

Union members rally in Racine for Labor Day celebration

By Andrew Brown



SAM OWENS | Gazette-Mail photos

Community labor union activist and songwriter Elaine Purkey, left, sings for the crowd alongside Mike Wilson, right, during the United Mine Workers of America Labor Day Celebration at John Slack

Memorial Park in Racine on Monday. Purkey grew up in Lincoln County and has traveled all around the country to sing for labor unions.

RACINE — The line of people stretched back 30 to 40 feet as they waited for a hefty helping of the slow-roasted pig, a ladle of barbecue sauce and a scoop of coleslaw.

The sun beat down on the crowd of more than 100 people as they took cover under the large white tent to eat their meals and listen to the twang of the steel guitar and the rhythmic lyrics of the folk singers on stage.

But while they may have come for the pork, they stayed for the company and to celebrate the successes of organized labor in the United States over the past 125 years.

On Monday, the United Mine Workers of America held its 77th annual Labor Day celebration at the John Slack Memorial Park in Racine.

Throughout the park, active and retired union miners from across West Virginia — along with some from Kentucky — congregated to discuss the weather, West Virginia University football and to reflect on their work in the coal mines of Appalachia. Over half the men and women in the crowd proudly wore camouflage hats and shirts with the UMWA logo plastered on them.

While the event was meant to celebrate what the UMWA and other labor unions have provided to their members and families, the picnic was also used as a political rally to raise awareness of state and federal policies that are affecting union membership throughout the country.

Numerous Democratic politicians and representatives from their offices turned out to show their support for union miners and organized labor in West Virginia, including gubernatorial candidate Jeff Kessler and staff from Sen. Joe Manchin's office and Jim Justice's campaign team.

The scene was not an unfamiliar one. For decades, the Labor Day event has been used as a soap box for labor leaders and the politicians that have paid homage to the unions' cause.

But unlike previous decades, unions in West Virginia now find their ranks, and possibly their political clout, dwindling.

According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, the number of union employees in the

country has fallen from 17.7 million in 1983 to 14.6 million in 2014. In 1983, union members made up roughly 20 percent of the U.S. workforce. They now make up roughly 11 percent.

In West Virginia, the decline in union membership has accelerated over the past four years. While union members made up around 14.8 percent of the state's workforce in 2010, that number has fallen to roughly 10.6 percent of the workforce as of 2014, according to the labor data.

That decline in organized labor comes at a time when Republican lawmakers in statehouses throughout the country have passed laws that limit the ability of labor unions to collect dues from non-union employees that benefit from the unions' collective bargaining agreements.

That legislation — commonly referred to as right-to-work — has become the focus of the newly empowered Republican leadership in West Virginia, which took over control of both houses of the legislature in 2015.

While the bill failed to pass during the 2015 session, Republican legislators have stated that the right-to-work legislation continues to be one of their top priorities.

The Republican proponents of the bill believe that eliminating the dues for non-union members will spur West Virginia's economy back to life, but labor leaders see it as a blatant attempt to limit unions' collective bargaining power.

The debate over the legislation was the focus of many of the speakers at the picnic, including Kessler, who heavily criticized the legislation as an attack on working families. The gubernatorial candidate said there was only one party that stands up for unions and working class people.

“You must not have been watching the 2015 session if you think there is no difference between the Ds and Rs,” Kessler said to the devout union members. “We need to make sure the people working inside that dome work for you.”

David Kidd retired as a member of the UMWA last year, after decades of service hauling coal out of the mountains of West Virginia.

Throughout his years in the mines, Kidd has stood behind the UMWA and the union's effort to negotiate for better pay and benefits for its members. When he was out of work in 1989 and was offered a job to replace union miners during the Pittston Coal strike, Kidd turned down employment instead of replacing a fellow union member.

“I told them ‘I'm not a replacement,’” Kidd said, proudly.

Kidd's commitment for the UMWA hasn't ended, even now. With injuries to his back, his rotator cuff and carpal tunnel set into his hands — the direct result of his work underground — Kidd is dependent on health benefits that the union helped collect for its members.

With his former employer, Patriot Coal, filing for bankruptcy, Kidd said he is glad he has the UMWA to fight for his retirement benefits that were promised by the company.

David Crone Jr., another UMWA miner, said he is just hoping to put in a couple more years in a union mine so he can retire with enough benefits to support his family.

The South Charleston resident said he is also eagerly awaiting the settlement of Patriot Coal's recent bankruptcy case to see if the union's collective bargaining agreement is upheld.

In the past week, the company's two prospective buyers — Blackhawk Mining and the Virginia Conservation and Legacy Fund — have reached prospective agreements with the union to uphold that labor agreement.

Crone said his job and the jobs of the other roughly 140 miners that unearth the metallurgical coal at the Black Oak mine are relying on that settlement.

But even if Crone keeps his job, he worries that he could be the last person in his family to call himself a member of the UMWA. While his son is a coal miner, Crone said he hasn't been able to find work in a union mine and is instead working at a non-union operation owned by Patriot.

Neither Kidd or Crone were sure how influential the UMWA and other unions in West Virginia will be in future decades — or the coming legislative session, for that matter — but they said they are hopeful that enough people still support their cause.

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