

Alexandria Times

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Alexandria
 COMMUNITY MEDIA

The 1946 coal miners strike, led by an Alexandria resident

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the 1946 United Mine Workers of America strike, which was called on April 1, 1946, by UMWA leader John L. Lewis. At the time, Lewis lived at 614 Oronoco St., now known as the Lee-Fendall House.

The strike ended on May 29, 1946, with the signing of the Krug-Lewis Agreement, which guaranteed union miners a wage increase, vacation pay, a shorter five-day workweek and new safety regulations. The Krug-Lewis agreement also established mining's first medical, hospital and retirement welfare funds, which still exist in a different form today.

Lewis and Alexandria seemed like an odd match. The labor leader was born to a poor family in the mining town of Lucas, Iowa. Like many in his situation, he left school early and started working in the mines. His passion for people like him, and his physical pres-

ence, made him a rising star in the labor movement.

He led the United Mine Workers and founded the Congress of Industrial Organizations during World War II and beyond, as the relationship between workers and the federal government changed dramatically. He and his family moved to the house in Old Town in the 1930s when the United Mine Workers moved their headquarters from Indianapolis to Washington, D.C.

At the start of World War II, Lewis promised to cooperate with the federal government, acknowledging that coal was necessary for the war effort. But unsafe work conditions led him to call for a strike in April 1943, and 500,000 miners refused to work until President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9340, placing coal mines under government operation.

When miners still refused to work, Roosevelt threatened to

call troops to break the strike. According to the National Archives, miners shrugged and responded with what became their slogan, "You can't dig coal with bayonets."

Lewis' stand made him unpopular with some Americans who viewed his advocacy for miners as hurting the war effort.

After the war, Lewis and the union sought the protections and benefits they felt they had sacrificed in the war effort. Lewis called a nationwide strike on April 1, 1946. In May, the federal government, led by President Harry S. Truman, seized the mines.

A week later, John L. Lewis and Interior Secretary Julius Krug signed a historic agreement in the White House. The agreement included a lifetime healthcare and retirement welfare fund, an accomplishment that Lewis considered the highlight of his career.

Congress sought to curtail



PHOTO/LEE-FENDALL HOUSE MUSEUM & GARDEN
 Wartime protestors demonstrate outside John L. Lewis's home at 614 Oronoco St.

Lewis' power to call strikes after the signing of the Krug-Lewis Agreement and passed the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. The new legislation severely restricted the activity and power of labor unions, especially when those activities posed a threat to national security.

Despite these conditions, Lewis negotiated the Federal Coal Mine Safety Act in 1952, greatly improving coal mine safety standards.

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