

Cecil Roberts

and the United Mine Workers

Cecil Roberts fires up the delegates at the 2022 NALC convention in Chicago.

With a unique combination of working-class humility, unyielding resolve and electrifying speeches, Cecil Roberts has led the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) for three decades. Roberts, who will retire as UMWA president next month, expressed unwavering pride for unions and a fierce determination to empower the powerless.

Roberts, a sixth-generation coal miner, took the helm of the UMWA in 1995 and would go on to serve six more full terms as president.

Over the years, he forged and maintained close ties with NALC and America's letter carriers.

Roberts grew up on Cabin Creek in Kanawha County, WV, in the core of coal country, in a family with a strong union legacy. Among his family members active in the union was his great-uncle Bill Blizzard. Roberts understood on a personal level the dangers involved in his craft: Both of his grandfathers were killed in the mines.

After serving in the Vietnam War, Roberts mined coal while rising steadily in the ranks of the UMWA, and was elected national vice president in 1982 on the ticket of presidential candidate Richard Trumka.

Shortly after taking office as UMWA president, Roberts reopened the

UMWA's national wage agreement and gained significant improvements. By the highest percentage in the union's history, UMWA members ratified a new national agreement he negotiated in 1998. The agreement included a historic 20-year-and-out pension provision, regardless of age.

Roberts also led the charge for passage of a trio of bills in Congress to secure the health care and pensions of more than 92,000 retired miners—the Miners Protection Act in 2017, the Bipartisan American Miners Act in 2019 and the Miners Pension Protection Act in 2020.

Standing on the shoulders of giants

Roberts follows in the footsteps of a long line of inspiring leaders of UMWA, all of whom worked to bring better wages, benefits and working conditions to workers who go deep into the earth to help the country meet its energy needs, while risking their bodies and lives each workday.

In the early days of the labor movement, miners risked their lives standing up for their union as well, as violence was all too often part of the struggle. A few years after two smaller unions merged to form the UMWA in



Roberts and other members of the UMWA attend the 2019 commemoration of the Battle of Blair Mountain.

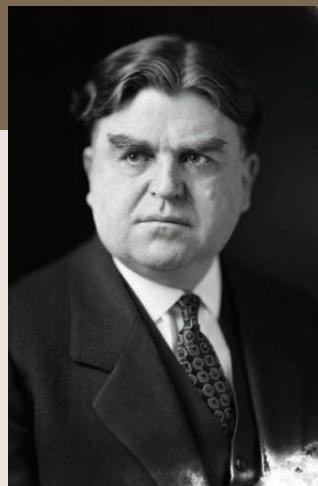
1890, 10,000 members from Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania—mostly immigrants—called a strike that culminated in the death of 19 miners in the Lattimer Massacre, with miners marching peacefully shot down by local police and coal company hired thugs near Hazleton, PA. It was not the first violent incident targeting coal miners and would not be the last. Coal fields across the country would sometimes resemble battlefields. But the UMWA remained determined.

UMWA President John Mitchell, who had risen rapidly in the ranks to leader of the union in 1898, negotiated an end to the strike that included gains for miners, most notably an eight-hour workday. Under Mitchell's watch, UMWA membership grew tenfold.

In 1914, Colorado National Guardsmen and coal company employees attacked a striking miners' camp in Colorado, killing an estimated 20 people, an event known as the Ludlow Massacre. Families of striking miners were living in the camp—the dead included two mothers and 11 children along with several miners.

John L. Lewis took the helm of the UMWA in 1919, an office he would hold for four decades, the only tenure longer than that of Roberts. The era of violence in the coalfields was far from over, but Lewis was undeterred.

Lewis was forced to confront the most militant labor activists in 1921, when influential West Virginia miner Bill Blizzard (Roberts's relative) led 7,000 striking miners on a march that culminated in the Battle of Blair Mountain. When a union activist was assassinated by coal company agents, tensions boiled over and the battle raged for nearly a week. After an estimated 16 deaths, U.S. President



Former UMWA presidents (from l.) Richard Trumka, John L. Lewis and John Mitchell

Warren Harding sent troops to restore order. Believing that Blizzard had pushed the violence too far, Lewis expelled him from the union.

It wasn't until 1946, when President Harry Truman ordered the seizure of coal mines to break a nationwide strike, that the violence began to subside. Truman's actions led to an agreement between Lewis and Interior Secretary Julius Krug, known as the Promise of 1946, that led to the creation of UMWA's health and retirement funds and called for federal regulation of mine safety. Over the following decades, the adoption of regulations moved at a slow pace, though. It often took a deadly mine disaster to force the hand of Congress or federal regulators.

Over the following years, the violence continued to wane, but the strikes did not. Under the leadership of UMWA President Richard Trumka, the union turned to civil disobedience tactics in the Pittston Coal Strike to press for the safeguarding of health care and retirement benefits for workers nationwide. The strike involved miners in 11 states in 1989 and 1990. The 10-month strike against the Pittston Coal Co., which had cut off health benefits to retirees, widows and disabled miners and stopped contributing to a retirement fund, led to a settlement that restored most of the cuts.

A coal miner born into a Pennsylvania coal-mining family, Trumka earned a law degree that he put to work for his fellow miners, becoming a staff attorney for UMWA. He rose in the leadership to become president in 1982. In addition to the Pittston Strike, Trumka's accomplishments included a

successful strike against the Peabody Coal Company in 1993.

Trumka lived the non-violent confrontation style for which he advocated. He was arrested several times during UMWA strikes and again when standing up for workers in other unions when he left UMWA in 1995 to serve as an elected leader of the AFL-CIO, which he later served as president. Trumka was succeeded as UMWA president by Roberts.

Roberts and NALC

Cecil Roberts's accomplishments were many. But it was his stirring oratorical skills that set Roberts apart and made him a sought-after guest at labor gatherings. He left union halls full of fired-up workers confident in their mission and ready to take action. In his infectious Appalachian vernacular, he hammered home his words like a miner pounding solid rock, confident and unyielding.

Roberts spoke at three NALC conventions, leaving the delegates thrilled each time. Noting in his speech at NALC's 2010 convention in Anaheim, CA, that unions have solved so many economic and social problems, Roberts implored workers everywhere to unionize with the following words:

You want higher pay?
Join a union!
You want more health care?
Join a union!
You want better pensions?
Join a union!
You want more democracy?
Join a union!
You want a better America?
Join a union! **PR**