

Trump appoints mining industry executive to head Mining Safety and Health

Steve Filips
10 March 2025

The nomination last month by Trump of Wayne Palmer to head the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) presages a major ramping-up of attacks on miners.

Palmer, a former mining industry executive, was the deputy assistant secretary of MSHA in the first Trump administration, that oversaw attempts to roll back safety standards 100 years or more.

Under Trump, MSHA saw its workforce decline by 13 percent from 2017 to 2021, according to the *Charleston Gazette Mail*.

MSHA is part of the US Department of Labor (DOL) and, alongside the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, is specifically tasked with inspection and safety rule enforcement for over 300,000 miners employed at 13,000 mines; from surface and underground to other mineral mines classified as metal/non-metal (MNM). MSHA oversees the Coal Mine Safety and Health division in 12 coal districts and the Metal-Nonmetal Mine Safety and Health division in its six regions.

The Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969 was the initial substantial response of the federal government to the longstanding, deadly, and unhealthy conditions at US coal mines.

Unsurprisingly, it was opposed by the mine owners, who calculated it would negatively affect the profits being extracted from the bodies of miners who were deemed replaceable at a lower cost, which is largely still the case. This was subsequently amended by the Federal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1977, which created MSHA.

Palmer, since his first stint as head of MSHA, advertises he was descended from generations of miners, including the anthracite coal miners in Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania coal fields are

associated with the Molly Maguires, the militant miners who were hunted by mine owners who hired Pinkerton thugs to suppress unionization battles in the 19th century, a time when hundreds of miners were killed in preventable accidents and illnesses. They also fought against the use of child labor and the promotion of divisions among workers through the use of recent immigrant workers by the mine owners.

Currently, each MSHA inspector is mandated with monitoring the safety of mines in their territory along with the investigation of accidents. The following examples of recent fatalities in the mines give an indication of the savagery of the American industrial slaughterhouse.

- On November 27 of last year, Cargill Cleveland, Ohio, salt mine worker Grzegorz Scyyla, 58 years old, died while in his utility vehicle underground working to reset a reclaim feeder when he was struck by a Load Haul dump-loader. There were 223 workers affiliated with Teamster Local 436 at the salt mine in 2023.
- Colton Walls, 34 years old, and a 14-year veteran of the underground Leer Coal Mine in Grafton, West Virginia, owned by Arch Resources. He sustained life-threatening injuries this past September, succumbing to them on October 5. According to MSHA's preliminary report, Walls sustained the injuries while "in the process of realigning some longwall shields, a miner received injuries on an active longwall panel."
- A second fatality at the same Leer Coal Mine owned by Arch Resources had occurred just in August when William J. Crandell, 57-years-old and a motorman at Arch's non-union mine, died two days after the accident. MSHA's preliminary report said, "A

miner was struck in the head while using an air-lifting bag to rerail a longwall electrical power car."

Coal miners are at risk of developing pneumoconiosis (black lung disease), affecting them many years later after even limited exposure. The same is true for other miners and workers encountering exposure to toxic silica dust at their workplaces. The final safety rule for silica dust exposure, aimed at protecting workers from the equally fatal disease silicosis, was approved last year. The mining industry is anticipating that under Trump MSHA will not receive the resources needed to adequately enforce the new safety standards.

In Cheyenne, Wyoming this month, in an area with a large coal mining industry, a demonstration of 100 workers was held in opposition to any cuts to workplace safety. Workers pointed to the attacks on safety standards expected under the new administration: "Elon Musk and Trump just willy-nilly firing a bunch of people, that's going to destroy people's lives, and people are going to get hurt and die and lose their livelihoods," said Cameron Tibbets, a Cheyenne union sheet metal worker, in comments to Wyoming Public Radio, which also reported that Musk has terminated the MSHA Green River office contract along with 28 other MSHA office contracts across the country.

The current president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), Cecil Roberts, served under former UMWA and AFL-CIO head Richard Trumka, a notorious sellout who oversaw the collapse of the UMWA as a mass organization and the decimation of workers' living standards.

Among his many betrayals, in 1990 Trumka was involved in the cover-up of the murder of miner John McCoy, who was killed in an ambush perpetrated by A.T. Massey thugs in a struggle near a non-union mine in Welch, West Virginia.

In a moving excerpt from *Death on the Picket Line: The Story of John McCoy*, Donna Carter, John's youngest sister said, "John's thoughts and ideas were union, not leadership. He made a distinction. He was in the working class, period. If his brother 1,000 miles away needed him, then that's the one he was standing for. He was not standing for their leadership, or his leadership. He was standing for his class of workers, period. He believed strongly."

Since that time the UMWA and the other bureaucratized trade unions have repeatedly betrayed

the working class, ever more openly collaborating with corporations and their servants in both capitalist parties—Democrats and Republicans.

To oppose the drive to roll back conditions in the mines to the dark days of the 19th century mine workers must unite with workers in other industries in and industrial and political struggle against the corporations, which are backed by the Trump administration. This means building independent rank-and-file committees to organize resistance to the drive to destroy wages, benefits and other social gains such as health and safety.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is the means for workers to link up with their fellow class brothers and sisters, transcending industries and borders in the fight against transnational corporations and the pro-corporate trade unions and big business government in the fight for international socialism.

To learn more about forming a rank-and-file committee at your workplace please fill out the form below.



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