What accounts for Trump's support among West Virginia miners?

Jerry White—SEP candidate for US president
7 May 2016

In his first campaign event after becoming the presumptive presidential candidate of the Republican Party, billionaire demagogue Donald Trump held a large rally Thursday in Charleston, West Virginia. As he has done in a series of Midwestern "rust belt" states, Trump sought to exploit the frustrations and grievances of workers, including coal miners, devastated by the economic crisis.

More than 11,000 miners have lost their jobs in the Mountain State since 2013, with employment in the logging and mining sector falling by 20.5 percent in the last year alone. West Virginia is the second poorest state in the US, behind only Mississippi. In abandoned mining towns like Mullens, Welch, Gary and Matewan, anywhere from half to three-quarters of the adult male population is jobless.

In his familiar routine, Trump railed against Mexico, China and Japan for "taking our jobs" and blamed the conditions in the coalfields on "bad trade deals" and "overregulation" of the mines. He declared, "We're going to reopen the mines and put the miners back to work," and "make America great again."

The phony populist Trump has nothing to offer workers in West Virginia. His pledge to eliminate "silly regulations" means the destruction of whatever restraints still exist on the exploitation of miners, who are regularly sent to their deaths by coal companies that are, at most, given a slap on the wrist. After his remarks, Trump accepted the endorsement of the West Virginia Coal Association, the very body that has directed the attack on the jobs, pensions and safety conditions of the state's miners.

To the extent that Trump is able to win a hearing among workers, it is due to the treachery of the unions and their subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party, which seeks to mask its indifference to the economic plight of workers with racial and identity politics.

West Virginia and neighboring eastern Kentucky have a long history of bitter class struggle, dating back to the late 19th century, when the robber barons first used native Appalachians, eastern and southern Europeans and black workers from the South to work their deadly mines. From the Paint and Cabin Creek strikes (1912-13) and the Mingo County Wars (starting in 1919), which included the famous Matewan Massacre (1920) and Battle of Blair Mountain (1921), to Kentucky battles in "Bloody Harlan (1931-32), miners fought, in many cases arms in hand, against the violence of the coal bosses, their hired gun thugs, bribed judges and federal troops.

The formation of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) gave an impulse to the organization of millions of workers in steel, rubber, auto and other basic industries and the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1935. During the post-World War II period and into the 1970s, miners continued to be among the most militant and class-conscious contingents of the American working class.

The Achilles heel of the movement of miners, and of the American working class as a whole, was its subordination through the UMWA and the other unions to the Democratic Party and the capitalist system. Speaking for the entire union bureaucracy, UMWA President John L. Lewis in 1937 appealed to the employers and the capitalist state to recognize the CIO, declaring that "unionization, as opposed to communism" is "based upon the wage system and it recognizes fully and unreservedly the institution of private property and the right to investment profit."

After the war, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and CIO carried out a purge of the socialist and left-wing workers who had played the leading role in establishing the industrial unions. In 1955, the two federations merged to form the AFL-CIO on the basis of anticommunism and

© World Socialist Web Site

support for US imperialism.

The catastrophic implications of the alliance of the unions with the Democratic Party became fully apparent as American capitalism entered a period of protracted decline in the 1970s and into the 1980s. The ruling class responded with a brutal counteroffensive, initiated under Democratic President Jimmy Carter, who invoked the Taft-Hartley Act in an effort to crush the 111-day miners strike in 1977-78, and intensified under the Republican administration of Ronald Reagan.

Reagan's firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981 was the signal for an all-out assault on workers throughout the country. In the coalfields, the mine bosses, with the full backing of Democratic governors, resorted to the methods of the 1920s to break strikes and bust unions—using gun thugs, government frame-ups and the murder of striking miners.

Then-UMWA President Richard Trumka isolated and sabotaged strikes at AT Massey, Pittston, Milburn and other companies. Trumka was rewarded for reducing the UMWA to an empty shell by being named president of the AFL-CIO.

The miners never lacked courage, militancy or self-sacrifice, but they fell victim to the subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party and economic nationalism. The betrayals inflicted on miners were part of a broader transformation of unions in the US and throughout the world in response to the emergence of transnational corporations capable of shifting production anywhere in the world in pursuit of cheaper labor and higher profits. In the face of globalization, these organizations abandoned any resistance to the attacks of the employers, adopted a corporatist policy of wage cuts and concessions to entice companies to produce within the US, and integrated themselves fully into the structure of corporate management and the capitalist state.

As with the entire working class, workers in West Virginia confront a political system that is thoroughly hostile to their interests. The Democratic Party has repudiated its previous association with social reforms. It is a party of Wall Street, aligned with corrupt layers of the upper-middle class on the basis of identity politics. Its leading candidate, Hillary Clinton, is justly despised, a fact that Trump has sought to exploit.

The hostile attitude of the Democratic Party to the working class, and the use of race-obsessed politics to smear white workers, in particular, was summed up Friday by *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman, who wrote of Trump: "We're looking at a movement of white men angry that they no longer dominate American society the way they used to."

In other words, workers in economically devastated regions such as West Virginia are only getting what they deserve! This outlook permeates the milieu of middle-class "left" liberals and pseudo-lefts in the political orbit of the Democratic Party. The contemptuous and arrogant attitude of what is presented as the "left" in American politics toward the working class, and the right-wing policies of austerity and war it supports, create the conditions for a fascistic pitchman like Trump to gain a hearing, by default, among sections of workers.

The ultra-right politics of Trump pose immense dangers. But enthusiasm for Trump is by no means universal. There is deep hostility and opposition among working people and youth to his nativism and anti-immigrant racism. Many workers and young people see the billionaire candidate for the fraud he is. The leftward movement of the working class has found expression in support for the candidacy of Bernie Sanders (who is leading Clinton in polls in West Virginia). But Sanders' principal aim is to direct this opposition back into the dead end of the Democratic Party. He has proposed nothing for workers devastated by deindustrialization but token job training programs combined with trade war rhetoric that mirrors that of Trump.

In our election campaign, my running mate Niles Niemuth and I are fighting for a genuine socialist program for the working class. This includes the transformation of the major corporations into democratically controlled utilities, run on the basis of social need, not private profit. It also includes a multitrillion-dollar public works program to rebuild infrastructure and ensure that everyone is guaranteed a job as a basic social right. The vast wealth accumulated by the corporate and financial elite must be seized and used to eliminate poverty and unemployment.

There are growing signs of the reemergence of class struggle and an anti-capitalist radicalization. The Socialist Equality Party is building a political leadership to lead a mass socialist movement of the working class and youth that will defeat reactionary demagogues like Trump and provide a way forward to end social inequality, war and the threat of dictatorship.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site