

Democrats capitulate after publicity stunt over miners' health care benefits

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A group of Senate Democrats announced Friday night they were giving up an effort to extend health care for thousands of retired miners whose coverage will run out in four months under a government spending bill passed by the House of Representatives.

On Thursday, House Democrats and Republicans voted 326-96 to pass the spending bill, which is now expected to be approved by the Senate with bipartisan support on Saturday morning. If the bill was not passed, it would have forced a government shutdown.

At issue was the amount of time health care benefits would be extended for 16,000 retired coal miners who were slated to lose coverage at the end of December. Under the deal that is now likely to pass, the benefits will run out in April. Another 6,500 retirees will lose coverage later next year. The retirees are former employees of coal companies that have used shell companies and the bankruptcy courts to avoid paying into a federal fund that provides these benefits.

With hours to go before a Friday night deadline, Democratic Senators Joseph Manchin (West Virginia), Sherrod Brown (Ohio), Heidi Heitkamp (North Dakota), Claire McCaskill (Missouri) and Bob Casey (Pennsylvania) announced a plan aimed at extending benefits by eight months longer than under the current bill.

All five are unpopular Democratic Senators from states that voted for Trump, and each faces re-election in 2018. All five are bought and paid-for representatives of the mining corporations. Manchin, for example, has received over \$600,000 in campaign contributions from mining and utility companies in the last five years.

The maneuver was a cynical political stunt aimed at duping workers into supporting the Democratic Party. The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA)

supported the maneuver whole-heartedly.

The stunt was never intended to succeed. At the last minute, Senator Manchin cancelled a Friday press conference in which he was to appeal for a “no” vote. The Democratic Senate leadership shrugged off the maneuver. *Politico* reported Friday that Minority Whip Richard Durbin (Illinois) “said he wasn’t whipping his members to oppose the bill...”

One of its primary purposes was to provide the Senators with an opportunity to acquire demagogic video footage for use in election advertisements. “I rise for the working men and women we all use in our commercials,” Manchin said on the Senate floor, in words he no doubt intended for use in future commercials.

Even as they posture as friends of miners, the Democrats involved are proposing an alliance with Trump on the basis of economic nationalism. As Trump assembles a cabinet of billionaires and asset strippers, Manchin is himself preparing to meet with the president-elect. He is reportedly being considered as a possible secretary of energy in the new administration.

The moves to strip miners of their health care is an act of class warfare by a financial aristocracy awash in cash. Miners toil for decades under dangerous conditions and retire with a high risk of cancer, respiratory disease, asbestos poisoning, lung disease, silicosis, lead exposure and more.

The UMWA has spent the last three decades forcing through sell-out contracts on miners. In October 2013, the UMWA reached a global settlement with Patriot and Peabody, allowing the companies to cease its contributions toward retiree health care and to transfer the obligations to a Voluntary Employees' Beneficiary Association (VEBA). In other words, the UMWA traded away guarantees on employee and retiree health

care in exchange for giving the bureaucrats control over hundreds of millions of dollars. In 2016, the UMWA negotiated to allow Peabody out of much of its remaining contribution obligations.

Miner pensions are also under attack, with 120,000 retirees at risk of losing these benefits in the coming months. The UMWA pension plan was rocked by the 2008 financial crash and is expected to become insolvent in coming years. According to the UMWA, contributions to the 1974 pension plan have fallen by two-thirds over the past year alone.

Retired miners receive pensions averaging at \$586 per month, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. This paltry sum is impossible to live on—it amounts to barely \$7,000 per year.



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