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Guide to  
the Microfilm Edition  
of the

**FBI File on  
John L. Lewis**

A Microfilm Publication by

**SR** *Scholarly Resources Inc.*  
Wilmington, Delaware

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## Introduction

John Llewellyn Lewis was a titan of the American labor movement during much of the twentieth century. In 1920 he was elected president of the United Mine Workers of America, the largest and most militant union in the country, and he held this position until his voluntary retirement in 1960. During his tenure, Lewis directed a major effort to organize unskilled industrial workers, founded the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and worked to secure a permanent place in corporate America for organized labor. His motivation, beyond improving the deplorable working and living conditions of coal miners, was to secure for all industrial workers a wage that would allow them to participate in the consumer economy. If workers could not afford to buy what they produced, Lewis and many others believed that the American economy would not survive. Lewis spent his life fighting for the workingman's fair share and the basic human rights he saw denied to poor whites and African Americans. It was this never-ending crusade for justice that brought Lewis to the attention of J. Edgar Hoover and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Lewis was born in a central Iowa mining town in 1880 to an immigrant Welsh coal miner and his wife. The Lewis family moved frequently throughout central Iowa during John's childhood, settling in Des Moines long enough for John to finish all but his final year of high school, a rare achievement in an era when most sons of miners followed their fathers into the shafts before their teenage years. In 1906, after trying his hand at a number of different occupations, Lewis too followed his father into the mines.

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He quickly became involved with the United Mine Workers (UMW) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL), choosing the path of labor organizer over miner as his life's work.

Lewis grew into a tireless organizer for both the UMW and the AFL. His abilities and dedication won him the loyalty of rank-and-file members and the attention of union leaders. In 1917, Lewis went to work full-time for the UMW. Through a series of appointed positions Lewis rose quickly up the ladder of the union leadership and in 1919 became acting president of the UMW. Through his deft handling of the 1919 coal strike, and the undercutting of his opponents, Lewis was elected to the UMW's presidency in 1920, just three years after his return to the union. For the next forty years he won reelection to this position.

The UMW was the largest and most important union in the country when Lewis became its president. The majority of American workers did not belong to unions in the 1920s, with less than three million union members as late as 1932. Coal miners had a long history of union activity. Mining was back-breaking and extremely dangerous work, with tens of thousands of miners losing their lives every year at a job that paid very little. The quest for improved safety conditions and wages provided the impetus for forming a union. The miners' power came from the importance of coal to the nation in the Industrial Age. Coal was the fuel of choice for industry, shipping, railroads, heating, and the generation of electricity, and a strike in the mines could cripple the economy, bring transportation to a stand-still, and leave millions of people in the cold and dark. In almost

yearly strikes, miners willingly used this power to push for their demands.

Lewis used the vital importance of coal and the willingness of the miners to strike to force the federal government to intervene and compel mine owners to settle in order to avert economic and political crises. However, he learned early on in his career that this government power was a double-edged sword. Federal intervention could protect the strikers and force concessions from the owners or through indifference and hostility destroy a union. Lewis understood that for the UMW, or any union, to succeed it needed to combine the ability to severely disrupt the national economy with political connections and debts that could ensure favorable governmental support.

During the prosperous 1920s, Lewis cooperated with mine owners and the federal government in an effort to protect union jobs while ensuring the health of the coal-mining industry. He followed the lead of the secretary of commerce, and later president, Herbert Hoover, who preached "cooperative capitalism," in which capital and labor voluntarily worked together to secure the prosperity of the nation. Despite these intentions, declining demand for coal caused by the shift to oil and gas, and the growing competition from nonunion mines in the South, strained labor relations. Neither Hoover nor President Calvin Coolidge was willing to force mine owners to uphold contracts signed in 1924. Nor were government officials willing to step in and halt the bloodshed in the coal-mining towns of West Virginia, where the UMW was trying to organize nonunion miners. These events reinforced Lewis's understanding of the power of government to influence the

success or failure of union movements. It also turned him politically away from the doctrine of voluntary cooperation preached by Republicans and toward the Democrats' willingness to intervene directly in the economy. Despite the prosperity of the 1920s, the decade was disastrous for the UMW. The West Virginia organizing effort was halted by violence, and membership was depleted by the closing of mines. As wages fell back to pre-1914 levels, the UMW was nearly destroyed.

To rescue both the union and the miners, Lewis and his chief economic adviser, W. Jett Lauck, devised a plan for the federal government to intervene directly in the coal industry and force its rationalization. Lewis and Lauck envisioned the government setting production quotas and prices, allocating markets, and sanctioning the UMW as a stabilizing force in the industry. The Great Depression and the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt offered Lewis the opportunity to implement this plan. The economic advisers that Roosevelt brought to Washington to create the New Deal preferred the type of direct government involvement that Lewis desired. The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) took many of the ideas that Lewis and Lauck proposed for coal mining and made them the blueprint for the recovery of the entire industrial sector of the national economy.

With the encouragement of the NIRA, Lewis moved to unionize not only all coal miners but also the millions of mass-production workers whom traditional, skilled-based unions overlooked. This action brought Lewis into direct conflict with the AFL, which acted as an umbrella organization for a number of skilled trade unions, including the

UMW. Lewis repeatedly pleaded with the organization to reach out to those unskilled workers who stood on the ever-growing number of assembly lines. Organizing unskilled labor was essential, in Lewis's view of economics, to ensure the long-term survival of the American consumer economy. This view was supported by many within the Roosevelt administration who believed that the Great Depression was caused by under-consumption. Because of the AFL's traditional emphasis on skilled labor, its conservative nature, and personality conflicts between Lewis and other union leaders, the group refused the plan. Frustrated, Lewis removed the UMW from the AFL in 1934. In 1935 he organized the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which welcomed all unions regardless of level of skill and worked to organize the great unskilled industries such as automobiles, steel, and textiles.

Simultaneously, Lewis campaigned vigorously for Roosevelt's reelection in 1936. The president and Lewis appeared together at coal-mining towns throughout the country, and the UMW donated several hundred thousand dollars to the Democratic campaign. When Roosevelt won in a landslide, it was in part due to Lewis's hard work, a fact that the UMW president did not let FDR forget. The winter and spring of 1937 following the election were the high-points of Lewis's career. Under his leadership the CIO successfully organized the vehemently antiunion General Motors following a protracted sit-down strike at the auto giant's Flint, Michigan, plants. The occupation of GM's Flint plants succeeded, in large part, because both the state and federal governments refused to intervene and uphold GM's private property rights. Lewis's twin strategy of gar-

nering political support and using economic pressure paid off when GM agreed to a union contract, the first automobile company to be unionized. This victory was quickly followed by U.S. Steel's agreement to a union contract, even though the CIO had only begun an organizing effort at the nation's largest company.

These successes—the greatest labor victories of the century—could not be sustained. When Lewis and the CIO targeted the smaller steel manufacturers in the fall of 1937, the effort failed mainly because of a lack of political support. These setbacks combined with a sharp economic downturn in the fall of 1937 to wipe out many of the CIO's gains as assembly-line workers lost their jobs. Lewis's plan to organize the textile industry also collapsed in the face of the recession and FDR's growing disinterest in domestic policy. Embittered, Lewis blamed Roosevelt and began to attack the president publicly.

With the recession at home and war looming in Europe, FDR turned his attention to foreign affairs. His disinterest in domestic affairs left Lewis and the CIO without federal protection and only increased the split between Lewis and Roosevelt. Lewis was very public in his pronouncements that the nation could not end its economic difficulties by sending its young, unemployed men to be killed in Europe; he supported peace efforts and isolationism. During the Second World War, Lewis remained a vocal critic. War mobilization brought government control of wages, prices, and critical industries such as coal, but, despite these controls, prices continued to rise while miners' wages remained the same. The emphasis on increased production and productivity for the war effort led to a higher number of

mine accidents and deaths. When the miners went on strike, both during and immediately following the war, they earned the wrath of the federal government and the public. By striking, the UMW repeatedly threw the nation into crisis. Lewis and the UMW won some important concessions regarding a welfare and retirement funds; however, the UMW's main adversary became the federal government, not the mine owners. A series of bitter strikes in the late 1940s resulted in a number of legal changes that restricted the rights of all unions. By the end of the 1940s the UMW and Lewis were facing fines and penalties for actions that were legal even during the Second World War. Their powers severely restricted, American unions would never again be as potent as they were in the 1930s.

The changing legal, political, and economic situation forced Lewis to alter his style in the 1950s, his last decade of leadership, and he again became an apostle of "cooperative capitalism." He moved to cooperate closely with the mine owners in an effort to again rescue the ailing industry. The UMW and owners signed long-term, collective contracts that brought stability to the industry. Coal strikes, an almost annual event since 1920, became limited to sporadic wildcat strikes. Lewis invested union funds to promote the industry at home and overseas, but none of these efforts returned coal to its former position as a slow decline continued. In January 1960, Lewis stepped down as UMW president, one of the few union leaders ever to leave a post voluntarily.

The FBI took an interest in John L. Lewis for a number of reasons. The first was Director Hoover's personal dislike of Lewis, who repeatedly called for equality for

African Americans, challenged the poll tax, and spoke to civil rights groups. Lewis also assailed President Roosevelt for tolerating the racist views of southern supporters. To the FBI this made Lewis an obvious Communist sympathizer and a clear threat to the status quo, despite his strong support for American institutions and repeated purges of Communists from the UMW. His strident antiwar criticism added to the reasons to keep him under surveillance. Lewis was aware of the FBI's interest in him, and he confronted Roosevelt about surveillance and wiretaps. When the president claimed to know nothing about the investigation, Lewis publicly condemned the existence of any sort of secret police in a free society.

The files reproduced here center on the 1930s and concentrate on Lewis's efforts to control a splinter mining union and on his civil rights work. The files will be of particular interest to labor historians, both for their revelations on how established unions met challenges and for labor's relationship to the civil rights movement. The documents reproduced here were drawn from the Washington files of the FBI and have been released under the Freedom of Information Act; certain documents or portions of documents have been deleted by the FBI pursuant to provisions of that legislation. The material has been filmed in exact order and condition in which it was released, and every effort has been made to publish the most legible copies available.

This file is in approximate chronological order, and the FBI did not index documents. The Roll Notes section is not a complete inventory of the file; however, it gives an

indication of the types of material or specific documents  
that may be particularly worthwhile for research.

*Paul Beezley*  
*Texas Tech University*

## Roll Notes

FBI File: 44-845

### SECTION 1

Roll 1, 0001-0159

*Jul-Aug 1943*

Investigation into the charge that John L. Lewis, et al., conducted unfair labor practices against the miners in Springfield, IL, employed by the union: Progressive Mine Workers of America

Lewis, et al., Civil Rights and Domestic Violence

News article:

*P.M. (Aug 1943)*

"Grand Jury to Probe \$350,000 Lewis 'Loan' to Mine"

Outline of Trial Brief against John L. Lewis, et al.

### SECTION 2

Roll 1, 0161-0329

*Aug 1943*

Outline of Trial Brief against John L. Lewis, et al.  
Lewis, et al., Civil Rights and Domestic Violence

News article:

*St. Louis Post Dispatch (Aug 1943)*

"UMW Paid 14 PMW Members During Mine B Dispute"

Pamphlet: The Wrecking of the Miners' Union  
by Frank Farrington, former President of District 12,  
United Mine Workers of America

Outline of investigation, Mine B Case, Alleged Violations

Documents from National Labor Relations Board,

re: Mine B Coal Company

SECTION 3

**Roll 1, 0331-0590**

*Aug 1943*

Lewis, et al., Civil Rights and Domestic Violence

Relations between UMW and Carl H. Elshoff, owner of  
Mine B, prior to Sep 1932

Interviews with workers of Mine B concerning the situation  
between the UMW and the PMA

SECTION 4

**Roll 1, 0593-0838**

*Aug-Sep 1943*

Interviews with workers of Mine B concerning the situation  
between the UMW and the PMA

SECTION 5

**Roll 1, 0840-0880**

*Sep 1943*

John L. Lewis, et al., Civil Rights and Domestic Violence

SECTION 6

**Roll 1, 0881-1039**

*Sep 1943*

John L. Lewis, et al., Civil Rights and Domestic Violence  
Interviews with PMA miners employed at Mine B in May  
1937

SECTION 7

**Roll 1, 1041-1186**

*Sep 1943*

Interviews with PMA miners employed at Mine B in May  
1937

SECTION 8

Roll 1, 1188-1338

*Sep 1943*

Interviews with PMA miners employed at Mine B in May  
1937 (continued)

Investigation concerning UMW labor spies operating within  
the PMA during spring of 1937

SECTION 9

Roll 1, 1341-1374

*Sep 1943*

John L. Lewis, et al., Civil Rights and Domestic Violence

SECTION 10

Roll 1, 1377-End

*Sep 1943*

Roll 2, 0003-0111

John L. Lewis, et al., Civil Rights and Domestic Violence

Interviews with PMA miners employed at Mine B in May  
1937

Interviews with persons employed at Mine B after Nov 6,  
1939

SECTION 11

Roll 2, 0113-0385

*Sep 1943*

Interviews with persons employed at Mine B after Nov 6,  
1939 (continued)

Interviews with persons employed at Mine A at time of  
seasonal shut-down, Apr 1941

SECTION 12

Roll 2, 0388-0606

*Sep 1943*

Interviews with persons employed at Mine A at time of seasonal shut-down, Apr 1941 (continued)

Review of Illinois State Register and Illinois State Newspapers of Springfield, IL

Miscellaneous Investigation and Interviews

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Roll 2, 0609-0681

*Sep 1943*

John L. Lewis, et al., Civil Rights and Domestic Violence

SECTION 14

Roll 2, 0683-0771

*Sep-Oct 1943*

John L. Lewis, et al., Civil Rights and Domestic Violence  
News articles:

*Washington Times-Herald* (Oct 1943)

"New Deal Accused of Tapping UMW Wires"

*N.Y. Daily Mirror* (Oct 1943)

"Phones Tapped, Strikers Claim"

*Washington Post* (Oct 1943)

"John L. Lewis Gas Ration Case Closed"

SECTION 15

Roll 2, 0773-0800

*Sep-Oct 1943*

John L. Lewis, et al., Civil Rights and Domestic Violence  
Examination of records of Central Illinois Mining Co. (Mine A) and Panther Creek Mines, Inc.

SECTION 16

Roll 2, 0802-0823

*Oct-Nov 1943*

John L. Lewis, et al., Civil Rights and Domestic Violence

SECTION EBF

Roll 2, 0825-0998

*Sep 1937-Nov 1941*

Records of the National Labor Relations Board:

Settlement Agreement between the Mine B Coal Co. and

Progressive Mine Workers of America

Affidavit of Lee Ensel

Affidavit of Carl Elshoff

SECTION EBF

Roll 2, 1000-1234

*Aug 1937-Jan 1941*

Legal matters involving the Mine B Coal Company

SECTION A

Roll 2, 1236-1270

*Mar-Nov 1943*

News articles include:

*Washington Post* (Nov 1943)

"Justice Dept. May Act in Lewis Case"

"Mine Seizure Likely Move if Workers Go on Strike"

*P. M.* (Nov 1943)

"Lewis Signs Wage Pact With Ickes; Ends Strike"

"Lewis Meets UMW Officials as Miners Avoid Pits"

*The Daily Worker* (Nov 1943)

"Lewis Stalls, Strike Continues"

*Washington Times-Herald* (Sep 1943)  
“Grand Jury to Eye Lewis Union ‘Dea’ ”  
*P. M.* (Mar 1943)  
“Special Group for Lewis ‘Out’ ”

**FBI File: 62-2998**

**SECTION 1**

**Roll 2, 1272-End**

Alderney Auklet Basilar, Confidential Matter  
Bituminous Coal Strike, John L. Lewis