

Coal Miners Are Mad...and Scared. And They Have a Right to Be

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In 1968, the Mannington Mine in Farmington WV owned by Consol Coal, caught fire, blew up, and 78 miners were buried, many likely alive.



In 1972, a Consol mine in Blacksville, WV, caught fire and 9 miners were buried (again, likely alive) when Consol sealed the mine off to stop the fire and save the coal.

I remember those well, having been involved in labor struggles as a working Teamster truck-driver back then with friends in the coal fields.

In the very early '70s, a militant movement of rank and file union coal miners called the Miners for Democracy was born, threw out corrupt leaders, and rebuilt a union that was militant, demanded safe working conditions, and knew who the enemy was, and still is — the owners of those coal companies like Consol.

I knew and worked with some of them. I even worked in the mid '70s to try and persuade some folks to revive the MFD as it had now dissolved and some of the militancy and class-consciousness was fading.

But at its founding, the MFD knew what it was about, knew that the coal companies were evil, and knew miners had to stick up for each other as workers...or die.

Yesterday, I stood on a sidewalk outside of this building holding a sign calling for reduced carbon emissions while a thousand or so miners and famil members marched by supporting those same companies that have brutalized and exploited the communities of Appalachia for decades.

What happened to make union coal miners support the companies that buried some ancestors alive, gave most of the survivors black lung and then tried to deny them benefits, and laid them off by the tens of thousands as the companies opened non-union mines and began ruining the “almost heaven” hills and valleys of WV with mountain to removal which employs few, if any, union miners.

Why are union miners falling for the company line that there’s a “war on coal” when the coal and gas companies are really making a war on ALL of us, on our planet, on our children’s futures and certainly on those very miners who are marching on behalf of the coal companies?

BECAUSE THEY'RE SCARED TO DEATH OF THE FUTURE.

Last year, I traveled thru some of the same mining communities where friends lived and worked in the early 70's, towns like War and Welch that were once friendly, solid, working class towns, places you'd be proud to live. When I was there last year, I couldn't even find a pizza shop open on a Sunday and most businesses were boarded up.

MINERS ARE SCARED!

I saw poverty on that trip in those hidden Appalachian valleys that I'd not seen since the Kennedy-Johnson era and the War on Poverty days.

MINERS AND THEIR FAMILIES HAVE A RIGHT TO BE SCARED.

Why? Not because there's a "war on coal", but because those very same coal companies that fund their protests, pulled out of their communities once the easy-to-get coal was gone and went to mountain-top removal or tar-sands oil or fracking and left those miners and their families out in the cold, jobless, and desperate for easy answers.

I saw anger on the faces of those marching coal miners yesterday, but I smelled fear on every one of them, fear of further social and economic devastation, of hungry children with lousy schools and no way out, of old houses without money to keep them up, of the addictions people turn to when they're desperate for relief from the social pain of unemployment that just keeps coming every time your kid looks in your empty pockets for lunch money.

Those angry and fearful miners aren't stupid, they're as smart as anyone else, but they're desperate. They know what's coming, about climate change, of looming environmental disasters already too late to avoid...but they still need to feed their kids.

Those miners and their families have fueled this nation with their labor and their lives for countless decades. They, like everyone else displaced in this Wall Street "recovery" but working class disaster, need jobs, good jobs with dignity, union protection, and living wages. Jobs that leave us with some sense of pride at the end of the shift, knowing we somehow contributed to the common good, and that ain't gonna come from the coal companies, not now, not ever. They've used those miners and their families up and now they're sitting them out, while using them one last time for their own interests.

And so I come to the proposed regulations, weak as they are, and certainly to be weaker once Congress gets done working for the coal companies. But they are still urgently needed and strengthened if we are to even begin getting off our self-destructive path paved by the fossil fuel industry.

But while we debate those rules, we must also create good jobs for those who will be, correctly, displaced from the mines.

Does anyone dare to tell me that a working miner would not rather have a good, clean, union job building solar panels or wind turbines? Or that a human being would choose black lung over a clean environment that allows comfortable retirement, a job where the roof doesn't fall and kill you, a job where you might wind up being buried alive to save the coal?

If you dare to answer "yes" to those questions, I'll refer you to a good psychiatrist for a sanity check.

In closing, I urge the EA to do the SANE thing by rewriting your proposed carbon reduction regulations to not only increase the rate at which the reductions are achieved, but to demand that Congress provide the funds to put those who lose coal jobs back to work in fully funded renewable

energy jobs and save the communities that have been destroyed by the coal companies.

Government cannot serve two masters. It either works for us, the working people, or for the fossil fuel companies. I know which side I'm on. How about you?

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