The West Virginia mine disaster and the collapse of the United Mine Workers

Jerry White
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The deaths of at least 25 West Virginia miners in the worst mining disaster in more than a quarter century is a tragic and stark demonstration of the state of class relations in America today.

In many regards, conditions in the Appalachian coalfields resemble those of a century ago. Faced with high levels of unemployment and poverty, workers are forced to jeopardize their lives in dangerous mines.

Multimillionaire mine operators, like Massey Energy CEO Don Blankenship, disregard elemental safety regulations and compel miners to work 12-hour shifts in order to maximize profit. They know full well that once the news media have left and federal and state agencies have held their hearings, they will be free to continue profiting from the killing and maiming of coal miners.

As one woman from the area told the media, "We're nothing but disposable commodities."

Miners confront huge firms with immense resources without any organization to defend them. It has not always been so. Indeed, the site of the present mine explosion was, as late as the early 1990s, a stronghold of the United Mine Workers (UMW) union and a center of militant strikes and mass resistance to the coal bosses' demands for speedup and attacks on mine safety and workers' health coverage.

Even at the height of the union's membership and power, however, rank-and-file miners repeatedly came into conflict with the conservative leadership and its policies of class collaboration. The gains won through the UMW were due to the militant action of the workers.

For three solid decades, however, the UMW has repudiated the militant traditions with which the miners were associated and sought to integrate itself ever more closely with corporate management and the government. Over this period the union has betrayed one struggle after another. The result has been the collapse of the UMW, to the point where its active membership has fallen from 120,000 in 1978 to 14,000 at present.

What underlay the betrayal and disintegration of the UMW? How is it that the miners have come to their present desperate situation?

The miners, particularly in West Virginia, were historically among the most militant and class-conscious sections of the American working class. Over a century of struggle, they evinced unsurpassed courage, solidarity and readiness to sacrifice.

Throughout much of the 20th century, the social weight and strategic position of the miners was something the US corporate and political establishment could not ignore.

The UMW established its roots in southern West Virginia during the bitter Mine Wars of the 1920s and 1930s. The names of great class battles—"Bloody Mingo," the "Battle of Blair Mountain," the "Matewan Massacre"—give a sense of the intensity of social conflict when miners responded in kind to the violence of the coal companies, their hired gunmen and the authorities.

The miners spearheaded the drive to build the new CIO industrial unions in the 1930s, and during World War II defied Roosevelt and launched a national strike, winning substantial demands while the industry was making record profits from wartime production. Again in 1947, the miners defied the back-to-work order issued by Congress, declaring, "Let the senators dig the coal," and won their greatest wage increase, improvements in health care, and protections against the Taft-Hartley antistrike act.

In 1974, after a series of wildcat strikes, mass protests against unsafe conditions and black lung disease, and rebellions against the UMW leadership, miners won a 54 percent wage and benefit increase over three years, following a 28-day strike. This was followed by the historic 111-day walkout in 1977-78, when miners once again defied a presidential back-to-work order, this time from Democrat Jimmy Carter.

Despite the militancy and solidarity of the miners, however, their movement suffered from an ultimately fatal political flaw. It was the same weakness that undermined the entire American labor movement.

The miners never established their political independence from the Democratic Party and capitalist politics in general.

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Their struggles, within the framework of the UMW, never acquired a consciously anti-capitalist character.

Throughout their history, the miners' struggles continuously raised questions of political perspective and program. From the turn of the century onward there were demands for the nationalization of the mines, as economic downturns, mechanization and the anarchy of coal production for the capitalist market led to mass unemployment, impoverishment of mining communities and the continuous sacrifice of miners' lives and limbs to the bosses' drive for profit.

The need for the political organization of the working class independently of the two big business parties was repeatedly posed, as miners faced injunctions, back-to-work orders and state repression from officials of both parties, who were bribed agents of the coal operators.

From the earliest days, however, the leadership of the UMW opposed any struggle against the capitalist system. In a radio address in September 1937, UMW President John L. Lewis appealed to the ruling class to recognize the unions because, he said, they would "prove the finest bulwark against the intrusion of alien doctrines of government."

"Unionization," Lewis said, "as opposed to communism, presupposes the relation of employment; it is based upon the wage system and it recognizes fully and unreservedly the institution of private property and the right to investment profit."

From the outset, the hallmark of the American trade unions was anti-socialism, servility to the profit system and opposition to any independent political struggle by the working class. While trade unions throughout the world essentially shared this pro-capitalist outlook, the political backwardness of the American trade unions was the most pronounced.

In 1955, after socialists and other left-wing militants had been driven out of positions of leadership, the CIO leaders merged with the American Federation of Labor and established the AFL-CIO on the basis of the explicit defense of the profit system and US imperialist interests around the world. Over the next 25 years, as American capitalism lost its position of world economic dominance and the US ruling elite replaced its policy of relative class compromise with one of unrelenting class war, this perspective led the working class to disaster.

Like his British counterpart, Margaret Thatcher, President Reagan—who had smashed the 1981 PATCO air traffic controllers' strike—was determined to break the backs of the miners in order to achieve a permanent rollback in the conditions of the working class as a whole.

In 1985-86, with the full backing of the White House and state and local authorities, AT Massey Coal (spearheaded by Blankenship) launched a union-busting drive against the UMW, in which it revived methods of class violence not seen since the Mine Wars of the early decades of the 20th century.

The UMW, led by then-President Richard Trumka (now president of the AFL-CIO), responded by isolating the 2,600 Massey strikers and abandoning the union's long-standing tradition of calling all miners out on a national strike. The UMW did nothing to defend militant miners who were arrested, framed up and thrown in jail. After leaving the strikers to languish on the picket lines for 14 months, Trumka called off the strike, opening the door to a wave of union busting and concessions throughout the coalfields. The UMW conducted a similar betrayal in the 1989-90 Pittston strike.

The objective conditions that facilitated the domination of a right-wing bureaucracy over the working class—the immense power and economic reserves of American capitalism and the global dominance of its industry—no longer exist.

As a new period of class struggle emerges out of the current crisis, miners will seek to build new organizations of struggle. This is absolutely necessary and critical. However, the bitter lessons of history must be learned—above all, that the resistance of the miners must be based on a conscious fight for the independent political mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system and all of its political representatives.

The only way to end the scourges of mine explosions, cave-ins and black lung disease is to take the mines out of private hands and transform them into public utilities, owned and controlled by the working people themselves. This requires the building of a mass socialist movement of the working class.

Jerry White

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