

Trump, the coal miners and the environment

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During his election campaign and since taking office, Donald Trump has postured as a champion of American workers, particularly the coal miners, whom the billionaire president claims he “loves.” According to Trump, trade war and the lifting of all restrictions on corporate profit-making will reverse decades of deindustrialization and revive the economically depressed Appalachian coalfields.

That such a con game could even be attempted, let alone have an impact on a section of miners and their families, is a testament to the complete bankruptcy of the United Mine Workers (UMW) union and the Democratic Party. The UMW and the Democrats have collaborated, along with the Republicans, in a four-decade-long drive to claw back every gain won by generations of miners in bitter and often violent struggles in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Today there are little more than 50,000 workers employed in the coal mining industry, down 40,000 since 2012 and 120,000 since 1985. Former mining communities in southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky are now centers of poverty and a devastating opioid and suicide epidemic. Tens of thousands of retired miners and their spouses are facing the loss of health and pension benefits as the coal companies use the bankruptcy courts to escape their obligations.

According to Trump, this disaster is caused by “job-killing” environmental regulations, from the Paris climate accord to federal clean air and water regulations. Since taking office, he has repealed rules aimed at protecting waterways from coal mining waste, lifted the moratorium on coal leases on federal lands, and overturned the limited restrictions on greenhouse gas emissions and toxic metal releases from power plants.

In a visit to a southwestern Pennsylvania coal mine last month, Scott Pruitt, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), declared that the federal government’s “war” against the energy industry was over and environmental regulation would be handed back to state governments. As attorney general of Oklahoma, Pruitt, a climate change denier, repeatedly sued the EPA over clean air and water regulations on behalf of the oil, gas and coal industry.

Stripped of the demagoguery and lies, the line of the Trump administration amounts to the proposition that miners must place their full trust and confidence in the benevolence of the coal bosses, who, once freed from regulations on the environment (and health and safety), will share their profit

bounty with their workers. This is the ideology of corporatism, the notion that workers have no interests separate and distinct from, let alone in conflict with, those of the owners of the mines, the oil fields and the banks.

This, in turn, is based on the premise that the blame for the destruction of jobs and living standards does not lie with capitalism, which has produced the greatest levels of social inequality in history, but rather with legal restrictions on the ability of billionaires like Trump to maximize their profits.

How do these claims stand in relation to the history of the miners’ struggles?

The forebears of today’s miners understood well a basic fact of life under capitalism: nothing could be won or, once won, defended without a bitter struggle against the coal companies. Every improvement—pensions, overtime pay, health care, safety rules, decent wages—was the product of massive struggles. What has enabled the employers to destroy those gains is precisely the suppression of the class struggle, above all at the hands of the UMW, which has been transformed into an industrial police force for the coal industry and the banks.

The coal bosses and the UMW insist that environmental regulations prevent them from competing with domestic and foreign producers. They say the same thing about pensions and health care. It is only a matter of time before the Trump administration, which includes Wilbur Ross—who owned the deathtrap Sago Mine, where 12 West Virginia miners were killed in 2006—declares that protections against cave-ins, mine explosions and the spread of Black Lung disease are counterproductive.

The choice between jobs and the environment is a false choice. Miners do not want to live with toxic air and water, any more than they want to work in deadly conditions. But they need jobs that provide decent wages and benefits. The conflict is not between a healthy environment and decent living standards, it is between the interests of the workers and those of the capitalists. The problem is the capitalist system.

If jobs can be secured only by poisoning the air and water, then there is something radically and fundamentally wrong with the way society is organized. The existing system is irrational and socially destructive. It subordinates every aspect of life, and life itself, to the drive of a corporate elite to accumulate ever greater levels of personal wealth.

No worker with a knowledge of the history of the miners’

struggles can seriously believe that giving the coal and energy bosses a carte blanche to pollute and exploit will improve the lot of miners and their families. Just to get the most minimal improvements it took mass struggles that at certain points assumed a semi-insurrectionary character.

For more than a century, from the 1870s to the 1980s, the coal miners had to wage fierce battles against the violent resistance of the employers and the capitalist state. From the frame-up and hanging of the Molly Maguires in 1877-78, to the Paint Creek and Cabin Creek strikes in 1912 and the Mine Wars of the 1920s, to the rank-and-file rebellions of the 1960s and 1970s and wildcat strikes against UMW betrayals in the 1980s, the miners had to fight the coal companies, which hired spies and gun-thugs and controlled the state politicians, the judges and the police.

What concessions were won, including safety and environmental protections, were wrenched from the bosses and the government through mass struggle. Only 36 miles south of Consol Energy's Harvey mine, where EPA head Pruitt declared an end to the "regulatory assault" on the coal industry, lies the small West Virginia town of Farmington. On November 20, 1968, an explosion ripped through the Consol No. 9 Mine killing 78 miners who were trapped underground.

The defense of Consol by UMW President Tony Boyle helped spark a rank-and-file rebellion across the coalfields that would incorporate demands for greater safety, federal compensation for Black Lung disease—still not recognized in West Virginia and other states—and improved environmental conditions. The latter emerged particularly after the March 6, 1972 Buffalo Creek Disaster, when 125 people were killed and 4,000 made homeless when a coal slurry dam at a Pittston Coal surface mine burst in southern West Virginia.

During this period, coal miners, retirees, widows, black lung victims and others conducted wildcat strikes and other actions, culminating in the historic 111-day strike in 1977-78, when 120,000 miners defied a Taft-Hartley back-to-work order by President Jimmy Carter.

While Trump has focused on undoing the chiefly cosmetic regulations passed in the last days of the Obama administration, his real targets are the mine safety and environmental laws that date back a half-century or more.

Today's energy companies, which are controlled by vast transnational corporations and their Wall Street investors, are no less ruthless than Rockefeller, Carnegie and the coal barons of the past. They derive their profits from the exploitation of miners in the US, China, South Africa and around the world, and are determined to sweat as much profit from workers as possible to satisfy the demands of powerful shareholders.

The crisis in the coalfields confronts miners and working people in general with fundamental *political* questions. The great weakness of the miners—historically the most militant, courageous and class conscious section of the American working class—has been the failure to join their industrial

fighting spirit with a conscious political program. The result has been their subordination to the capitalist parties, primarily the Democrats, which has led to one defeat after another and a devastating decline in living standards.

It is not possible for the working class to assert and fight for its social rights if workers are chained to the Democratic Party and politicians like West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin and current West Virginia Governor and coal boss Jim Justice. The working class must break with both corporate-controlled parties and build its own mass political party, which sets out consciously to replace the capitalist system with socialism.

There is no reason in principle why the development of technology and the global integration of energy production cannot be a blessing to workers rather than a curse. A rational plan for energy production and usage, including decisions on the future use of coal and other fossil fuels, cannot be developed if social needs remain subordinated to the demands of giant energy conglomerates and powerful financial institutions.

And the jobs and living standards of workers in Appalachia and other former coal mining centers must be guaranteed regardless of the impact of new technology and the need to protect the global ecosystem. There is ample wealth—produced by the working class but monopolized by the idle rich under capitalism—to provide training and new, secure and well-paying employment for any and all workers, including miners and former miners.

The development of such a plan must be based on science and human need, not private profit. For this to happen, the working class must expropriate the coal bosses and Wall Street speculators and transform the energy industry into a public enterprise, collectively owned and democratically controlled by the working class. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is the only party that fights for this revolutionary perspective. We urge miners and workers throughout the coal regions to study our program and make the decision to join the SEP.



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