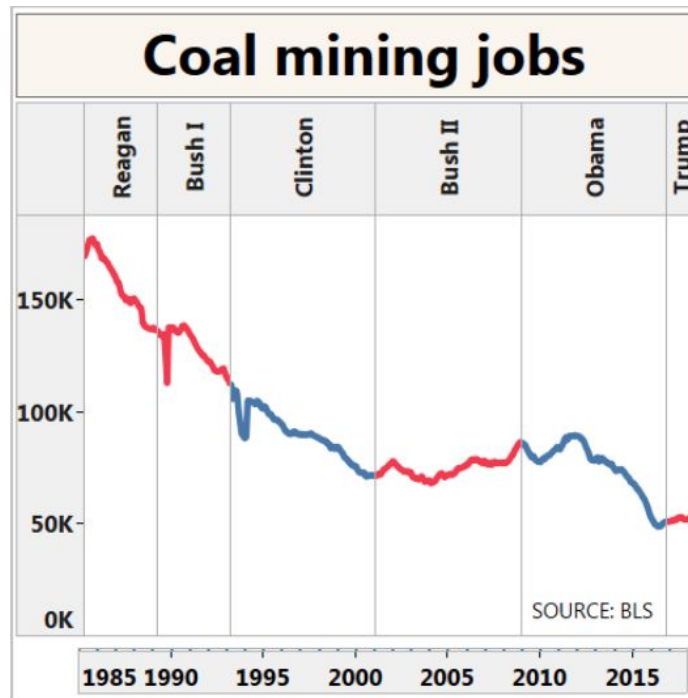
nature of the industry combined with the growing need to combat climate change. It is also often attributed in part to the generally anti-union climate of politics at the state and national level in recent years, and certainly since the Reagan administration. Predictably, the decline of workers in the industry has naturally led to a reduction in union strength with a lack of workers to power the union. This means Figures 4 and 5 imply a reduction in coal unions and thus in union strength.

Figure 4⁴⁶



⁴⁶ US Energy Information Administration, 2018.

Figure 5⁴⁷



Quite predictably, the decline of coal is often politicized. In the 2016 United States presidential election, for example, presidential candidate Donald Trump promised the American people, and especially the coal-mining industry, that he would bring back the coal industry. He also blamed the rapid decline of the coal industry on Barack Obama, claiming that Obama’s environmental regulations caused the industry to fail.⁴⁸ These sentiments expressed by Trump, were in response, in part, to Hillary Clinton’s careless “anti-coal” comments. More than 80 percent of Harlan county voted for Trump in the 2016 election.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016.

⁴⁸ Boles, “Inside the Harlan County Coal Miner Protest.”

⁴⁹ See note 48 above.

Coal, of course, won't come back that easily. Its demise has taken place over many decades, and the causes of its weakening are complex. While the Obama administration's environmental regulations certainly created greater obstacles for the coal industry's recovery, the decline began much earlier and is the result of a far more complicated set of factors. The particular steps that the Kentucky government has taken over the last two decades has included requiring coal to replace smoke stacks with cleaner filtered stacks, increasing significantly air monitoring, monitoring and filtering run-off that ends up in streams and rivers, and improving air-quality protections for miners. These costly regulations have strained an already struggling industry.

Unfortunately, coal's survival within the climate-change debate has become highly politicized. Democrats at the national level have typically favored replacing coal with more environmentally friendly energy sources. These kinds of policies have both undermined the coal industries and weakened their unions. Hillary Clinton, for example, argued that climate change must demand a minimizing of coal production and use.⁵⁰ Democrats have pushed for other more modern forms of energy that have less of an environmental impact and are also cheaper, such as natural gas and solar power. While Kentucky Democrats have remained a bit more subdued in an attempt to empathize with their constituents, the increasing use of natural gas across the state has certainly contributed to the continual decline of the coal industry.⁵¹ The growth of these newer energy sources and the decline in the value of Kentucky's coal has resulted in thousands of coal miners without work, struggling to find ways to provide for their families.

⁵⁰ Relman, Eliza, "Hillary Clinton: Here's the Misstep from the Campaign I Regret the Most," Business Insider, (Business Insider, Sept. 6, 2017).

⁵¹ *Kentucky Coal Facts*, vol. 17, 2017, 3.

Of equal importance, the declining value of eastern Kentucky's coal has contributed quite significantly to the decline in operating coal mines and lower wages for coal mining jobs within the region. The value of eastern Kentucky coal has gone down as it is no longer viewed to be as efficient or marketable as coal in western Kentucky and other states in the west, based on the scientific properties it holds. Western Kentucky coal, denser and less energy-efficient, brings a markedly lower price than other cleaner and more energy-efficient grades of coal.⁵²

Significantly, as demonstrated by Figure 3 on page 16, non-union coal employment has actually increased from 2003 until late 2012, while employment for unionized coal miners has continued to decrease. In some cases, both in Kentucky and in other states, the decline in coal unions is not altogether linked to the availability of jobs in the coal industry. Indeed, even where mines continue to thrive, other political, economic, and cultural factors have contributed to the continued decline in coal union membership.

How the History of Kentucky's Unions and Political Affiliation Align

The Democrats dominated politics in Kentucky for the majority of the 20th century. And while a Republican governor gained control during two critical time periods during this period, the legislature remained firmly in the hands of Democrats throughout. The first time period, the early 1930s, correlates with the time of the Harlan County War or "Bloody Harlan," which marked a period of union unrest but also a period of union expansion and empowerment. The second time period, the late 1940s, was a couple of years before the massive decline in the

⁵² Ibid.

number of coal mines and unions, and a drop in union power and membership rates. This is shown in Figure 6 below {(D) meaning Democratic affiliation, and (R) representing Republican affiliation}.

Figure 6⁵³

Year	Executive offices						
	Governor	Lt. Governor	Sec. of State	Attorney General	Treasurer	Auditor	Ag. Comm.
1928	Flem D. Sampson (R)	James Breathitt Jr. (D)	Ella Lewis (D)	James W. Cammack	Emma Guy Cromwell (D)	Clell Coleman	
1929							
1930							
1931	Ruby Laffoon (D)	Happy Chandler (D)	Sara W. Mahan (D)	Bailey P. Wootton	Elam Huddleston (D)	J. Dan Talbott (D)	
1932							
1933							
1934	Happy Chandler (D) ^[22]	Keen Johnson (D)	Charles D. Arnett (D)	Beverly M. Vincent (D) ^[23]	John E. Buckingham	Ernest E. Shannon (D)	
1935							
1936							
1937	Keen Johnson (D) ^[14]	Rodes K. Myers (D)	George G. Hatcher (D)	Hubert Meredith	Ernest E. Shannon (D)	David A. Logan	
1938							
1939							
1940	Simeon S. Willis (R)	Kenneth H. Tuggle (R)	Charles K. O'Connell (D)	Eldon S. Dummit (R)	Thomas W. Vinson (R)	B. L. Sparks	
1941						Charles I. Ross	
1942						W. D. Bratcher	
1943							
1944							
1945							
1946							
1947							

Many Harlan County miners who were involved in the massive strikes from 1931-1939 self-identified as Democrats. In one interview, when asked why, a miner responded “I never voted for a Republican because even if he was a good man, he’d probably be a friend to a bad

⁵³ Chart by Wikipedia, data provided by Ballotpedia.

one. The Republicans' philosophy, for a fact, is to get rich, for the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer.”⁵⁴

This was a common sentiment from miners at the time. In the past, miners would tend to view both local and national Republican victories as detrimental to the cause of labor and labor unions.⁵⁵ This is because miners noticed that on the federal level Republican victories were sometimes followed by anti-union or anti-labor legislation and policies, resulting in a loss of union power, coal jobs, and even more conflict and tension surrounding worker's rights. This, however, did not create an issue in Kentucky because the political impact of Republicans in the legislature and even in the position of governors remained minimal. The election of Republican Matt Bevin as Kentucky's governor in 2015 might stand out as an exception. Bevin's aggressive support of strengthening Kentucky's "Right to Work" laws, which prohibit union security agreements between companies and labor unions and allow workers to work without being required to join a union, were clearly anti-union.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, perhaps surprisingly during this same period union membership in Kentucky strengthened. The anti-union stance of the governor had little short-term impact on union strength. Because Bevin only served for four years, it is not enough time to measure change very accurately. Clearly, however, laws like this discourage union membership and would likely have, over time, undermined union membership in Kentucky.

Miners also noticed that on the federal level Democrats had created legislation and programs that favored unions. Examples of this include worker's compensation laws, which help

⁵⁴ Scott, 132.

⁵⁵ See note 54.

⁵⁶ Wiessner, Daniel, "Top Kentucky Court Upholds State's 'Right-to-Work' Law," Reuters, (Thomson Reuters, Nov. 16, 2018).

to provide compensation for injured workers (like the one introduced by Democratic governor James McCreary in 1912) or wage laws to help increase the pay of workers across certain industries.⁵⁷ Assuming that people typically affiliate themselves with the party that best serves their interests, and considering the horrifically long and brutal struggle faced by coal miners for labor rights, it makes sense that they would have recognized this trend and come to the conclusion that Democrats were the more union or labor-friendly party and align themselves accordingly.

An extensive body of research concludes that on the federal level Republicans have been less supportive of labor unions than Democrats. An examination of the policies of U.S. presidents reveals a clear political difference between the two major parties regarding their views on unions. Democrats such as Franklin D. Roosevelt pushed for major labor policies such as the National Labor Relations Act. This is a stark contrast when compared to Republican President Ronald Reagan, who, according to one author, viewed unions as a “worthless relic of previous years that interferes with his economic game plan.”⁵⁸

Reagan’s presidency specifically introduced anti-union sentiments that had a significant impact across the country. During his time in office, two specific events stand out as a symbol of the anti-labor attitudes of a large sector of the Republican Party. First, in the summer of 1981 Reagan dismissed striking unionized air-traffic controllers because he viewed their actions as too detrimental economically, as their actions closed down most of the country’s major airports. Non-union employees were quickly hired to replace them.⁵⁹ This event brought forward a

⁵⁷ “Commonwealth of Kentucky Labor Cabinet,” KY Labor Cabinet.

⁵⁸ Goldfield, *The Decline of Organized Labor in the United States*, 5.

⁵⁹ Farber, Henry S., and Bruce Western, "Ronald Reagan and the politics of declining union organization," *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 40, no. 3 (2002), 385.

common attitude that a labor union might not be able to protect a worker if it invites the wrath of the federal government. Although this kind of federal action has never been common, it sent a chilling message to labor unions across the country. Nevertheless, academic rhetoric notwithstanding, this legislation was not the factor that triggered the demise of labor, a process that had been taking place for decades before and continued for decades after.⁶⁰

The second political event was when, within 12 months of his election, Reagan appointed two individuals to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) who markedly reshaped the focus of the organization. These appointments helped to secure a “pro-management” majority which sought to expand employer’s rights at the detriment of union organizing.⁶¹ There is a rather direct link between these appointments and the decline of labor unions because of the power the board has exercised in union elections and labor law administration.⁶² These two major anti-union actions of the Reagan administration further solidified the already steady decline of labor unions in the 1980s, and helped to shape Republicans’ attitudes and policies towards unions for decades to come.

Clearly, attitudes toward labor unions and labor policy have been highly politicized on the federal level.⁶³ In fact, declining membership in US labor unions is often traced, in part, to political causes.⁶⁴ Republicans, on the one hand, tend to be focused mostly on small businesses and employee’s rights when it comes to labor, as well as economic policies intended to grow the

⁶⁰ Farber, Henry S., and Bruce Western, "Ronald Reagan and the politics of declining union organization," *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 40, no. 3 (2002), 386.

⁶¹ Farber and Western, "Ronald Reagan and the politics of declining union organization," 385.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 386.

⁶³ Tope, Daniel, and David Jacobs, "The politics of union decline: The contingent determinants of union recognition elections and victories," *American Sociological Review* 74, no. 5 (2009), 842-864.

⁶⁴ Farber and Western, "Ronald Reagan and the politics of declining union organization," 385.

economy. Democrats, on the other hand, are usually more in tune with unions and labor organizers as their focus, especially in the Reagan era, tends to be on social programs and civil rights. Union miners, and really anyone else watching Democrats and Republicans on both the state and federal level throughout the twentieth century could detect a clear philosophical and political difference regarding the value of labor unions.

Results and Conclusion

Does political party affiliation or control affect the trend of unionization? Does the shift from Democratic to Republican control in the case of Kentucky partially explain the decline of unionism in the coal industry? Finally, is there a resurgence of unionism in coal recently? If so, how can that be explained?

First, it is possible that political affiliation or control of a state has the ability to influence the existence and activity of labor unions. In states where Republicans have controlled both the executive and legislative branches for extended periods of time labor unions have remained fairly weak. In the case of Kentucky, however, the Republicans have exercised measurably less control over most of the twentieth century, so their influence has been less important in the demise of labor in the state.

Certainly, the Democratic Party has remained quite pro-labor in its policies and attitudes. Consequently, with the exception of miners' support for Donald Trump in 2016, coal miners have, over this period, remained loyal to Democrat candidates.⁶⁵ But, in the end, the demise of

⁶⁵ Scott, 132.

labor unions in Kentucky has not been a result of Republican policies. Although the Republicans have had an important role in weakening labor across the country generally, the impact has not been felt as acutely in Kentucky because of the protection of the state's powerful Democrat Party. Nevertheless, the state has experienced a significant weakening of labor.

The bigger causes for labor demise have been less political and more economic. A combination of globalization -- which has resulted in the off-shore movement of coal-subsidary companies to rely on cheaper wages and the growing competition of foreign companies -- and the invention of new technologies, the anti-union sentiment of American entrepreneurs, and the rise of post-industrialism have all contributed to the slow demise of labor unionization. In the case of Kentucky, a decrease in demand of certain Kentucky grades of coal, a drop in price of natural gas, anti-coal environmentalism, and the development of alternative energy sources have also contributed to the weakening of coal unions. While Republicans and Democrats have adopted differences in policies and attitudes toward labor unions, sometimes dramatic differences, those differences do not account for the weakening of Kentucky's mining unions.

Finally, I could not find a specific explanation for a slight rise in labor organizing in Kentucky over the last few years. The support of Republican President Donald Trump and his reaching out to strengthen the coal industry has perhaps resulted, in the short term, in a slight strengthening of the labor movement. It is important to note that this is not necessarily because Trump is a strong supporter of labor, but because he is a strong supporter of the coal industry. If Trump wins again in 2020 we may see this strengthening sustaining. But this surge in coal will not likely sustain over the long term as the use of more environmentally friendly natural gas continues to increase markedly. While the Blackjewel Mining Blockade may have rekindled the

organizing spirit again for a brief moment in Eastern Kentucky, it will likely remain only an isolated incident. Labor organizing over the decades to come is not likely on the rise again in Kentucky. Only time will tell how these changes at the national level will affect coal unions in eastern Kentucky.

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