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OCCUPY SPRING

West Virginia retirees occupy — and win

by [Jake Olzen](#) | April 2, 2012, 6:00 am



Dismantling the encampment. Photo by James Fassinger, all rights reserved.

Karen Gorrell choked back tears one Saturday in early March as she pulled the final stake from the tent that had been her home for the past seventy-five days. Last fall, the protracted struggle she led for retired workers from Century Aluminum Corporation found itself an accidental part of the Occupy movement. “I’m elated that a bunch of little senior citizens can take on corporate giants in West Virginia,” Gorrell said.

The group fought to have their health care benefits reinstated after the company unilaterally dropped coverage for more than 500 retirees and their families. After more than a year of organizing, protests and, ultimately, a physical occupation, the Occupy Century group reached a settlement with the company late last month that will restore those health benefits and grant \$44 million to the retirees over ten years, with up to \$25 million in additional contributions to follow.

“I love these people,” Gorrell, 62, said about her fellow occupiers, whose ages range from their early-60s to mid-80s. “This is the closest family you could have in the world.” Gorrell is married to a Century retiree and describes herself as a high school graduate, a community volunteer and a grandmother.

The Century Aluminum factory in Ravenswood, West Virginia, had seen struggles before. In 1990, 1,700 union workers at, what was then called Ravenswood Aluminum Corporation, were locked out in an effort to drastically cut wages. The ensuing “Battle of Fort RAC” was a divisive conflict for the Jackson County community; the negotiations that ended the two-year lockout and picket resulted in workers forced to take a significant pay cut in exchange

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for health care retirement accounts. When the plant closed in 2009, laying off 651 workers, Century Aluminum promised workers that their health benefits would continue.

In June 2010, however, the company announced it would be terminating health coverage for its retirees and keeping the \$25 million that workers had paid into their pensions. “You’ve been exposed to every hazardous chemical in the book — asbestos, coal tar pitch, all kinds of extreme hazards from aluminum — and when the men retire and they’re actually beginning to suffer from the exposure, then the company comes in and just pulls out the rug,” Gorrell said.

Not only that, but Century Aluminum qualified for and was accepted by — yet chose not to participate in — the [Early Retiree Reinsurance Program](#), a provision of the [Affordable Care Act](#) that President Obama signed into law in 2010, which grants federal funding to help cover retirees’ health care costs. The company later accepted EERP funding; in the fourth quarter of 2010, Century reported a net income of \$65.3 million citing “changes to the retiree medical benefits program [that] increased quarterly results by \$56.7 million.”

“It’s not only morally wrong, it is absolutely criminal what they’re doing to America’s most vulnerable people,” Gorrell said, “and the sad part is, the federal court system is upholding these decisions by these corporations.”

Not this time.

[United Steelworkers](#) (USW), which represents most of the unionized workers, filed a lawsuit on behalf of the Century retirees. Meanwhile, Gorrell and others began to organize, picket and protest. “My daughter kicked me in the pants and told me to stand up and fight!” she recalled. “I said, ‘Jody, this is corporate America.’ She said ‘Mom, you’ve got more fire in the britches than anyone, you can do this.’”

On December 18, 2011, after months without benefits, through faltering negotiations and litigation, two dozen or so retirees from Century Aluminum [occupied their old workplace](#).

Weathering the cold and snow, the makeshift occupation became home to dozens of retirees. There they slept, cooked meals, played games, gave interviews and celebrated Christmas together. “It was the greatest Christmas I ever spent,” Gorrell recalled. “So many of these people are seriously ill — cancer, heart disease, emphysema, lung disease from the industry. One guy said, ‘If this is where I’m supposed to die, of pneumonia, it’s worth it, because everybody is fighting for the right thing.’”

“Every one of us believed it, that the sacrifice was worth the risk,” she said. “It could be the last Christmas some of them have, but we had an overwhelming outpouring of support.”

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Karen Gorrell. Photo by James Fassinger, all rights reserved.

Part of Occupy Century's success was due to the negative publicity it was able to generate about the company, making the blood on its hands visible. When Gorrell and three others traveled to Century Aluminum's shareholder meeting in California last June, for instance, she wore a bright yellow shirt with a photo of her friend Bryce Turner screen-printed above the words "Murder without a Gun."

At the time, Turner was hospitalized with leukemia while his health coverage was discontinued. He has since died.

"I told the board at the shareholder meeting that Bryce is in the hospital," Gorrell recalled. She said to them, "I want you to remember, every day you go to the bank and deposit your profits, that he gave you 36 and a half years of his life."

Many of the group's tactics targeted Century's CEO [Logan Kruger](#), who left the company in November, taking with him a going-away present of [\\$6.2 million](#). When his successor [Michael Bless](#) visited the retirees' camp last month, he told Gorrell that he remembered her.

Meanwhile, Occupy activists and local union shops across the country were also picketing and protesting Century Aluminum in support of the retirees' cause, including at the company's global headquarters in Monterey, California, where Occupiers confronted Bless on a regular basis. [Occupy Charleston](#) joined the retirees at the state capital. And workers from the [Century Aluminum plant in Hawesville, Kentucky](#), Gorrell said, "supported us all the way through."

West Virginia senators [Jay Rockefeller](#) and [Joe Manchin](#), as well as the West Virginia state legislature, offered key support for the retirees while facilitating negotiations at USW offices in Pittsburgh. Rockefeller, in particular, backed the group from day one, taking a stand for labor rarely seen among current politicians. West Virginia Governor [Earl Ray Tomblin](#), on the other hand, dragged his feet.

Last year, the governor promised to reopen the Ravenswood plant without addressing the health care issue. "We were furious. I wrote a letter to the editor that night and laced him for dealing with the devil," Gorrell said. The retirees got a meeting with Tomblin after threatening to picket his office indefinitely. Later, the governor proved crucial in bringing Century Aluminum to the negotiating table.

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And on February 29, Century Aluminum, the USW, the retirees and state political leadership reached an agreement to restore health care benefits for the retirees. The agreement, however, hinges on Century Aluminum receiving tax breaks and other incentives from West Virginia lawmakers to reopen the Ravenswood aluminum smelting plant.

Century Aluminum did not respond to questions about the impact the occupation had on bringing them back to the negotiating table. Local newspapers credited the support of politicians, including Senator Manchin, who said that “this deal belongs to the workers and retirees who made this happen.”

USW spokesperson Jim McKay explained by email how the retirees’ occupation and USW helped bring Century to the table: “The Occupy Century group protested in the state capital and were responsible, together with the USW, for defeating legislation the company sought in 2011.” This, he wrote, “is one of the principal reasons the company believed it needed to reach a negotiated settlement.”

The retirees’ victory highlights what similar campaigns across the country are now revealing, whether they are activists occupying foreclosed homes or [workers taking over their Chicago factory](#) for the second time in two years: that taking space means taking power.

“We wanted our message to be clear. We felt we could make a statement about the whole 99 percent and how corporate America and greed overtook us and put us in poverty,” Gorrell said.

“I’m not a professional negotiator, I’m a grandma. But by golly, what’s right is what’s right. Our fight was to make the company give us what we paid for. What better fighters than a bunch of senior citizens? We have one foot in the grave but are kicking like hell with the other.”

This article appears through a collaboration with [Occupy.com](#) and was jointly published there.



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SHERRY WYATT says:

April 3, 2012 at 8:24 pm

I am so proud of your fight and your win...

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Anne Sibley O'Brien says:

April 3, 2012 at 8:59 pm

Bravo! This is so inspiring! Gives me hope.



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We need to remember that although corporations are NOT people, there are people within them who can be touched, shamed, and/or moved.

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Lina Reinert says:

April 3, 2012 at 9:34 pm

You folks are fantastic! I applaud you and your commitment to stand up for your rights! We retired at United Airlines are going through the same thing right now. Endurance, never give up! You worked for it and nobody has the right to take those earned benefits away!!

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Devon says:

April 4, 2012 at 2:07 am

Really great! What other choice is there but to fight against the evils of the world like this... OCCUPY NOW!

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Dave Crossley says:

April 5, 2012 at 9:52 am

Please note : Occupycharleston.org links to the website for Occupy Charleston, South Carolina. The website for Occupy Charleson, WV, is occupycharlestonwv.org

Occupy Charleston (SC) has done some fine work but we can't take credit for any part of the action above. Our friends in West Virginia have a long history of Standing Up for their rights; we can't but take inspiration from their bravery and persistence. Thank you, WV!

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