

As Trump postures as friend of miners, retirees and widows face April 30 health care cutoff

By Samuel Davidson
29 March 2017

In a ceremony at the Environmental Protection Agency Tuesday, President Donald Trump signed an executive order reopening federal lands to coal mining giants like Peabody Energy, and rolling back the modest Obama-era proposals to limit coal-fired power plants.

In his remarks the billionaire president postured as a champion of coal miners, falsely claiming that the destruction of environmental protections and elimination of what he called “job-killing regulations” such as occupational safety and health laws would protect their jobs and livelihoods.

The administration’s real attitude to miners and their families is demonstrated by its indifference to the imminent loss of pensions and health care benefits for tens of thousands of retirees who labored their entire lives producing profits for the coal bosses.

An estimated 22,600 retirees and surviving spouses face a cutoff of retiree health benefits on April 30. The majority worked at Patriot Coal mines in West Virginia, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky and Ohio. The company was formed when Peabody Coal, the world’s largest private coal company, spun off its unionized operations in 2007 to escape further payments into the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) Health and Retirement funds.

After Patriot Coal filed for bankruptcy in 2012, the UMWA negotiated a Voluntary Employees Beneficiary Association (VEBA) scheme with the company, which paid the union to take over the provision of retiree health benefits. The new VEBA fund provided union executives with lucrative posts managing the funds, but only a fraction of the amount needed to secure the benefits for the retired miners. The promised

contributions to the VEBA were never full paid, as Patriot filed for bankruptcy again in 2015 and Peabody filed for bankruptcy in 2016.

Other UMWA Health and Pension plans are in no better shape and are predicted to run out of funds by the end of the year. The collapse in global demand and coal prices, and the resulting layoffs throughout the industry, have drastically reduced the amount of money going into the funds. Many other companies, with the full cooperation of the UMWA, followed the Peabody-Patriot pattern to shed pension and health care obligations.

A total of 120,000 active and retired miners and their dependents are threatened with the loss of pensions and health benefits because of the near bankruptcy of various UMWA-administered pension and benefit funds.

On March 1, the UMWA funds sent a letter to 22,600 retirees and widows informing them their retiree benefits would be cut off in 60 days. This was the third such letter in the last five months. In December, after a political stunt by Democratic senators from coal states, Congress agreed to an extension of benefits until April 30.

The UMWA is boosting illusions in various Democratic politicians who have long been in the pockets of the coal companies. The union’s web site prominently displays a March 8 letter from US Senators Joe Manchin, Democrat from West Virginia, and Bob Casey, Democrat from Pennsylvania, along with several other US Senators from coal producing states. The letter asks the Senate Finance Committee chairman—the notoriously right-wing Orrin Hatch—to include the Coal Miners Protection Act in the “waiver

needed for the nomination of Mr. Robert Lighthizer to be the United States Trade Representative.”

Trump’s pick for trade representative needs the waiver because as an attorney 25 years ago, he represented a business organization tied to the Chinese government, in a trade dispute case against a US-based fan manufacturer. The Democrats and the unions are threatening to make an issue of this based on economic nationalism. Lighthizer has since represented US Steel in trade cases against China and will be taking his place alongside Trump’s virulently anti-Chinese Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross who had the enthusiastic support of the unions.

The UMWA has been pushing for the passage of the Miners Protection Act because it proposes to shore up the UMWA Pension and Health funds with an infusion of cash from the interest being earned on money in the Abandoned Mine Reclamation Fund.

Whether such a deal is reached or not, massive attacks on retirement benefits on coal miners and millions of truckers and other workers are being prepared, with the full backing of both big business parties. As for the union executives, their only interest is shoring up their positions as managers of multi-billion-dollar investment funds.

In the meantime, miners are being kept in the dark about their fate. “We haven’t been told anything,” Dave, a retired miner from the Maple Creek mine in Monongahela, Pennsylvania, south of Pittsburgh, told the *World Socialist Web Site* .

Another Pennsylvania miner agreed, saying, “I haven’t heard anything. Our mine is non-union, but there are many miners that used to be in the union and they don’t know what is going to happen to them.”

The UMWA “wanted us to go to Washington” in February to lobby Congress, Dave explained, “but I’m 73 and couldn’t go.”

Dave worked 23 years underground until he was laid off and he later retired. “I loved being underground. Most people would never work in the mine, but believe it or not, I loved it. I was first laid off in 1992, and I didn’t work steady since. I finally turned in my papers and took my pension, which isn’t very much.

“We had to fight to get our pension and health care. I’ve been on long strikes when we didn’t know how we were going to eat. Now the union is on the side of the companies, they have given all these concessions,

and for what?”

Deadly black lung is also on the rise, with approximately 1,000 miners each year dying of the disease. Companies routinely work to deny miners benefits through a process in which a company doctor claims the miner is not 100 percent disabled or that the disease was not caused by working in the mine.

David Neel, a miner with 39 years, has been denied benefits twice. He told the WSWS, “A lot of other miners have it worse than me. I’ve made two applications and am working on a third attempt for my black lung approval. The first try I took care of the health issue. Then I met with the union rep and he sent me to a local hospital for the union info. Then I was sent to a management doctor and was advised it would never go through on the first attempt.

“I was advised to wait a year and start again. The union attorney said I should go to Chicago to a physician they have out there. How the hell am I supposed to do that? I have been off on SSD (Social Security Disability) with virtually nothing coming in. I’ve got 39 years in coal mining but like everything else, the government and big business are cuddled up in bed together.”

The World Socialist Web Site invites coal miners, retirees, health care experts, those suffering from black lung and their spouses to contact our site.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>