

Kentucky turns back the clock on workplace safety

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In a brazen attack on the working class, two new Kentucky state laws took effect at the end of June, one drastically undermining workplace safety for all workers, the other targeting what was once the state's largest and most dangerous industry, coal mining.

The Republican-controlled state legislature passed both bills at the end of March, and they took effect after 90 days without any serious opposition from either Democratic Governor Andy Beshear or the state AFL-CIO and other unions.

The first piece of legislation, House Bill (HB) 196 removes the requirement to have two mine emergency technicians (METs) at every mine, reducing this to only one for shifts with ten or less miners. Two METs will be required if the number of miners are more than ten, but less than fifty-one. Only underground mines will be given another MET for each additional fifty miners.

METs are miners who have gone through an extensive certification and training process to provide basic medical care in the event of a workplace injury. The requirement of two METs was established in 2007, in response to the 2005 death of 29-year-old coal miner David “Bud” Morris at H&D Mining Inc. Mine No. 3.

According to the Mine Safety and Health Administration's investigative report, Morris was fatally injured when he was struck by a loaded coal hauler. He received “near amputating injuries” to his legs. Morris received inadequate medical care from the sole MET on duty at the Harlan County mine.

One of the paramedics who treated Morris stated that there would have been a “very different outcome” if he had been given basic first aid.

The coal industry in central Appalachia has been in decline for the past two decades as a result of an increase in mechanization and automation, and mine operators seek to offset this crisis by cost-cutting. But a

backup MET on all mine sites remains a vital necessity. The reduction in METs places miners at risk of preventable deaths.

Despite the claim made by proponents of the bill that small mines are finding it difficult to obtain two METs on site, there has been no evidence that coal companies are struggling to comply with the requirement.

The other claim, that lowering the requirement would provide financial help to a struggling coal company, is absurd given that it only costs \$40 to \$50 a week to maintain a second MET on shift. This in an industry that generates \$1.4 billion a year in revenue. The average coal miner makes only about \$42,000 annually.

In effect, what the legislature is saying is that profit is more important than the lives of workers.

HB 398 also went into effect at the end of June, reducing the authority of the Kentucky Department of Workplace Standards so that it merely follows the lead of the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). This prevents Kentucky from enforcing stricter workplace safety regulations, beyond those set in Washington.

It further restricts the time in which an employee may file a complaint for being fired or discriminated against for a safety allegation, as well as setting a time limit in which the state can issue a citation for such actions. This encourages stall tactics that the company can employ, capitalizing on the understaffing of investigators who handle retaliation complaints.

The bill also incentivizes employers to contest citations received, even if there are hazardous conditions, delaying any corrections to comply with workplace safety. This is due to a stipulation within the bill which threatens state institutions with financial penalties for enforcing safety laws, allowing businesses to request a financial “award” for their expenses,

including legal fees and court costs.

The passage of these two bills reflected the Republican Party's coordinated assault on the working class, seeking to remove all restrictions of capitalist exploitation. Trump took the lead on this coming to office, overseeing mass firings of federal workers, wholesale cuts in social program and wiping out regulations that infringe on the profit interests of the rich.

Though the Republican Party is leading the attack upon workers, the Democratic Party is doing nothing to stop it. Nor has the trade union apparatus sought to take serious measures to oppose this attack on working conditions.

In Kentucky, Democratic Governor Andy Beshear made a show of opposition by vetoing HB 398, knowing that his veto would be easily overridden by the Republican majorities the state house and senate. In the case of HB 196, Beshear declined to sign or veto the bill, allowing it to become law without his signature. He issued a mealy mouthed statement bemoaning the cut in the number of METs for small mines but praising the increase in METs for larger underground mines.

Similarly, representatives of the state AFL-CIO and the Kentucky State Building and Construction Trades Council only postured as opponents during the deliberations on the bill. Despite their empty rhetoric of opposition, the trade union apparatus only sought minimal action by calling upon workers to plead with their state representatives to vote no.

Since the passage of these bills, both the Democrats and the unions have remained silent. During the 90 days before the laws took effect, there were no calls for protests, let alone strike action. Both the capitalist politicians and the bureaucrats are petrified of any move that might encourage popular protest, for fear of a social movement that could threaten the capitalist system.

The removal of current workplace safety standards will only ensure that the numbers of workplace injuries and fatalities will increase in Kentucky, a state that already surpasses the national average of workplace injuries and fatalities.

This attack on workers' safety demonstrates the significance of the independent investigation initiated by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File

Committees (IWA-RFC) into the death of 63-year-old Ronald Adams Sr., a Stellantis worker at the company's Dundee, Michigan engine plant.

Adams was a machine repairman, a husband, father, and grandfather, highly skilled and respected by his coworkers. He was crushed on April 7, 2025, when an overhead gantry lifting engine blocks engaged, pinning him to the conveyor.

Since his death, the Adams family has not received any information from the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy, the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) or Stellantis.

The IWA-RFC's investigation, led by rank-and-file workers, is seeking to uncover the truth and hold those responsible for Adams' preventable death to account.

Workers must take matters into their own hands, fighting for their own interests, by building the IWA-RFC. The creation of the rank-and-file committees allows workers to break the stranglehold of the union bureaucracy and assert democratic control over their fight.

These committees will be able to coordinate the collective strength of workers in every industry, linking struggles across workplaces, cities, and countries throughout the world. The interconnection of industries across the globalized world economy indicates that workers would be in a position to impact multinational corporations.



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