

Black lung disease resurges as Trump and coal bosses sacrifice miners for profit and war

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There has been a resurgence of black lung disease, also known as Coal Worker's Pneumoconiosis (CWP), in recent years among miners in the central Appalachian coalfields.

Long considered an affliction of older and retired miners, the disease, including the more aggressive form known as progressive massive fibrosis, is showing up with greater frequency among younger miners. This includes many under the age of 30 and those with less than 10 years of service in underground mines.

In the push to extract every bit of coal from mines, operators are cutting into thinner seams of coal, releasing greater amounts of rock particles in the process. Rock or silica (quartz) dust, acting as tiny pieces of glass, cuts into the lung tissue of miners.

The increased amount of rock/silica dust—which is 20 times as dangerous as coal dust alone—has triggered the explosion in black lung cases among younger miners.

The wholly preventable but incurable disease continues to kill over 1,000 active and retired miners each year. Thousands more are disabled with the excruciatingly painful disease.

For decades, the coal operators denied the very existence of the disease, claiming that chronic respiratory problems were caused by cigarette smoke. By the late 1960s, the continuous killing of coal workers in mine explosions, cave-ins and disease, led to an eruption of struggles by rank-and-file miners against the pro-company bureaucracy in the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA).

A wave of wildcat strikes and other militant actions, including by retired miners and the widows of miners killed by black lung, led the coal operators and the government to recognize the disease and implement safety measures.

This included the passage of the Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969, which established dust limits and, for the first time, federal black lung benefits.

By the 1990s, black lung had all but been eliminated due to improvements in mine ventilation. According to the *New York Times*, the government documented only a few dozen cases in the 1990s, “a low number even when accounting for the steep decline in mining jobs. Progressive massive fibrosis,” the newspaper reported, “was nearly eradicated.”

Over the last three decades, however, the disease has sharply increased as a result of the ruthless drive for profits by the coal operators, cuts to both the enforcement and improvement of mine safety regulations, and the collaboration of the UMWA bureaucracy with the coal operators to boost profits at the expense of miners' health and safety.

This will only worsen as President Trump eliminates any remaining workplace protections to boost energy production and profits and prepare for war. Trump has promised to roll back or completely abolish government regulations over the coal industry.

This includes gutting the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), established in 1971 and tasked with developing standards and procedures to improve workplace safety.

In April, Trump fired 850 of NIOSH's 1,000 employees, including hundreds at its Morgantown, West Virginia, office, the only one in the country where miners can be tested for black lung and to certify that they are eligible for black lung benefits.

Another NIOSH office closed by Trump tested and certified respirators used by coal miners, as well as other workers, to be sure they functioned properly. Another operated two underground test mines to determine the best methods to control dust levels and roof safety.

Some of the NIOSH workers have been brought back after lawsuits, but their work is greatly impeded by lack of support staff, and their jobs are still being threatened as Trump continues to get approval from the Supreme Court for slashing government jobs.

This exposes the fascist president's lies about being a champion of coal miners and makes it clear his program of “bringing back coal” will be done through bringing back the most brutal and deadly exploitation of miners.

Rates of black lung disease are now reaching levels not seen since the 1970s, medical experts say. The number of coal miners affected by black lung disease is staggering—and growing. One study found that one in five Appalachian coal miners suffers from black lung, and one in 20 has progressive massive fibrosis, with large areas of dense scarring that severely impairs lung function.

According to government figures from 1970 to 2016, black lung disease was the cause or contributing factor in 75,178 deaths. The estimated prevalence of black lung among coal workers in the US is about 16 percent. In central Appalachia, including West Virginia, Kentucky and Ohio, the rate is even higher, with 20 percent of tenured miners showing signs of the disease.

Currently, black lung benefits are only paid to coal miners when they are 100 percent disabled. This leaves miners in a Catch-22. They can't receive benefits until they are 100 percent disabled; however, the only way to slow down the further progression of the disease is to stop working, rendering them unable to collect any disability benefits.

In 2024, only about 14,000 miners or their surviving spouses were receiving black lung benefits. Monthly benefits for a miner who can no longer work are just \$773. If married, the amount is \$1,159. Those figures are less than a third of what it costs to live.

For a long time, doctors and the handful of lawyers in the coalfields who handled black lung benefit claims felt the presence of the disease was much higher. The *World Socialist Web Site* first reported in 2003 that black lung deaths were higher than they should be and that dust levels

Trump's war on coal miners

were being falsified by both coal companies and government inspectors.

Over the past three decades, both corporate-controlled parties blocked the implementation of lower dust standards and new technologies that would prevent mine operators and Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) inspectors from submitting false coal dust readings.

In 1995, NIOSH proposed that permissible dust levels be lowered to 1 milligram per cubic meter of air and, for the first time to limit the exposure to silica rock dust to 0.05 milligrams per cubic meter of air to ensure miners' safety and eliminate black lung.

These measures were rejected by both Democratic and Republican administrations alike, finally adopting a reduction in coal dust to 1.5 milligrams only by 2016—21 years after the new recommendation. Even then, loopholes were added that effectively allowed the coal companies to get around them.

Another recommendation by NIOSH, that miners carry a “black box” with them that would monitor coal dust levels continuously in real time, warn miners when dust levels are high and make it nearly impossible for coal operators or MSHA officials to falsify dust testing, was never implemented.

A survey conducted in 2019 by National Public Radio and Frontline, of a dozen clinics in Kentucky, Virginia and West Virginia, found 2,300 cases of advanced black lung, some 20 times what the government was reporting for that area—in fact, more cases than what the government was showing for the entire country.

The struggle for job safety

The horrible, slow deaths of miners are part of the daily toll of industrial murder, which claims the lives of approximately 385 workers a day in America from traumatic injuries and occupational diseases.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees has launched an independent investigation into the death of 63-year-old Stellantis worker Ronald Adams Sr. as part of the counter-offensive by workers to halt the relentless sacrifice of workers' lives to corporate profit.

To develop this fight, a review of the struggle against black lung by the coal miners, long the most militant and class conscious section of the American working class, is critical.

The federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969 was passed the year after the explosion at the Consolidated Coal Company's Farmington, West Virginia mine on November 20, 1968, which left 78 miners dead.

The day after the disaster, United Mine Workers President Tony Boyle enraged rank-and-file miners by declaring, “As long as we mine coal, there is always this inherent danger. This happens to be one of the better companies, as far as cooperation with our union and safety is concerned.”

It soon emerged that mine operators deliberately bypassed a ventilation fan alarm rather than fixing it. Boyle's defense of the coal bosses triggered a rebellion against the gangsters in the leadership of the UMWA, which combined the movement of disabled miners and widows whose first protests to demand black lung benefits began in 1960.

In 1969, Robert Payne, a disabled miner with 27 years' service, organized the Disabled Miners and Widows of Southern West Virginia (DMW). Payne had been a supporter of District 5 President Jock Yablonski, who ran against Boyle for president of the UMW.

After losing in what was widely considered a rigged election, Yablonski, his wife and daughter were murdered on New Year's Eve 1969. Nearly a decade later, Boyle was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for the murders.

After Boyle refused to meet with Payne's group, they began picketing

the mines on June 20, 1970. The strike rapidly spread, involving more than 25,000 miners at 160 mines, according to Curtis Seltzer, the author of *Fire in the Hole* (1985).

Boyle responded with brutality to crush the strike. As Seltzer wrote:

When picket lines went up again on July 12 after the vacation break, the UMWA sent payrollers to break them up. Working miners were appalled at the sight of UMWA officials crashing through picket lines of wheelchair bound miners and old women.

After two months, the strike was put down as Boyle and the companies turned to the courts, getting injunctions against the picketing, and Payne, along with other organizers, were arrested, jailed and fined.

The rank-and-file revolt continued, however, culminating in the 111-day strike by 150,000 miners in 1977–78. The miners defied President Jimmy Carter's Taft-Hartley back-to-work order and rejected two tentative contracts negotiated between the White House and UMWA, before “reform” president Arnold Miller forced them back to work.

The American ruling class responded to the loss of its global economic dominance by abandoning its previous policy of relative class compromise and adopting a program of class war. This included exploiting new developments in technology and the increasing global integration of production, to destroy millions of industrial jobs and sharply reduce the conditions of the working class.

In response, the UMWA, just as every other union, followed the same nationalist path of corporatist labor-management “partnership” to make American capitalism more “competitive” against its foreign rivals. This meant the suppression of the class struggle, the virtual ending of strikes and betrayals of strikes that they could not prevent.

UMWA President Richard Trumka and Vice President Cecil Roberts—who both came out of Miller's Miners for Democracy movement—replaced the miners' tradition of national strikes with “selective strikes,” which led to the isolation and defeat of strikes at AT Massey (1984-85) and Pittston (1989-90)

Today, the UMW “represents” fewer than 10,000 active coal miners. If it wasn't for a government bailout of the health and wellness fund, it is very likely that the UMW would not exist at all.

The fight against black lung and for safe working conditions in the mines, as well as all industries, will not be conducted by the union bureaucracies but rank-and-file workers themselves.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees is building new organizations of workers' struggle, independent of the trade union bureaucracy, to unite workers of every industry and every country, to assert control over production and safety in every workplace.

The death and maiming of workers will only end when workers put the factories, mines and other workplaces under their control as part of the socialist reorganization of the world economy.



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