

The United Mine Workers of America and the resurgence of black lung disease

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According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), the number of cases of black lung disease among US coal miners has more than doubled in recent years. This reverses a decades-long trend that saw a 90 percent decline in the incidence of black lung, or coal workers' pneumoconiosis, which destroys lung tissue and slowly suffocates miners to death.

The resurgence of black lung demonstrates in a particularly tragic way the rolling back of all of the historical gains not only of miners, but the entire working class. Before the miners' mass struggles to improve their working and living conditions in the 1960s and 1970s, the prevalence of black lung disease was associated with the oppression and poverty faced by wide sections of the population, particularly in the mining regions of Appalachia, as chronicled in Michael Harrington's famous 1962 work, *The Other America*.

Despite a massive decline in the ranks of working miners—to only 98,000 today, compared with nearly 500,000 in 1950—the number of black lung cases and the rate of incidence are increasing, including among young miners. Health officials blame the increase on longer working hours—which have increased by more than 32 percent since 1978—and increased exposure to coal dust. These are largely the results of the drive of profit-mad companies to extract coal from locations previously considered to have been mined out.

The systematic weakening of health and safety standards, carried out under both Democratic and Republican administrations, has also contributed. Under the Bush administration, former coal executives were put in charge of the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and coal companies were told to police themselves.

Since 1995, NIOSH has recommended cutting the limit

of coal dust exposure in half, to 1 milligram per cubic meter, but MSHA has refused to set a stricter limit. The pandering to the industry has continued under President Obama, who has long had close connections to the coal interests of southern Illinois.

The return of high levels of black lung is, above all, a testament to the treacherous role of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Over the last three decades, the UMWA has systematically sabotaged the resistance of the miners and collaborated with the employers and the government to destroy the gains won by previous generations over more than a century of struggle.

The evolution of the UMWA—once known as the most militant and powerful union in America—is indicative of the transformation of the trade unions as a whole into corporatist adjuncts of big business. It is a historical verdict on the perspective of building a labor movement on the basis of support for the profit system, nationalism and an alliance with the capitalist parties, in particular, the Democratic Party.

Like the rest of the AFL-CIO trade union apparatus, the UMWA responded to the crisis of American capitalism in the late 1970s by repudiating the class struggle and working ever more closely with the employers to drive down labor costs and make US corporations more competitive against their international rivals.

A turning point in the degeneration of the UMWA was the election of Richard Trumka as union president in 1982. Trumka set out systematically to destroy the rich traditions of class conscious solidarity and militant struggle of the miners, which had been forged in the bitter “mine wars” of the first two decades of the last century.

Trumka overturned the miners' long-standing principles of “no contract, no work” and the waging of national strikes to shut down both union and non-union production, and introduced the disastrous policy of

“selective strikes.” This led to the isolation and defeat of bitter struggles at AT Massey (1984-85) and Pittston (1989-90). At the same time, the UMWA abandoned militant miners who were framed up, beaten and even murdered by the coal companies.

In June 1989, rank-and-file miners sought to break Trumka’s isolation of the strike by 1,500 Pittston miners in Virginia and West Virginia by launching a wildcat strike involving 50,000 miners across 11 states. In an interview with the *Charleston Gazette*, Trumka pleaded with the coal bosses, saying Pittston’s intransigence was undermining the union’s efforts to bring “stability” to the coalfields.

If the coal operators and government were successful in smashing the UMWA, Trumka warned, this could result in a far more radical movement of the miners. “When it comes back, I think the form of union will be different,” Trumka said. “Its tolerance for injustice will be far less and its willingness to alibi for a system that we know doesn’t work will be nonexistent.”

Trumka all but acknowledged that the UMWA functioned as a policeman for the coal bosses, making excuses for and defending a political and economic order that was thoroughly hostile to the interests of the miners whom the organization claimed to represent.

The former UMWA president’s reward for collaborating in the destruction of his own union and virtual re-enslavement of the coal miners was his promotion to the leadership of the AFL-CIO. Here, of course, Trumka continues to alibi for the profit system and the Democratic Party, working ever more closely with the Obama administration, even as it ramps up its attack on the jobs, living standards, health care benefits and social conquests of the working class.

The issue of health and safety has always been at the center of the miners’ struggles. In 1968, mineworkers rebelled after 78 miners were killed in a mine explosion in Farmington, West Virginia and UMWA President Tony Boyle came out in defense of the mine owners. During this period, rank-and-file miners with the aid of sympathetic medical professionals organized the Black Lung Association to demand compensation for the condition, which at that time was not even recognized by the federal government as an occupational disease.

In February 1969, miners in West Virginia launched a 23-day wildcat strike and forced the passage of the first legislation related to black lung in the US. This was followed by the passage of the Mine Safety and Health Act, which, among other things, mandated safety

inspections and set legal limits on the amount of coal dust.

This struggle preceded the massive strike wave of the 1970s, in which miners won significant improvements despite the cowardice and treachery of the UMWA bureaucracy. This included the 111-day strike in 1977-78, when miners defied the strike-breaking Taft-Hartley injunction imposed by Democratic President Jimmy Carter.

The substantial gains won between 1960 and 1980 have been reversed, with the full complicity of the UMWA. Once again, the hollows and mining towns of Appalachia are scarred by high rates of poverty and chronic unemployment, with the median family income in West Virginia consistently near or at the bottom of all US states. Young workers confront the dismal choice of taking their lives in their own hands to work in unsafe, dirty “dog-hole” mines, leave the state to search for a job elsewhere, or join the military.

It is telling that the sharpest increase in black lung disease has occurred in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, eastern Kentucky and western Virginia—the former strongholds of the UMWA. Today, less than 15 percent of working coal miners are members of the UMWA, down from 90 percent from its heyday in 1950. All told, the active membership of the UMWA has plummeted from over 120,000 in 1978 to 14,152 at present.

It is inevitable that miners and the entire working class will seek to build new organizations of struggle and find new means to defend themselves. The success of this depends on the development of a new political perspective, based not on the defense of American capitalism and the two-party system that upholds it, but on an irreconcilable struggle against the existing economic and political system. The working class must break with the outmoded and reactionary trade union organizations and create a mass political movement fighting on the basis of a socialist and internationalist strategy.

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