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US coal miners face cutoff of health, pension benefits

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More than 120,000 retired coal miners are threatened with the cutoff of health and pension benefits over the next several months as the United Mine Workers Health and Retirement Fund runs out of money.

This includes 16,000 retired miners from Patriot Coal in West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky and Illinois who are threatened with the loss of medical coverage by April, and another 6,500 who could see their health benefits terminated later in the year.

In addition, 89,000 miners and family members, and another 22,000 miners whose pensions are vested but who have not received payouts, face the loss of their pensions or severe cutbacks if the union retirement fund goes bankrupt or is dumped into the government's nearly insolvent Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation.

The tragedy that is unfolding is the outcome of decades of betrayals by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), which have left the miners—historically the most militant and class-conscious section of the American working class—facing destitution.

The immediate cause of the crisis is the sharp falloff in coal demand and the moves by several companies, including the world's largest producer, Peabody Coal, to declare bankruptcy and set

up dummy companies to shed their obligations. In exchange for its complicity, the UMWA has been given control of retiree health care schemes known as Voluntary Employees Beneficiary Associations, or VEBAs, which serve as slush funds for the union executives.

The disaster facing the miners has political roots. It is the outcome of the subordination of the interests of coal miners and the working class as a whole to the profit interests of the corporations, enforced politically through the unions' alliance with the capitalist Democratic Party.

The right to retiree health care and pension benefits was not handed to workers by the ruling class. It was the product of immense struggles, including the wave of strikes by miners and other sections of workers in the immediate aftermath of World War II.

UMWA President John L. Lewis, UAW President Walter Reuther and other union leaders, however, were opposed to socialism and refused to fight for any significant limitation on the economic dictatorship of the corporate elite, such as a government-run health and retirement system.

In 1950, Lewis, declaring that the union “stands for the investors of the industry to have a return on their capital,” agreed to a union-controlled health care and pension fund financed by employer-paid royalties on every ton of coal. In exchange, he backed the mechanization and restructuring of the industry, which led to the reduction in mining employment from 415,562 in 1950 to 124,532 in 1969.

In the ensuing decades, miners found themselves increasingly in conflict with the UMWA, which signed sweetheart deals that reduced royalty payments while cutting benefits to retirees and their spouses to shore up the dwindling funds. In the late 1960s, protesting retired and disabled miners sparked wildcat strikes to demand the full funding of benefits, community clinics and compensation for Black Lung disease.

This culminated in the 111-day strike in 1977-78 by miners to defend their “cradle-to-grave” health care and retirement benefits. The miners defied not only their union president, Arnold Miller, who twice failed to push through sellout contracts, but also Democratic President Jimmy Carter, who tried to force them back to work by invoking the Taft-Hartley Act.

In the 1980s, the American ruling class reverted to methods of class war—strikebreaking, union busting, gun thug violence and frame-ups—that had not been seen since the “labor wars” of the 1920s and 1930s. These methods, however, were not the basic cause of the defeat of the miners. The miners fought back with unstinting courage and determination. They were defeated as a result of the deliberate sabotage of the UMWA.

Defying the miners' militant tradition of “no contract, no work” and national strikes that shut down all mines, union and nonunion, newly elected UMWA President Richard Trumka, a former member of Miller's legal staff, introduced “selective strikes” to isolate and defeat militant struggles against AT Massey and Pittston. Facing a wildcat strike in 1989, Trumka issued a desperate plea to the coal bosses and the government, telling the *Charleston Gazette* that

Pittston's intransigence threatened to destroy the stability and competitiveness the UMWA had brought to the coal industry.

If the company succeeded in breaking the UMWA, Trumka warned, "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."

The UMWA and the rest of unions, however, continued to alibi for capitalism and the Democratic Party. While Trumka was rewarded with the top position in the AFL-CIO, the result of the union's collusion with the coal companies and the Democrats was nothing but disaster for miners and their families.

In West Virginia, coal employment has fallen from 65,000 in 1977 to less than 15,000 today. In McDowell County, one of the former strongholds of the UMW, life expectancy for males is only 63.1 years, 13 years below the national average and roughly the same as for men in Namibia.

Under the Obama administration, the Democratic Party escalated the assault on health care and pensions. The Affordable Care Act was used to shift costs from the employers to workers, who are forced to pay exorbitant fees and accept substandard coverage. Obama has backed the slashing of pension benefits for 270,000 workers, including Teamster drivers and warehouse workers covered by multi-employer pension funds, and he backed the Detroit bankruptcy, which paved the way for the destruction of public employee pensions.

In the 2016 Democratic primary contest, workers in West Virginia voted by a wide margin for Bernie Sanders, who presented himself as a socialist and opponent of the "billionaire class." Sanders turned around and endorsed Clinton, whose contempt for the working class was summed up in claims by her campaign that white workers in industrially devastated states like West Virginia were racists who were seeking to defend their "privileged" status by turning toward Trump. This gave Trump a green light to exploit popular discontent and posture as a champion of the miners.

Workers will soon come to realize that Trump is their class enemy. His choice for commerce secretary, billionaire asset stripper Wilbur Ross, owned the Sago Mine, where 12 West Virginia miners were killed in 2006 after Ross and his subordinates ignored repeated safety violations. The efforts to return workers to the darkest days of industrial slavery will provoke immense struggles, including by the miners.

The lessons of the long, tragic and heroic history of the struggles of miners and the working class as a whole must be learned. New organizations of struggle, entirely free of the corrupt, bureaucratic and pro-capitalist unions must be built. Above all, the struggle must take a conscious political form, wholly independent of the parties and politicians of the ruling class, and based on the fight for the international unity of the working class and socialism.