

John L. Lewis

1880–1969



WHY HE MADE HISTORY Even in the anti-union climate of the post-war years, John L. Lewis used his abilities as an organizer and leader to work for a better life for miners.



As you read the biography below, ask yourself what might have caused labor leader John L. Lewis to dedicate his life to improving the lives of coal miners.



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From its beginning, coal mining has been one of the most dangerous occupations. In the United States, the coal mining industry began in the late 1700s, as growing railroads and industry required a source of power.

In the coalfields of western Pennsylvania and the eastern Midwest, miners removed the coal by hacking it from the rock deep underground. The only light came from candles mounted on the miners' helmets. Some spaces were so small that miners could not stand upright. A work shift usually lasted 12 hours. Miners were expected to work six and sometimes seven days a week. Children as young as seven or eight were often put to work sorting the lumps of coal according to size.

Cave-ins and floods were common. Dangerous gases could be released by one jab of a miner's pick or seep into a tunnel and explode. Miners were crushed to death, lost limbs, or died a lingering death from "black lung," a condition caused by breathing coal dust. There was no disability or life insurance, no health care plan, no old-age pension, no Social Security.

Life above ground was also hard. Mining companies often owned and rented out worker housing, sometimes little better than shacks. Usually the company store was the only place to buy food and other essentials. Often miners were paid in "scrip," bills printed by the company and only good at the company store. If a miner was killed, became ill or disabled, or got fired for complaining about conditions or for union activities, his whole family might find itself homeless and starving.

Such conditions continued for over 100 years. John L. Lewis knew them well. He grew up with coal miners and spent his life helping them.

The son of immigrants from the mining regions in Wales, a region in Great Britain, Lewis himself went to work in the mines when he was 15. From there he progressed to union organizer. Along the way he educated himself, an education that enabled him to inspire both workers and

From War to Peace**Biography**

authorities with his speeches.

In the 1920s as president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), Lewis led strikes that increased wages. The daily life of the miner and his family, however, remained largely unchanged.

As Lewis sought to improve the lives and working conditions of miners, he understood the challenges posed by anti-union sentiment, the Red Scare, and 100 Percent Americanism in the years after World War I. He knew that labor movements were often suspected of Communist sympathies and that many miners were recent immigrants. Although he knew that it would take years to change public opinion, he found much to do to promote this change, such as building good relationships with political leaders. These connections would pay off in the decades to come when public opinion of unions softened. In time Lewis became a regular adviser to U.S. presidents, and in the 1930s he worked to elect Franklin D. Roosevelt president.

In 1943, in the face of rising inflation, Lewis called a strike for higher wages despite the need for coal for the war effort. For this, many Americans never forgave him. In the 1950s he worked with mine operators to introduce labor-saving mining machinery and still support the miners.

By the time Lewis retired as union president in 1960, the issue of mine safety had been tackled and many improvements made. Mining would always be an extremely dangerous job, but through Lewis and the UMWA much had been done to decrease that danger. The miners had their own health care and pension system, the UMWA Welfare and Retirement Fund, which Lewis helped administer until his death in 1969. John L. Lewis was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** Describe Lewis's union activities in the decades between 1920 and his retirement as president in 1960.

2. **Evaluate** During World War I the miners made a no-strike bargain with the government. Compare and contrast this with the actions of Lewis and the UMWA during World War II.

ACTIVITY

Do some research on the 2002 Quecreek mining accident in Somerset County, Pennsylvania. What happened? What role did cutting-edge technology play?