



Desecration at Ludlow

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Source: *New Labor Forum*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring, 2004), pp. 86-89

Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40342457>

Accessed: 13-04-2021 18:48 UTC

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Photo: Gary Cox

DESECRATION AT LUDLOW

Sometime between caretaker's rounds on May 7 and May 8, 2003, the Ludlow Massacre Memorial near Trinidad, Colorado, was vandalized by parties who remain unknown. The Memorial is dedicated to five striking coal miners, two women, and eleven children killed by the Colorado State Militia on April 20, 1914, during one of the bitterest coal field strikes in American history. Two figures that anchor the 20-foot, gray Vermont granite monument—a miner and a woman cradling a child in her arms—were decapitated. The memorial stands at the site of the Ludlow Tent Colony, the largest of a dozen striker's camps occupied for 15 months between September 1913 and December 1914. Erected in 1918, the memorial is sacred ground for the United Mineworkers of America (UMWA) and union people everywhere.

AT PRESENT THE LAS ANIMAS COUNTY Sheriff's Department and Trinidad police have no reliable leads as to the identity of the vandals, despite a \$5000 reward for information. A search for the missing pieces has come up empty. As far as restoration is concerned, the UMWA has solicited advice on treatment approach and budget from professional stone conservators in Denver and Cali-

fornia. Before and after photographs of the monument taken from various angles have helped conservators determine the best approach to take to restoration. Current recommendations favor repairing, rather than replacing, the monument.

Befitting its significance in labor history, the Ludlow monument is very much a "living memorial." On the last Sunday of every June

since 1918, union members, labor activists, and sympathetic citizens from around the country have converged on the site to remember the Ludlow dead, and rally support for contemporary causes. For example, Ludlow has recently been used as an important symbol in the

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struggle of striking steelworkers to stop forced overtime by the Rocky Mountain Steel Mills of Pueblo, Colorado. In so doing, the steelworkers have been trying to regain one of the basic rights for which the Ludlow strikers died, the eight-hour workday.

Mine and steelworkers were out in force for the memorial service on June 29, 2003, to rally around their desecrated monument. An estimated 400 people constituted the largest turnout in recent memory. Various speakers (including myself) put the significance of the monument in historical context and urged support for restoration. In a particularly stirring speech, United Mineworkers President Cecil Roberts described the Ludlow dead as “American heroes” and “freedom fighters.” He compared the Ludlow Memorial to the Vietnam Memorial, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and the Lincoln Memorial, in that the Ludlow strikers died for basic workplace rights that most Americans enjoy—but take for granted—today. Representatives of several unions pre-

sented checks to Mike Romero, UMWA local 9856 president, to aid in the restoration effort. This could cost in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Desecration of the Ludlow Memorial provoked universal outrage in union circles and received widespread coverage on independent news websites. However, in the mainstream press outside of Colorado the vandalism met with a resounding silence. This is not surprising given the ambivalence that most Americans feel about the unhappy events of our past. Like other labor memorials and monuments to tragic events in American history, Ludlow occupies a marginal position in “official” public memory. Official American history is progressive and triumphal, emphasizing social unity and glossing over periods of internal rupture and violence. But good history, or what I call critical history, must recognize social division, exploitation, and conflict. It must look, in the words of the esteemed Western historian Patty Limerick, squarely at the past, “warts and all.” This means doing more to recognize and commemorate sites of industrial struggle like Ludlow, and also protecting them. My colleague Julie Greene, a labor historian, received especially loud applause at the June 29 service when she stated that Ludlow should be made a national landmark so that it could receive federal protection. While this suggestion raises some concerns about loss of union autonomy in maintaining control over the Ludlow site, it would certainly respond to a 1991 U.S. House of Representatives report that “the history of work and working people . . . is not adequately represented or preserved” in the United States.

Photo: J. Reese



There has been some speculation about a possible antiunion motivation to the Ludlow vandalism. While there is no evidence for this, several unionists at the June 29 service expressed the view that the vandalism “feels” antiunion. One of the comments I made from the speaker’s platform that day was that even if the vandalism wasn’t antiunion *it might as well have been*, given that labor is currently under assault from a variety of directions in America. Union protections are being denied to workers in several industries, pension funds are at risk of depletion through privatization, and funding to ensure worker safety (as within the Mine Safety and Health Administration, even in the wake of Alabama’s Brookwood and Pennsylvania’s Quecreek mining accidents) is being cut. Certainly, continuing revelations about corporate greed and government complicity in sustaining it suggests that America still hasn’t figured out a way to regulate the re-

lationship between corporate and state power so as to minimize the risk to working people.

Labor’s resolve to stem the erosion of worker rights, at least as evidenced on June 29, is strong and deep. Another point I made while putting the Ludlow desecration in historical perspective that day was that it is always the best and most powerful monuments that are targeted for destruction because they function so superbly in the struggle for hearts and minds. One person I spoke to after the service suggested, albeit hesitantly and self-consciously, that some evidence of the vandalism should be *purposely* preserved in the restoration, as a nod to the monument’s stature as a living memorial having considerable contemporary relevance. I think that this is a good idea. Such a strategy would enhance the symbolic power of the monument by reminding us that labor’s victories were won against formidable odds. It would also remind us that labor’s great cause requires constant nurturing and vigilance. ■

Photo: J. Reese

