

The social crisis in Appalachia

Part 1: Deprivation and inequality in the coalfields

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22 July 2010

This article is the first of a series on the history, economy, social and environmental conditions in the Appalachian region of the United States. Part 2 was published on July 24, part 3 on July 27, part 4 on July 30, and part 5 on August 3. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters recently visited the coalfields of southeastern Kentucky and southwestern West Virginia and interviewed residents on their conditions of life. Accompanying interviews and material are posted in five parts here: [1](#) | [2](#) | [3](#) | [4](#) | [5](#).

The region has long suffered a deep economic distress. One-third of the 100 poorest counties in the United States, as measured by median household income, are concentrated in the coalfields. This “pocket of poverty,” as economists sometimes refer to it, has, for decades, recorded extremely high levels of deprivation, unemployment and all the social problems that accompany them. This has been exacerbated by the dearth of government spending on the region and scarcity of basic infrastructure—freeways, commuter rail, airports, Internet connectivity, public universities—which lend the region a remote and disconnected air.

Yet in an immediate and direct way, the region is globally integrated. It continues to be one of the largest producers of coal in the country as well as a major lumber exporter. Fluctuations in the international energy and raw commodities markets have a powerful bearing on the local economy, prospects for the youth, and social infrastructure funded by tax revenue.

Moreover, as throughout the country, the deepening economic crisis has worsened joblessness, collapsed home values, forced the closures of public schools, clinics, and charity organizations, and further depressed communities in the coalfields. At the same time, billion dollar coal corporations have been the beneficiaries of ever-more generous tax breaks and “incentives” from the state governments of Kentucky and West Virginia. Safety, health, and environmental regulations over the coal industry have been systematically loosened, or simply

ignored.

The result is a barefaced portrait of the extreme inequality that exists throughout the United States, with a handful of ultra-wealthy coal barons dominating every aspect of daily life of the highly exploited and deeply impoverished majority.

Every social indicator bears out the class relations. Double-digit poverty rates predominate, and the majority of adults are classified as “not in labor force.” Typical of the region, in Harlan County, Kentucky, 34 percent of residents live below the poverty threshold. Median household income stood at \$23,600 in 2008—nearly half the state median, which is significantly lower than the national median of \$52,000. Home values throughout the coalfields are likewise half the state median or less. Most children live in poverty, and many families subsist on less than \$10,000 a year.

The majority of adults in the region did not graduate high school; 2004 figures indicate that 57 percent of the adult population did not receive a high school diploma or earn a general equivalency degree. The population has declined steadily as young people leave in search of jobs with livable wages.

Year after year, budget crises have been used to justify double-digit rises in tuition at public universities and community colleges, while aid has been cut. Young residents looking for an education and a job have limited options—the few jobs for young workers are concentrated in the low-wage retail and service sectors; for a university education, students are often compelled to leave the region, or join the military. Lack of basic infrastructure like broadband Internet service has precluded residents even from taking online college courses. Some 20 percent of residents still live without telephones, libraries are woefully underfunded, and cell phone towers are sparse in the steep terrain.

The budget crises in the states compound social need in the region. Funding cuts and shortfalls for social services

over the past decade have impacted the mountainous counties, in particular. These areas, which are less accessible by major roads and distant from urban centers, have far fewer health resources and specialists and a far higher proportion of Medicaid-enrolled patients. Poor reimbursement rates, coupled with a high volume of paperwork and red tape, have discouraged many doctors, dentists, and other care providers from accepting Medicaid patients.

Local clinics are understaffed and forced to operate irregular hours and without basic supplies. Residents, describing their clinics as little more than first-aid stations, explained that for life-threatening and chronic problems, hospital emergency rooms were their only source of care. Untreated health problems like diabetes, tooth decay, mental illness, obesity, and other manageable conditions are of epidemic proportions. Black lung disease—produced by long years of working in the mines—emphysema and cancer are increasingly common.

Life expectancy, significantly lower than the national average, has stagnated or declined since 1983, in some counties by as much as five years. Levels of ill health and premature death parallel parts of Eastern Europe and Latin America.

Miles of train cars brimming with coal lumber through the center of such conditions every day, carrying loads worth millions of dollars at each pass. Over the course of the past three decades coal production has risen steadily while the mining workforce has been decimated. Today, far fewer miners—virtually all non-union—are extracting record loads of coal at massive mountaintop removal sites and dangerous retreat mining operations. Last year, less than 90,000 miners—a workforce under half the size of that of the 1980s—were responsible for extracting 1,170 million tons of coal, a third again as much as the production rates of 25 years ago.

Every year, dozens of Appalachian coal miners are killed in disasters caused by the deliberate disregard of operators and regulators alike for basic safety procedures, and thousands of current and former miners are diagnosed with black lung. Communities are subjected to increasing environmental devastation in the form of mudslides, flash flooding, and pollution caused by reckless surface mine operations. The water supplies of entire cities have been declared unsafe to drink because of contamination.

The coal industry, deeply entwined in state politics, cost West Virginia and Kentucky tens of millions of dollars more than they pay in taxes, while fines for endangering workers and pollution are negligibly tiny, and usually

ignored. Residents of the coalfields can find no representation for their grievances in elected officials and no defense in the legal and regulatory framework.

This state of affairs has been created through the active collusion of the political establishment, dominated by the Democratic Party, the environmental and safety regulatory agencies, and the United Mine Workers of America.

On the rare occasions that the national news media covers this region, for example, during the disaster at Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch Mine, which killed 29 West Virginia miners last April, it attempts to portray the population as submissive, religiously devout and resigned to a fate of deadly working conditions and poverty. In fact, the region has been the scene for some of the fiercest struggles of the American working class.

The miserable conditions in the coalfields cannot be understood without grasping the role of the UMW, which, over the last three decades, betrayed strike after strike, abandoned and helped victimize militant miners and imposed endless concessions on its members at the behest of the coal bosses. This counts among the greatest betrayals of the working class, considering that the miners' struggles for union recognition in the 1920s and 1930s, and mass struggles to improve working conditions and living standards in the 1960s and 1970s, were some of the most heroic and bloody in labor history.

To be continued

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