

“If a miner comes between a coal operator and a dollar, they’ll always take the dollar”

US coal miners face loss of retiree health coverage, black lung benefits

By Samuel Davidson
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Thousands of retired coal miners and surviving widows have been sent letters by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) Health and Retirement Fund notifying them that their health benefits will be cut off April 30 when funding for 22,600 recipients runs out.

This is the third letter sent to retirees in five months. The first two were sent in October and November 2016. In December, congressional Democrats agreed to a four-month extension of the health plan, which is set to expire in eight weeks.

The UMWA Health and Retirement Fund administers retirement and health plans for both active and retired miners. Benefits are paid from the 1974 UMWA Pension Plan and the Multiemployer Health Benefit Plan, which are both slated to run out of funds.

A few congressmen from coal mining states have introduced bills to extend funding for the programs, but no votes are presently scheduled. The Trump administration, which has postured as the friends of miners, has said nothing, while pushing for the lifting of occupational health and safety and environmental laws, which it calls “job killing.”

Opposed to any struggle against the energy giants and the government, the UMWA is telling workers to place their fate in the hands of Democrats and Republicans on the federal and state level who have long been the pawns of Big Coal. Trump’s billionaire commerce secretary, Wilbur Ross, is the former boss of the Sago Mine where 12 West Virginia miners were killed in a 2006 explosion following numerous safety violations.

Changes or the repeal of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) could also make it more difficult for thousands of coal miners and widows to receive black lung benefits.

Black lung, or coal workers’ pneumoconiosis, has been on the rise for the past two decades after years of decline.

Each year about 1,000 miners die from the slow and painful disease caused by coal and rock dust, which scars lung tissue, causing miners to slowly suffocate to death.

In the 1960s and 1970s, rank-and-file miners, retirees and widows in the Appalachia coal fields had to wage wildcat strikes and other struggles just to win recognition of the disease and get compensation. The miners had to fight not just the coal operators and the government but the UMWA bureaucracy, which was allied with the coal bosses.

For years, coal companies vigorously fought paying benefits based on legal requirements that miners prove they were both 100 percent disabled and suffered black lung from their work in the mine. Coal companies would often bring in their own doctors to testify that the miner was not totally disabled and that he contracted black lung from smoking.

One provision of the Affordable Care Act slightly amended this process. If a miner had worked 15 years in a mine and was 100 percent disabled it could be assumed that his black lung was caused by mining unless the company could prove otherwise.

The Obama bill left intact the 100 percent disability requirement, meaning miners who are deemed partially disabled are forced to choose between quitting and losing their income or continuing to breathe coal dust that is slowly killing them.

“One hundred percent disabled with black lung means you don’t have very long to live,” an underground coal miner from Pennsylvania told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “It’s often that guys work in the mines and then die pretty soon after they leave.”

“When black lung sets in you can’t breathe and get any oxygen to the blood. Fifteen years seems like a long time before you can claim black lung benefits. With the new technologies, you are mining so much coal and producing so much dust a miner can get black lung a lot quicker than before. You see people who work six or seven years getting it now.

“If you are working six days a week, nine hours a day, whether you are running a shearing machine, a bolter or a cutter, there is so much dust. They want production so they just keep you running the machines. There is only so much water and so much air you can throw at it to keep down the dust.”

Studies have shown black lung is on the rise, hitting miners at a younger age and assuming a more aggressive form. (See: “US coal miners hit by sharp rise in deadliest black lung disease”)

One thousand miners die every year from the disease, and its incidence is now as high as it was in the 1970s when the first provisions to protect miners were enacted. Researchers attribute this to the increased amount of silica produced from grinding into rock, as companies seek to mine thinner and more difficult to reach seams of coal. Like coal dust, silica cuts into lung tissue, causing it to scab over, and preventing the absorption of oxygen.

“There are guys in my mine with black lung who are still working. They are nominally protected by the government but instead of being taken out of the mine, they are shifted to another job where they are not exposed to as much coal dust. Once a quarter an inspector takes a sample to show how much dust the worker is being exposed to. But they are still in the mine and breathing in dust.”

In 1995, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), the federal agency tasked with monitoring black lung, issued recommendations that the legal dust limit be lowered from the 2.0 mg to 1.0 mg. The administrations of Democrat Bill Clinton, Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Barack Obama refused to implement the new standards. In 2014, the Obama administration issued new standards cutting dust levels to 1.5 mg, just a 25 percent cut rather than the 50 percent reduction sought by NIOSH scientists.

“The Feds lowered the dust limit last year. The guys in the mines say with current production levels you can’t meet the standards. You would have to scale back production, but that is not something the coal operators are going to do. If they already have contracts for so many tons they are going to run production to get those

tons. They will sell as much coal as they think they can extract from the ground.

“It is framed to us that regulations are killing the coal industry. The operators would like to see zero regulations if they could. I am not saying all operators are bad, but typically speaking, if a miner comes between a coal operator and a dollar, they are always going to take the dollar.

“Another thing we talk about in the mine is the health impact from breathing fumes. A lot of the equipment is run by diesel engines now so they don’t have to run electrical cables through the mines. But nobody really knows what all those fumes are doing to you. It’s almost like they’re doing an experiment on us.

“Workers have to unite together. It will be hard, in many countries, workers would be risking their jobs and being able to support their families if they speak up. All over the world, miners are producing more coal and giving their lives and health away.”

Another provision of the ACA allows widows to continue receiving black lung benefits when their spouses died. Without that provision, spouses will have to reapply for the benefits, often waiting years to get approved.

The increased incidence of black lung and threat to miners’ health and pension benefits is the direct result of the long record of betrayal by the UMWA, which has systematically worked to isolate and betray the coal miners. Former union president Richard Trumka, now the president of the AFL-CIO, played a key role in overturning the militant traditions of the miners and selling out key struggles, including the 1984-85 AT Massey strike and the 1989-90 Pittston strike.

Trumka has recently pledged to “partner” with Trump on trade and immigration issues, underscoring once again the anti-working class character of these pro-company and nationalist organizations.

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