

Dissident miners attacked at United Mine Workers rally

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Dissident local officers and rank-and-file coal miners were brutally attacked April 1 by supporters of the United Mine Workers of America leadership at a union rally in southwestern Pennsylvania. The incident took place at the UMWA's annual Mitchell Day celebration in Bentleyville, just south of Pittsburgh, attended by some 250 union officials and miners.

Outside the hall a dozen miners from Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Ohio held up signs and passed out leaflets criticizing the policies of the union leadership. Central to their grievances was the UMWA's sanctioning of forced overtime. The miners pointed out the irony of a rally honoring John Mitchell, the UMWA president who led the bitter 1902 strike which won the right to an eight-hour day, while present-day miners are forced to work nine or more hours a day, sometimes six or seven days a week. The leaflet they passed out said, "The 8 hour day doesn't exist in the UMWA."

Almost immediately, a group of union thugs surrounded the protesting miners and began punching and kicking them. They pulled down the workers' signs and ripped the flyers from their hands. A protesting miner was hit on the head with a piece of lumber and had to be hospitalized. The attack only ended when state and local police intervened.

Rich Cicci, the financial secretary of UMWA Local 1197 and a worker at Rochester and Pittsburgh's Eighty-Four Mine in Washington County, suffered a gash by his ear. He told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We were standing with signs and they brought in people on the International [union] payroll. I call them thugs. They pulled away our signs and I got hit with something."

"We are a rank-and-file opposition and the union does not know how to deal with us. When a local officer says something they don't like, they call the district and bring down pressure on him. But with us that won't work. They tried to beat our heads in and shut us up."

The dissident miners wanted to make their position known to UMWA President Cecil Roberts and Richard Trumka, current secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO and the president

of the UMWA from 1982 to 1995, who spoke at the rally. Over the past decade-and-a-half their disastrous policies have led to the loss of tens of thousands of miners' jobs and the surrender of hard-won gains extracted from the coal companies in the course of a century of struggle.

After the attack on the dissidents, Trumka was greeted with a loud round of boos from a significant portion of the audience as he stepped to the microphone.

The leaflet passed out in the name of the "UMWA Rank & File" criticized the union bureaucracy's pro-company policies, including the new five-year agreement the UMWA signed last December, nine months in advance of the contract deadline, with the Bituminous Coal Operators Association. The leaflet demanded the elimination of forced overtime, opposed the combining of job classifications, and denounced the erosion of miners' living standards, medical benefits and pensions.

One of the protesting workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that his group was particularly angry over the union's sanction of work on two out of three Saturdays a month, as well as a practice called "hot seat exchange," in which one crew must continue operating their equipment until the next shift of miners relieves them. The UWMA agreed to this practice, which lengthens the work day to at least nine hours, as part of its efforts to help companies keep machines operating continuously and boost productivity. Another worker said conditions were returning to those that prevailed at the beginning of the century, and complained that miners today can be fired for insubordination if they do not accept overtime.

The opposition group also hit at the bureaucratic and undemocratic measures the UMWA leaders use to maintain their control over the union. They accused UMWA officials of hiding the actual results of the national vote on the contract, changing the constitution to block opposition candidates from running in International and district elections, and using the strike fund to maintain the salaries of union bureaucrats whose UMWA districts have been abolished due to mine closings and layoffs.

The violent attack on the protesters was publicized in western Pennsylvania and produced widespread disgust among working people. After the rally, however, UMWA International President Cecil Roberts justified the assault in an interview with the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*. “This is not the way we want to resolve disputes,” he said, “but you can’t curse the union and its leadership and expect that no one will take exception to that.” The UMWA director of communications later told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Roberts stood by his statement as quoted in the *Post Gazette*.

The Socialist Equality Party in the US emphatically condemns this hooligan attack and calls on miners and all workers to protest this assault on their democratic rights. Whatever Roberts and Trumka may think, their union sinecures do not give them a license to bully and intimidate workers who oppose their policies.

Our party is quite familiar with the methods employed by the UMWA bureaucracy. Our own members have been subjected to violence and intimidation at its hands. Our reporters were physically assaulted during the Pittston strike of 1989-90, and our members had leaflets and newspapers ripped out of their hands at a UMWA rally in Charleston, West Virginia in June of 1989. We repeatedly warned that such methods would not be reserved for the socialist opponents of the UMWA leadership, but would be used against rank-and-file miners as well.

This attack brings to mind the infamous methods of the old Tony Boyle leadership of the UMWA, against whom rank-and-file miners rose up in rebellion in the late 1960s. An insurgent movement sought to wrest control of the union from officials notorious for their corruption, bureaucratic abuse of the membership and collusion with the coal bosses. The legacy of Boyle was back-breaking labor, frequent mine explosions, black lung and terrible poverty in the coal fields.

Unfortunately this movement never rose to the level of a conscious struggle against not only Boyle, but the entire political outlook of the trade union bureaucracy, the basic elements of which are a defense of the profit system, a hostility to socialism, and flag-waving chauvinism. These backward tendencies have long found their political expression in the trade union bureaucracy’s alliance with the big business Democratic Party.

Lacking an independent political perspective, the miners’ movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was subject to manipulation and infiltration by the government, via the Labor Department, and a new series of trade union bureaucrats, no less corrupt and subservient to the coal operators, came into the leadership of the UMWA.

When Trumka and Roberts assumed control of the union in 1982 they tossed out the miners’ long-standing militant tradition of industry-wide strikes. They isolated and betrayed

one struggle after another, from A.T. Massey in 1985 to Pittston in 1989-90, to the BCOA strike of 1993.

The UMWA leaders abandoned striking workers such as the Kentucky A.T. Massey miners, the Milburn, West Virginia miners and Jerry Dale Lowe, who were framed up by the government and jailed. They did nothing to press for the arrest of the gunmen who murdered UMWA miner John McCoy on a West Virginia picket line in 1990. At the same time the UMWA adopted a corporatist policy of labor-management collaboration to boost productivity and reduce labor costs.

What have these policies produced?

The UMWA has become little more than a hollow shell. The fact that only 250 people attended the Mitchell Day rally in Bentleyville is itself an expression of the virtual collapse of the union. Up until the late 1980s these events drew thousands of miners, steelworkers and other sections of the working class. But there are now a mere 2,000 union miners working in southwestern Pennsylvania, once a stronghold of the UMWA.

When Trumka and Roberts were first elected there were 120,000 working miners in the UMWA. Now there are 40,000. UMWA strength measured in terms of the percentage of miners who are in the union, as well as the percentage of coal produced by union mines, continues to plunge. As for the conditions in the coal fields, not since the coal region depression of the 1950s and early 60s have there been such levels of poverty and unemployment.

The violence sanctioned by the UMWA bureaucracy testifies to its lack of any significant support among the miners. The majority of UMWA members, not to mention the tens of thousands more who are unemployed or forced to work in nonunion mines, are hostile to the union apparatus.

It came as no surprise when the office of AFL-CIO President John Sweeney informed a WSWS reporter that the labor federation had no intention of issuing a statement on the Bentleyville incident. This is but the latest exposure of the bogus “reform” of the AFL-CIO under the leadership of Sweeney and Trumka.



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