

History of bitter struggle by US miners

In the background of the Sago Mine disaster -- part 2

By Shannon Jones
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The following is the second part of an article on the historic struggles of US coal miners. The first part was posted on Wednesday, January 25.

The miners' strike of 1977-78 was one of the key events that led to a shift in policy by the American economic and political establishment, toward recessionary policies aimed at weakening the working class by driving up unemployment. In 1979 President Jimmy Carter appointed Paul Volcker—a former vice president of Chase Manhattan Bank—to head the Federal Reserve Board, the US central bank. Volcker immediately imposed a sharp hike in interest rates, resulting in a spreading wave of bankruptcies and mass layoffs in basic industry.

The threat of mass unemployment was then used as a hammer by corporate America against the working class, in order to break its militancy and impose a drastic reduction in living standards of American workers.



Striking air traffic controllers in 1981

This offensive against the working class escalated with the installation of Ronald Reagan, who fired 13,000 striking air traffic controllers in 1981, using a strikebreaking plan that had been drawn up under the Carter administration. The response of the AFL-CIO trade unions was to isolate and abandon the air traffic controllers, and their union, PATCO, was smashed and a number of their leaders prosecuted and jailed.

The crushing of the air traffic controllers signaled a shift away from policies based on class compromise toward official government sanction for union-busting. It led to an escalation of the offensive by the corporations, aimed at rolling back all the gains won by the American working class over the course of the previous 50 years.

The reaction to this offensive by the leadership of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and the entire labor bureaucracy was retreat and surrender. Already, in 1979, the United Auto Workers had agreed to unprecedented wage concessions with Chrysler Corporation, in exchange for gaining a position on the corporation's board of directors. Now wage-cutting spread to every industry.

The betrayal of the working class was not simply due to the cowardice

and corruption of the upper-middle class officials who headed the unions. It was the deliberate response of the trade union bureaucracy to the decline in the competitive position of American big business in the world market. The trade union officials were determined to assist corporate America in disciplining the working class, suppressing its wage demands and doing whatever else was necessary to boost the competitive position of US corporations.

In 1982, Richard Trumka, a former union attorney with almost no experience in the mines, defeated Sam Church in an election for the UMWA presidency. Trumka pledged to reverse the sellout policies of Church and Miller, but in fact did exactly the opposite.

The 1980s saw the UMWA abandon its militant traditions and follow the same path as the rest of the AFL-CIO trade unions. The efforts of Trumka were primarily focused at undermining the strength and sense of solidarity that had been the hallmark of the coal miners for more than a century, and battering down the resistance of rank-and-file coal miners through ever greater labor-management collaboration and, when strikes did break out, isolating and defeating them.

Miners were told they had to help the corporations produce coal more efficiently and cheaply in order to compete with overseas imported coal. The UMWA signed agreements that, while guaranteeing the union bureaucracy would still be able to collect dues from at least a section of the miners, gave the companies a green light to spread their low-wage and nonunion operations.

In practice this meant a steady erosion of safety and health conditions for all miners. It went hand in hand with the Reagan administration policies of freezing the minimum wage and slashing social programs, which drastically worsened the conditions in Appalachia and throughout the poorest areas of the United States.

At the same time the UMWA intensified its collaboration with the Democratic Party, claiming that the politicians of this big business party were “friends of labor” who could be relied upon to oppose Reagan's anti-working-class policies. The 1980s provided further proof of the worthlessness of these claims, as Democratic governors in Virginia and West Virginia mobilized state police as a strikebreaking force in the service of the coal operators, and gave a green light to union-busting coal companies to hire private gun thugs to terrorize, frame up and even murder striking miners.

Following Trumka's election the UMWA adopted for the first time the policy of the selective strike. This represented the abandonment of the miners' militant tradition of “no contract no work” and launching national strikes to shut down the entire coal industry, union and nonunion. In effect it meant the wearing down and defeat of the miners through partial battles in which small groups of workers confronted the full power of the coal operators and the state.

Massey and Pittston



AT Massey miners in West Virginia during the 1984-85 strike

The coal operators took advantage of the UMWA's retreat to inflict a series of defeats on the miners. First, in 1984-85 AT Massey provocatively broke away from the Bituminous Coal Operators Association (BCOA) national contract. The owners brought in a small army of union-busting thugs to maintain operations during a selective strike by 2,000 UMWA miners, who were left isolated from the rest of the UMWA membership.

In December 1985 Trumka called off the Massey strike. Hundreds of AT Massey strikers were left fired and blacklisted. Those miners who returned to their jobs were forced to work side by side with strikebreakers.

The abandonment by the UMWA of basic working class principles was further demonstrated in 1987, when four AT Massey miners from eastern Kentucky were arrested and framed for the shooting of a nonunion coal truck driver during the Massey strike. The men, Donnie and David Thornsberry, Arnold Heightland and James Darryl Smith, were abandoned by the Trumka bureaucracy, which refused to provide even financial or legal assistance for the miners and their families. The miners were tried and convicted in federal court on conspiracy charges and sentenced to between 25 and 35 years in prison. A fifth miner, Paul Smith, was acquitted of federal charges and immediately re-tried on state murder charges. A West Virginia jury once again found him not guilty.



Pittston miners behind police barricades in Virginia in 1989

There next followed a bitter struggle at Pittston Coal, after Pittston refused to sign the BCOA agreement in 1988. The UMWA waited an entire year before calling a partial strike against Pittston. Again, gun-toting thugs were mobilized by the company while the UMWA limited strikers to impotent civil disobedience tactics and appeals to Pittston's stockholders. Thousands of miners were arrested and the UMWA was hit with millions of dollars in fines while Pittston's strikebreaking went on without hindrance.

The contradiction between the militancy of the miners, who invariably picketed in army camouflage fatigues, and the impotence of the UMWA could hardly have been starker. Finally, anger at Trumka's violation of basic principles of working class struggle erupted in a wildcat strike in June 1989. The action spread across the eastern coalfields and involved up to 50,000 miners in 11 states. The UMWA leadership was terrified by this rebellion. Trumka did not appear in public for several weeks. this rebellion. Trumka did not appear in public for several weeks. this rebellion. Trumka did not appear in public for several weeks. this rebellion. Trumka did not appear in public for several weeks. this rebellion. Trumka did not appear in public for several weeks. this rebellion. Trumka did not appear in public for several weeks. this rebellion. Trumka did not appear in public for several weeks.

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Former UMWA President Richard Trumka

During the wildcat strike Trumka summed up the position of the labor bureaucracy in an interview with the *Charleston Gazette*. He began by saying the union's efforts to bring "stability" to the US coalfields, i.e., to prevent strikes and impose the dictates of the coal bosses, was being threatened by the union-busting efforts of "maverick" employers like Pittston. If the coal operators and government were successful in smashing the UMWA, Trumka warned, this could result in the emergence of a far more radical movement of the miners:

"If we aren't successful, if justice and legal redress are totally denied here, I submit to you that from crumbled blocks will arise a movement just like it did in 1890 when we had no money, just like it did in 1910 when we had no money, just like it did in 1920 when we had no money and just like it did in the 1940s, it came back and it will again.

"When it comes back, I think the form of union probably will be different. Its tolerance for injustice will be far less and its willingness to alibi for a system that we know doesn't work will be nonexistent."

In this rare moment of candor, Trumka acknowledged that the UMWA essentially functioned as a policeman for the coal bosses, making excuses for and defending a political and economic order that was thoroughly hostile to the interests of the miners the union allegedly represented.

The UMWA leadership eventually brought the wildcat under control and convinced miners to return to their jobs by falsely claiming that Pittston had retreated on its concession demands. In September the UMWA then squelched an occupation at a Pittston coal processing facility in southwestern Virginia that threatened to become a rallying point for strikers. UMWA officials then entered intense negotiations with Pittston's owners and the US Labor Department to wrap up the strike. On January 1, 1990 the UMWA signed a tentative agreement with Pittston that gave in to most of management's demands, including a seven-day, 24-hour work schedule.

The UMWA's betrayal of the Pittston strike was a signal to the mine owners and the government to go on the offensive. In October 1989 nine miners on selective strike against Milburn Collieries in West Virginia were arrested on charges of arson, bombing and conspiracy. The UMWA leadership did nothing to defend the victimized miners. They provided no publicity in the case nor did they even help with legal defense. Instead, the UMWA, behind the scenes, worked to pressure seven of the nine miners to plead guilty.

On January 16, 1990, two weeks after the tentative contract agreement with Pittston, company gun thugs ambushed and killed John McCoy, a union miner who was picketing a nonunion mine in McDowell County, West Virginia. The mine was one of scores of nonunion operations that had sprung up in the area due to the continued capitulations and betrayals of the UMWA leadership.



John McCoy was shot down while picketing a nonunion mine on January 16, 1990

State and federal authorities who spared no expense when it came to charging UMWA miners with violence did nothing to arrest the gunmen who murdered John McCoy, who remain at large to this

day. The UMWA, which did not bother to report the gunning down of McCoy in the *UMWA Journal* until months later, did nothing to press the authorities for justice. Refusing to call a traditional memorial day to honor McCoy, UMWA President Richard Trumka and then vice-president Cecil Roberts did not come to McCoy's funeral, which was attended by over 1,000 miners. The next month the UMWA cut McCoy's widow off from strike assistance.

When yet another UMWA member, Jerry Dale Lowe, was arrested and brought to trial for the 1993 shooting of a nonunion contractor at an Arch Mineral mine in Logan County, West Virginia, the UMWA collaborated with the prosecution in helping railroad the miner. Ultimately Lowe was sentenced to 11 years without parole on federal charges of interference



with interstate commerce.

Principles abandoned

As the UMWA marked its 100th anniversary the once mighty organization was in ruins, little more than a shell of its former self. The UMWA bureaucrats had abandoned all the great principles and traditions that miners had fought for over the past century. Strike activity had virtually ceased, tens of thousands of jobs had been eliminated, union membership had dwindled and nonunion coal production predominated in former union strongholds such as southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky. With the door opened by the sabotage and betrayal of the UMWA leadership, the coal bosses were able to achieve an aim they had not been able to attain through decades of frontal attacks on the coal miners.

That the miners were the most militant section of the working class—and that their defeat was key to emasculating the entire labor movement—was also understood internationally, particularly in Britain, where Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher defeated the miners in the 1984-85 strike.

Because of the long domination of the labor bureaucracy and the destructive influence of its policies of anticommunism, support for the Democratic Party and national chauvinism, the coal miners tragically were unable to prevent the union officialdom from transforming the UMWA into little more than a tool of management, and ultimately destroying their organization.

In 1950, more than 90 percent of the nation's 483,000 underground coal miners belonged to the UMWA. Today more than 80 percent of the nation's underground coal mines are nonunion, with little more than 14,000 unionized miners still working underground, according to the US government's Energy Information Administration. In eastern Kentucky and Indiana there are no longer any unionized underground mines; in southern Illinois just one. All told, the active membership of the UMWA has plummeted from over 120,000 in 1978 to less than 30,000 at present.

Facing no organized resistance, the Democrats and Republicans have sought to dismantle many of the protections the miners won through decades of struggle. This has culminated with the Bush administration stacking the Mine Safety and Health Administration with former mine bosses, cutting back the number of mine safety inspectors and directing MSHA to establish a "cooperative" relation with the coal bosses. The White House proposed new regulations quadrupling the allowable amount of coal dust that miners can be exposed to and has blocked several other proposals that, if implemented, may have prevented many of the deaths at

the Sago and Alma mines.

The Sago Mine disaster, claiming 12 miners' lives, barely elicited a response from the UMWA. Since the explosion, UMWA President Cecil Roberts has assisted the company cover-up by giving uncritical support to the whitewash investigation being organized by West Virginia officials and Democratic politicians like Senator Jay Rockefeller. Underscoring the union bureaucracy's complacency, a UMWA spokesman told the *World Socialist Web Site* he didn't see any "direct link" between the sharp decline in the number of unionized miners in the coalfields and the erosion of safety conditions that led to the Sago tragedy.

Implications for the working class

The betrayals of the UMWA have had tragic implications for working class as a whole. Conditions in the coalfields have once again begun to resemble the scenes described in Michael Harrington's *The Other America*. Young people have little opportunities other than working in dangerous nonunion mines, leaving the state in search of work elsewhere or joining the military.

Living standards in the Appalachian coal mining areas, which had improved substantially in the period from 1960 to 1980, have sharply deteriorated. Unemployment and poverty are again on the rise. In 2004 the poverty rate in West Virginia stood at 17.1 percent, well above the US average of 13.1 percent, according to the US Census's American Community Survey. Median family income in West Virginia is consistently near or at the bottom of all US states.

There have been major reversals in health conditions as well. Very few miners' claims for black lung are recognized. Federal benefits were cut in the 1980s, so that only 7 percent of those that apply were eventually able to qualify. In 1996 the Kentucky legislature enacted new workers compensation rules making it virtually impossible for miners to become eligible. The changes were championed by Democratic Governor Paul Patton. Since that time less than 20 miners in that state have been recognized as having black lung disease, although as many as 1,500 are estimated to still die from the affliction each year in the United States.

Coal industry profits, meanwhile, are booming as the mining corporations have been able to restructure on the backs of the miners through consolidations and the driving out of smaller producers. In recent years, due to the rise in demand and higher coal prices, there has been an increase in production and a modest hike in the number of mining jobs. However, unlike the coal boom of the 1970s that arose under conditions of generally rising living standards, the present upswing in coal production has been built directly on the suppression of the working class and a drastic increase in exploitation.

Over the decades the battles of the US coal miners have expressed in a raw and elemental way the sharpness of the contradictions contained within American capitalism. Despite being surrounded by great mineral wealth, the residents of the Appalachian mining regions remain mired in oppression. The Sago Mine disaster underscores how miners' lives continue to be sacrificed for corporate profit.

The coming period will produce no lack of explosive struggles by the working class, including a new generation of miners and other workers in the coalfields. If a powerful movement capable of advancing a genuine alternative to exploitation and oppression is to emerge it must be based on the lessons of the heroic and tragic experiences of the coal miners and the entire working class.

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