

Real Life Safety Heroes: John L. Lewis



When he was 16 years old, John L. Lewis went to work in the coal mines of Iowa. It was 1896 and Lewis' destiny was to become a miner, just like his father. But destiny sometimes has a quirky sense of humor. Thus, while Lewis would, in fact, never leave the mines, his path turned out to be far different than what anybody expected.

From Miner to Union Leader

Lewis became a union activist and AFL (American Federation of Labor) organizer. In 1917, he was elected president of the UMWA (United Mine Workers Association). He was feared and called a despot. And for good reason. Lewis would brook no opposition and rid the union leadership of political rivals. He secured his national reputation for pugnacity by socking one of his critics in the nose during a union convention.

But he wasn't in it for himself. Lewis used his power to fight for the miners. Conditions in the mines were appalling. Lewis fought to change them. He wasn't afraid to leverage America's dependence on coal to call strikes in 1943, during the Second World War. Even the Communists called Lewis's tactics "un-American."

But they worked. By the time his career was done, Lewis would help miners win not just substantial wage increases, but health benefits, pensions and the right to organize. Union

pressure also forced mine operators to implement health and safety measures to protect their workers. Lewis died in his home in Alexandria, VA, on June 11, 1969.



[John L. Lewis](#)