

United Mine Workers of America

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July 26, 2011

Mr. Randall Reid-Smith, Commissioner
WV Division of Culture and History
The Culture Center
1900 Kanawha Blvd., East
Charleston, WV 25305

Dear Mr. Reid-Smith,

Shortly after the opening of the West Virginia State Museum, it was brought to my attention that there are a series of inaccuracies in the description of the UMWA, UMWA personnel and coal miners' history in the museum's displays. Additionally, I have received many complaints about the overall impression a visitor receives of the UMWA's role in West Virginia's history, life in the company towns, the events leading up to the Battle of Blair Mountain, the battle itself and other aspects of the displays in the museum.

Over the past months, several members of the UMWA staff have visited the West Virginia State Museum on many separate occasions. I have been to the museum myself, and seen the displays there. I have a number of very serious concerns with what is an inaccurate portrayal of the UMWA and our history of oppression and struggle against the coal operators of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The UMWA's concerns with the museum's displays are not only about the factual inaccuracies, but also extend to numerous misleading statements and lack of full information provided in the exhibits.

Let me start with this: There are two completely inaccurate statements in the museum's displays that I would like to see changed immediately:

- On "The Failure of Violence" plaque, the museum's text says that Bill Blizzard became the President of "Local" 17 of the UMWA. In fact, he became President of District 17, not Local 17. A local union is operational at only one workplace. A District encompasses all the local unions within a geographical area, in this case, southern West Virginia.

- On the “Bill Blizzard” plaque, the same mistake is made. Raymond Lewis became District 17 President, not Local 17. We also have concerns about the statement that Bill Blizzard resigned because John L. Lewis demoted him solely in order to put his brother in Blizzard’s place.

Beyond these outright mistakes, there are a host of misleading statements, biases, and incomplete information in almost every exhibition concerning coal miners, life in the coal camps, and more.

Specifically, the following “rooms” in the museum contain displays that are objectionable and do not present the actual history of these things anywhere near what it actually was:

- The “Company Store,” including the discussion of the system of using mine company scrip instead of U.S. legal tender to pay miners. Your presentation makes it seem as if the scrip system was little different from a credit card, where miners and their families could pay off expensive purchases over time.

Nowhere is it mentioned that miners had absolutely no choice as to whether they used scrip or not. Nowhere is it mentioned that going somewhere else instead of the company store to purchase goods and equipment was an offense frequently punishable by a beating from the company’s Baldwin-Felts thugs followed by dismissal from employment and eviction from the company house.

- “Coal mining,” including misleading statements regarding Island Creek Coal and UMWA organizing, as well as a very small presentation regarding the worst industrial disaster in United States history – the explosion at the Monongah mine – that includes language regarding the company’s Christmas “gift” to the families of those killed that is offensive to the memories of the fallen miners.
- “The Battle of Blair Mountain,” which blames Sid Hatfield for instigating the violence in the coalfields that led to that battle, instead of focusing on the daily violence inflicted on coal miners and their families in the coal camps of the day.

The film you show about Blair Mountain and accompanying panels also say that Bill Blizzard and others who were tried in the aftermath of the Battle were charged with treason against the United States, when in fact they were charged with treason against the state of West Virginia. As I’m sure you know, one cannot be treasonous against a single state, one can only be treasonous against all the United States. You fail to point this out, thereby perpetuating the false notion that these men were not true Americans.

There are several other issues with these and other displays that the UMWA finds objectionable, misleading, and biased; and which we are willing to discuss with you and your staff.

It is, to say the least, disappointing to find that what is supposed to be an authoritative presentation on our state’s unique history – and one that surely costs West Virginia taxpayers

millions of dollars to build and maintain – contains inaccurate, false, misleading and biased presentations.

Indeed, in just about every instance where the UMWA is mentioned in the museum, we are linked with violence or some other unsavory activity. There is no mention of the millions of West Virginians who have, over the past 60+ years, received and continue to receive the benefits of UMWA pensions and retiree health care – considerably easing their senior years – which were negotiated by the UMWA.

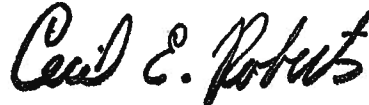
There is no mention of the UMWA's leading role in passing mine safety and health legislation which have saved countless lives in West Virginia and throughout the nation. There is no mention of the UMWA's role in fighting to end black lung and to establish and then protect black lung compensation.

Instead, the impression a visitor with little or no knowledge of the history of the coal industry and the UMWA would take away from the museum is that the union is made up of people who, while perhaps willing to work hard, are just as willing to be prone to armed violence to settle our problems, be they internal or external.

It is said that the "victors write history." I would point out that the fight between coal miners, our families and our communities against those who would exploit us is far from over. We have no intention of allowing a twisted version of what life was really like for our ancestors and ourselves to be foisted on an unsuspecting public.

I look forward to hearing from you as to how soon you intend to correct the false information contained in the museum, and whether or not you intend to work with the UMWA on correcting the biases imparted by so many of the museum's displays.

Sincerely,



Cecil E. Roberts

cc: Hon. Earl Ray Tomblin, Governor
Hon. Jay Rockefeller, United States Senator
Hon. Nick Rahall, Member of Congress
Hon. Kay Huffman Goodwin, Secretary, Department of Education and the Arts
Hon. Jeffrey Kessler, Acting President of the Senate
Hon. Rick Thompson, Speaker of the House
Hon. Mike Caputo, Majority Whip
Joe Carter, UMWA International District 17 Vice President
Gary Trout, UMWA Region IV Director
Ted Hapney, UMWA Eastern COMPAC Director
Marty Hudson, Executive Assistant to the UMWA President
Bob Scaramozzino, Administrator, UMWA President's Office
Phil Smith, UMWA Director of Communications
Emily Smith, UMWA Archivist/Collection Manager
Paul Nyden, Charleston Gazette
Ken Ward, Charleston Gazette
Lawrence Messina, Associated Press