

# Through the eyes of an artist

Sue Coe's images of the Pittston coal miners





## By Sue Coe

**W**e arrive at Camp Solidarity. It's the end of October. The camp is next to a tiny town called St. Paul. The countryside is very beautiful, mountains and hills, all very green. Mines and processing plants dot the hills. On the sides of the roads are many garage sales; we stop and look at a few. Little trinkets spread out on the hood of a car, old lighters, key rings, used pill bottles, pens, pen knives worn down to nothing, cracked saucers and plastic ash trays. Everything costs a few cents.

We see people going through dumpsters to find remnants of clothing, cans, anything.

Most of the houses have signs by the road, supporting [Lt. Gov. Douglas] Wilder for governor and supporting the striking miners.

Outside the main gate to the Pitston plant is a small wood shack covered with posters and information about the strike. Inside is a miner cooking hamburgers on a hot plate. Also a couch, chairs, lots of leaflets about the strike and messages of solidarity from around the country. We ask the miner about the strike. He has worked for Pitston for 18 years and now spends eight hours a day outside the gate. He is a gentle, shy man and takes great care to answer our queries.

He offers us his hamburger. We ask him where the scabs come from, and he says that a lot of the scabs were bused in from Texas. He points to a guarded compound up on the hill, to luxury mobile homes, where the scabs live.

All the time we are talking, we are being filmed by the Pitston security force, a camera with a telephoto lens on a tripod, inside the gate. I mention this, and the

miner laughs and says, "If you want to see them run, just point your camera at them." I also have a telephoto lens and turn to photograph them. Sure enough, they run behind the bush.

**W**e drive around the perimeter of the mine, which is huge, followed by the Pitston police in unmarked cars with tall aerials. To a visitor this is a shock, to be criminalized for driving along a public highway and conversing with a legal picket. But then you realize that the miners and their families live this way day in and day out. To think and act as a human being in a system set up for profit is to be classified a criminal.

There are hundreds of state police everywhere. We go on to the camp, which is not easy to find, as the roads are small and winding, but we start to see signs.

The camp is a large clearing, with mobile homes and tents, a stage area and, behind the stage, kitchens with food supplied by the steelworkers union, a long table with benches and a sheltered area where the carpenters' union is busily building bunk beds for the winter.

People flow around the camp, sometimes a few, sometimes a lot, everyone wearing camouflage clothing. Women, men, children, and even animals, all outfitted in camouflage. It seems that every union banner in the world is there proclaiming solidarity. There are some beautifully painted signs for the miners by an artist named R. Allen.

There are many speakers from all over the country and a lot of good music. It is a sunny, warm day, and people danced, children ran around looking for adventure, visitors exchanged their regular

clothes for camouflage clothes. One speaker, a farmer, came all the way from Guatemala with his family. He brought a message of solidarity from the striking farmers of Guatemala to the striking miners of Virginia.

**I**sit on a hill with my art supplies and a good view of the camp, intending to make drawings. But I am soon surrounded by curious children who also want to paint and draw. They are the children of miners and know everything about the strike. One of the children tells how her father was arrested. Apparently all a scab has to do is point to any miner at random and accuse him/her of throwing a tire at a scab's car. The police handcuffed her father, put him in a ditch and told him that if he raised his head, they would blow it off. This child's mother also went into the mine with her husband, past the guns, during the takeover.

In her class at school, there are 22 children, 19 of them miners' children. As we are talking a slow train passes the camp with a high pitched whistle, the cars full of coal, scab coal. The children smile and say it's coal on the top and rocks underneath.

Another child, an 11-year-old girl, wants us to draw horses, so we do. She tells me every detail about her horse, how she would brush his tail and mane, braid it, enter the horse in shows. The horse sounds like her best friend. I suggested we visit the horse but she says, in a matter of fact way, that he has been sold because the family cannot afford the feed. I think of the Pitston owners and bosses, and all their subsidiary companies, like Brinks security trucks, all sitting around their boardrooms, with lawyers and accountants adding up the yearly profits, and deciding to bust the Union. I wonder where their children are, and if they even gave a thought to the miners and their children.

The miners' children want to share everything, their knowledge of the wild animals and birds, the strike, what they had learned at school. Endless curiosity. Are there churches in New York? If you don't have an American accent, you have to be French.

The last thing we look at is a quilt made by the Ladies Auxiliary. Each square is embroidered with scenes from miners' lives and "the situation." I am amazed by it and take lots of photographs. It is true folk art. The children are very proud of the quilt. Anyway, you give two dollars and get a ticket for the quilt raffle.

The sun sets over the hills and miners and supporters hold hands and sing a song of solidarity.

**W**e go back to the motel. I ask a young woman, aged 26, who works there, about her family. She says her father, a miner, had been paralyzed from the neck down in a mining accident. He died six months later.

She vaguely remembers his wheelchair, but not him. He died leaving a wife and nine children. The company paid for his funeral, and that was it. It was non-union. Soon after that two children died of pneumonia, and later another child died in an accident. This young woman held down two jobs, one in a hospital during the day, and in the evening as a waitress at the motel.

Back in New York I have a sketchbook full of children's drawings of reindeer and horses. A week later, a phone call from Virginia: I had won the quilt in the raffle. It came today and is more beautiful than I remembered, a reminder that the strongest content for culture originates in the struggle for justice.

*"I've been doing critical realism in art since I came to this country in 1971" from England, Sue Coe told World Magazine. She works mainly for magazines and newspapers and her work has been exhibited widely in this country and abroad. An exhibition of her work, entitled "Art as Journalism," will open at the Brody Gallery in Washington, D.C. in February.*

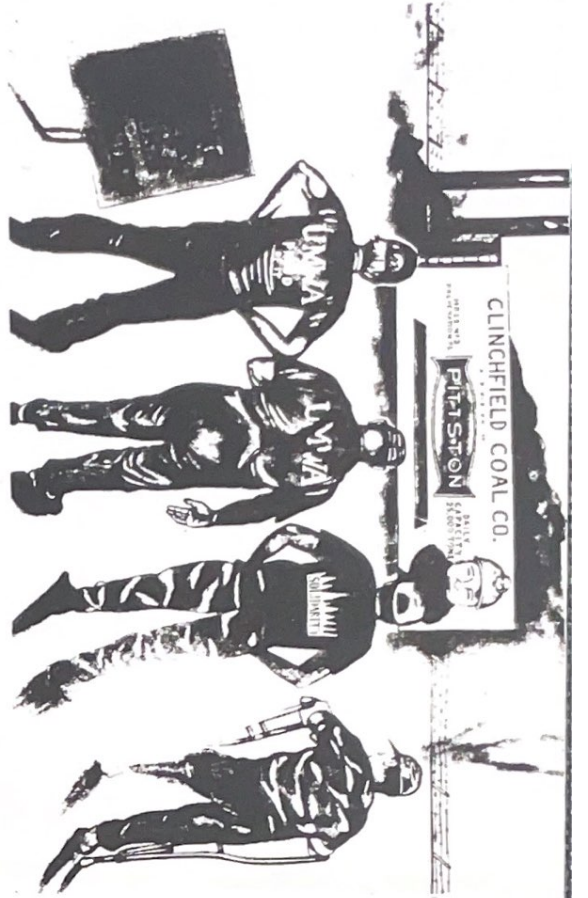




*The millions of dollars of corporate America will never defect to the flagships of Marked Jones*







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camp  
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