

An interview with dissident US miner Richard Cicci

"The UMWA International is trying to send a message to all miners: if you disagree with the leadership you will be attacked and driven out of the union"

By Paul Scherrer
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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with Richard Cicci, one of a group of dissident coal miners who were assaulted by United Mine Workers of America officials at a union rally in southwestern Pennsylvania on April 1, 1998.



Richard Cicci with his head bandaged after the attack

The attack took place in the town of Bentleyville outside of a hall where the UMWA was holding its annual Mitchell Day ceremony. This event, to honor the union president who led the 1903 strike that won the eight-hour day for miners, was being addressed by UMWA President Cecil Roberts and former UMWA President Richard Trumka, now the secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO.

Before the event about 50 rank-and-file miners, including Cicci, gathered outside of the hall to protest against the policies of the UMWA leadership, including the concessions its had granted the coal operators in the new national contract. Within minutes, a group of UMWA officials and their supporters attacked the protesting miners, ripping leaflets and protest signs from their hands. Several miners were punched, knocked to the ground and kicked repeatedly. Cicci was hit with a piece of lumber and suffered a large gash on his head.



UMWA President Cecil Roberts with James Gibbs to his left. Gibbs, director of organizing and administrative assistant to Roberts, was charged with assaulting Cicci and Russell Walker.

After the attack UMWA President Cecil Roberts justified the assault by saying: "This is not the way we want to resolve disputes, but you can't curse the union and its leadership and expect that no one will take exception to that." Richard Trumka refused to

answer questions about the assault which was reported by a Five union officials were later charged in the assault: four of whom are on the payroll of the UMWA, and the fifth, one of their sons. However, a local magistrate dismissed or reduced most of the charges against the UMWA officials despite testimony from nine witnesses, including several of those who were beaten and a police officer who witnessed the attack. Only one of the attackers, James Gibbs, the director of organizing and an administrative assistant to UMWA President Roberts, had his case bound over for trial. No trial date has yet been set.

The UMWA bureaucracy has followed up the assault by seeking to expel Cicci and two other miners, Mark Segedi and Ron Martos, from the union. Furthermore the UMWA International placed UMWA Local 1197, the home local of many of the dissidents, under trusteeship and removed elected officers.

On May 28, a commission of UMWA officials issued a whitewash of the assault, clearing the attackers of any charges and vilifying the victims. Their 27-page report charged Cicci, Segedi and Martos with "disloyalty" for organizing the protest. Among their so-called crimes was calling meetings, leafleting mine portals and speaking to other miners during breaks at safety meetings. The report threatened 27 other miners who had not cooperated with the commission that they too would face charges if they did not aid "future inquiries."

These methods are reminiscent of the gangsterism which former UMWA President Tony Boyle employed in the 1960s against his union opponents. The UMWA bureaucracy is seeking to stamp out all rank-and-file opposition to its policies.

Since taking office in 1982 Trumka and Roberts have overseen a devastating decline in the position of coal miners. The number of active UMWA miners has fallen from 120,000 to fewer than 40,000. The number of miners in western Pennsylvania, long a stronghold of the union, has fallen below 2,000. The percentage of unionized coal miners is at its lowest point in the more than 100-year history of the UMWA.

In the mid-1980s Trumka and Roberts ended the miners' long-standing tradition of industry-wide strikes, leading to the isolation and defeat of a series of bitter struggles, from A.T Massey in 1985, to Pittston in 1989-90 and the BCOA strike of 1993. In the face of an unprecedented wave of company and government violence, which saw the frame-up, injury and murder of scores of miners, the UMWA bureaucracy continued its collaboration with the coal operators and government authorities.

Richard Cicci has been a coal miner for 28 years. He started working in 1970, just a few miles away from where UMWA opposition candidate

Jock Yablonski was assassinated along with his wife and daughter only months before. Tony Boyle was later convicted for the murder.

The *WSWS* interviewed Richard Cicci.

WSWS: *Can you explain why you decided to stage this protest and what happened to you when you did?*

We decided to go to the Mitchell Day rally because we were so frustrated with the contract that we felt we had to let our feelings be known. Our local had voted down the contract by three to one. There were 139 "yes" votes to 368 "no" votes. When we heard that Richard Trumka and Cecil Roberts were planning to come to Bentleyville we knew we had to go.

They were going to come here to make their speeches about what a great contract had been negotiated. We could not stand the thought. We knew that miners were being forced to work overtime and that they had negotiated away the eight-hour day. They wanted to come here and honor John Mitchell. We just felt that we had to let people know that there are a lot of miners who don't like this contract and don't like what Roberts and Trumka are doing.

A group of us from within our local discussed what to do. We figured here was an opportunity to let the international know just how we felt about the contract and the way they were running things.

We sat down and placed our grievances on paper. We planned to pass out our flyer at the rally and we made signs with our issues on it. If we got a chance to go inside the rally we were going to ask for the floor and explain what we thought was wrong. We felt that this was a good opportunity to get these problems aired out.

If I was the president of the union, I would have welcomed a speaker from an opposition group. I would have said, "I understand that there is a group of miners who are dissatisfied with the contract. Is there a person from that group who would like to speak?" That is what I would have done, allowed them to speak and then gone on with the event. That is all we wanted: a chance to let people know how we felt.

Sure the newspapers would have written a story about how there is a group of dissident miners, but that would be that. It does not hurt an organization to have people who disagree. Rather, it makes it a stronger organization.

I did not think that was going to happen. I knew they were going to do something to try and prevent us from speaking. I knew that Roberts was going to do whatever he could to stop us from having a demonstration. The union leadership can't stand even the smallest group of opponents.

When we arrived, we lined up on the right side of the entrance into the hall. We had our signs and our leaflets. Mark was handing out the leaflets, I was walking back and forth along our line, keeping everybody back, so that we would not block the entrance to the hall.

As soon as we showed up, they came over. We did not know who they were, but we knew they were from the international because they had T-shirts that said so. Marty Hudson was the first one to open his mouth. He said to Ed Bell, "Eddie why don't you shut your mouth. This is not your district. Why are you here?"

I didn't know that this guy was Marty Hudson at the time, but Ed Bell lives 45 minutes from here. He used to be the president of District 6, but that district was closed down and Bell was pushed out. He did not get along with the Executive Board. So here you have this guy from the UMWA headquarters in Washington, DC telling our people that they had no business being there because they were from a different district.

I had my back to these people from the International. I kept walking up and down our line holding up my hands to say to our people to keep calm. I kept looking over my shoulder and I could see Donnie Samms. Samms is eyeballing me all the time, just watching me as I walk up and down the line.

Gibbs was the next one to talk. He says to Russell Walker, "Why are your guys here? Why aren't you up the Bailey Mine organizing it?" [Bailey is one of the largest underground mines in the country. It is owned by

Consolidated Coal Company and was opened as a nonunion mine as part of an agreement with former UMWA President Richard Trumka].

We didn't know at the time that Gibbs was the director of organizing or anything. It was a stupid question for him to ask anyway. Everyone knows that miners can't just go and try and organize a place. The International would have called us down if we did. Well Russell, he is one of the smallest of all of us, and he starts to answer Gibbs. He says, "You are the International. You people are the organizers. That is your job."

Well Gibbs did not like that. He rushes towards Russell and forearms him right in the face or the chest. Russell flipped over backwards and landed hard on his back. Once Gibbs moved, seven or eight other guys rushed us. I saw Russell on the ground and Gibbs was ripping the sign off of a stick. Two guys went after Mark Segedi and knocked the papers up out of his hands. They started hitting him. I went over to help him, but I was hit over the head with a board.

I was on the ground now and I looked over to see Greg McClure and Russell Walker on the ground. There was just a wall of legs kicking them while they were down. I saw three people, just six legs kicking and kicking them.

I saw Gibbs beating Russell over the back with a board. Gibbs picked up the board way up and came down on Russell's back again and again. After he was finished beating Russell, Gibbs backed up. He was holding the board with both hands, rocking back and forth, saying, "Any of you people want some more of this?" He said this twice.

The police officer who was there came over to Gibbs and told him to put down the stick. He told Gibbs twice, and warned him that he was going to mace him if he did not cooperate. Gibbs responded, "F--- you, mother f-----. Go ahead and mace me." Finally the cop puts his hand on his gun and Gibbs backed down and put the stick down.

All this was testified to at the hearing and they did not even hold him for disorderly conduct.

Our group had them outnumbered, but our people did not retaliate. We did not come there to get into a fight. That was not what we were there for. We came to try and say what we had to say, not get in a fight.

I feel if we had retaliated some of us might have been killed. When it all started, I saw a bunch of the union officers running for their cars. I am sure they were hoping that we would have fought back so they would have had an excuse to do something worse.

After the attack, Gibbs and Samms began laughing and joking. When Roberts and Trumka showed up, they ran over to them and escorted them into the hall.

The union is trying to make it out like we started the fight. They say that we shouted racial slurs against Gibbs. Butch, one of Gibbs's victims, testified at the hearing that he was hit in the eye by Gibbs. Butch is an older black miner. There were four or five black miners in our group. Why would they stay with us if we were shouting racial slurs? That is just another one of the lies to try and put the blame on us.

WSWS: *Charges were filed against five UMWA officials for the assault against you and the other miners. What happened at the magistrate's hearing?*

We had more than enough testimony to have them all held over for trial. All the magistrate is supposed to do is decide if there is enough evidence for the case to go to court. We had even more witnesses who were going to testify, but the assistant District Attorney who was handling our case did not think we needed more.

The Justice of the Peace was the main culprit. Right before the hearing the magistrate who was supposed to hear the case was removed and a new magistrate was put in.

The union had three lawyers there. When I arrived, they called me aside and wanted to know what it would take for me to drop the charges. They offered to pay my medical bills and lost wages if I would drop the charges. I told them I would not do it.

Then the judge called me into his office and asked me the same thing. I told the judge, first of all, that I did not have legal representation there to advise me. Secondly, I told him that I did not yet know the full extent of the medical injuries and other expenses, so I could not take the deal.

More importantly, what would this say to other miners if I had agreed to that deal? It would be like saying it is OK for the union to beat up anybody who opposes them. All they will have to pay is a few hundred dollars. The union thinks that they can intimidate anybody who speaks up against them. Anybody who does not agree with them they want to silence. If I had agreed to that deal, then other miners who have grievances might be afraid to speak up.

How many miners left that rally or did not say what they felt because of what they saw happen to us? How many other miners who were not at the rally but who heard what happened were intimidated? If these people can get away with what they did then many miners are going to feel that they can't say anything.

I would not drop the charges, so the judge went ahead with the hearing and dismissed most of the charges anyway.

The UMWA has a lot of money to throw around in elections. A lot of these judges and politicians do what the UMWA wants them to do.

WSWS: *What has the UMWA leadership done to you and the local?*

Our local has been put under trusteeship. The union has charged three of us with disloyalty to the union. Under the UMWA constitution if you are not an officer you are supposed to be tried by your local. So our local set up a trial and was going to go ahead with it. It was scheduled for a special meeting on a Sunday. The International found out about it the Friday before and they placed the local under trusteeship. They just put up a sign saying that the special meeting was canceled. They never even sent me a letter or anything saying that the trial was canceled or when it would take place.

They did not want the trial to take place in the local. They know that the local will support us and they don't want that to happen. So they put us under trusteeship to keep the trial from taking place.

They said that the reason they were putting us on trusteeship was to help our officers run the local better. They said no officers would be removed; that the trustee was to help us.

When Fred Eimer, the local president, told Roberts that the local was going ahead with the trial, Roberts said, "We spent \$70 million to fight Pittston, we will spend that much to fight you. No local will pull this union down."

That is their attitude about a group of miners who disagree with what the International is doing. To them, they are the union. Not that the members are the union and that they work for us. If you disagree with them then you are the enemy.

At our first union meeting after being put in trusteeship about 50 or 60 guys showed up. Mark Segedi got in an argument with the trustee so the trustee told Fred Eimer to remove Mark from the Safety Committee. Fred Eimer refused so the trustee removed both of them. Since then the recording secretary resigned and so have two other officers.

We want the whole local leadership to resign, make the International run the local. That way the members will see that it is the international that is allowing the company to get away with everything.

Whenever we file a grievance against the company, the committeeman always comes back and says, "they can do that." We call it the 'they can do that' contract. Nothing in the contract has changed in 15 years. I mean each contract we get a little more money, we lose some of our benefits or something, but the basic language is the same. There is nothing left to arbitrate. If you file a grievance the answer you always get is "they can do that."

The international claims that they are concerned about our safety. They are so far removed from what it is like to be a miner. I have been a miner for 28 years. When Roberts comes to a mine he walks around and then

goes up and they have a big lunch for him. I say that any president of our union or anyone on the international should have to work in some mine two weeks or a month every year. They should have to work side by side with us, know exactly what it is like to be a miner, know exactly what our concerns are.

I have to fight the company and the elements, I should not have to fight the union too. They are the ones who are supposed to be on my side. When things go wrong, they always want to throw the fault onto the members. But my job is to mine coal, it is their job to run the union.

WSWS: *The union held its own commission into what happened. What is your attitude toward that and the report they issued?*

First of all, we decided not to take part in it. How could a commission made up of people from the International report fairly on what happened to us? These are the people who work every day with Gibbs, Hudson and Samms. They are not going to find against them no matter what we said. They had their lawyers there and all they wanted was to ask us questions so they would know what to expect in court.

The whole thing was a joke. They are trying us as anti-union. They are disloyal ones. They are the ones who are anti-union. They are the ones who denied us the right to voice our opinion. Yet we are the ones on trial. They say we violated the union constitution because we heckled Roberts and Trumka. But they ignore the fact that we were attacked first. If we had been allowed to speak freely we would not have had to shout during the rally.

The commission tried to say that we conspired to destroy the union. They quoted one of our guys, Ron Martos, when he said, "What this union needs is to be broke and reorganized, put democracy back in the hands of the members and out of the hands of these dictators." The commission underlined the words "needs to be broke" and is trying to say that we are disloyal because of it. Everybody who reads this knows exactly what Martos meant. He wants a union run by the members. Roberts knows this too. That is what he is afraid of, a union that is in the hands of the members.

Cecil Roberts is trying to say that we are point boys for nonunion activity. They want to blame us for the fact that the organizing drive was defeated in Illinois. We looked into that. The union has been trying to organize that mine for 10 years. They are just trying to blame us for all their failings. If workers at this mine decided not to vote for the UMWA, it is the UMWA leadership's fault, not ours. If they voted against the UMWA because of what happened on Mitchell Day it is because they did not want to be in an organization that attacks its opponents. It is the image of members getting beat up for speaking up that destroys the union, not people speaking up.

WSWS: *Why is the international victimizing you?*

The International is trying to send a message to all miners: if they disagree with the leadership they will be attacked and driven out of the union. Miners are being told that if they dare to speak out, if they dare disagree with the International, then the International will do everything in their power to silence them. They don't want miners to have a voice of their own.

It isn't every miner but there are quite a few who are getting fed up with what is going on. Miners in Illinois and elsewhere are experiencing the same problems that we are. They may not be as vocal as we are so the union wants to use us as an example. I knew what the union would do. I have been fighting them for a long time. I wanted the other members to see just how they would treat us.

There are people that support Trumka and Roberts who are what you call "wannabees." The International can't put everyone on payroll. That is one of the reasons why these thugs attacked us. They have to prove to their bosses that they are worth being kept on the payroll.

There are also a lot of people on the union payroll who have been on selective strike for five or eight years, or whose mine has closed. The International is telling these guys that Cici is against the strike fund and

wants to take their only income away.

I have a very good work record. I have never been disciplined. But my company, R & P, is being bought out by Consol. Consol management and Roberts are best of buddies. All the concessions that the union has been giving have benefited Consol. What if they make a deal, build a case and fire me? I can't expect the union to back me up. I would go to court or the labor board and I would say that the company is victimizing me and that the union is victimizing me. The judge would just think that I was a nut. I would be right, but I would be out of my job.

The companies don't want democracy in the unions. The last thing the company wants is to have to face a union that is really run and controlled by the membership. It is a lot easier for them to just control one man and have him keep the lid on us.

See Also:

US miners' union assaults dissident workers, then moves for their expulsion

[9 July 1998]

Judge drops most charges against union officials who attacked US

[3 June 1998]

Charges brought by dissident US miners: UMWA officials named in assault

[30 April 1998]

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