

Trump, big coal and black lung

written by Stephen Millies
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Black lung disease is a terrible way to die. Coal miners' lungs become crusty and

useless, according to Dr. Robert Cohen, a pulmonologist at the University of Illinois. Towards the end, Dr. Cohen told National Public Radio's All Things Considered, patients are "essentially suffocating while alive." (Dec. 18, 2018)

Miners get black lung because capitalist coal companies put profits before safety. And the U.S. capitalist government helped cover up a growing black lung epidemic, as National Public Radio found out:

"A federal monitoring program reported just 99 cases of advanced black lung disease nationwide from 2011 to 2016. But NPR identified more than 2,000 coal miners suffering from the disease in the same time frame, and in just five Appalachian states." ([NPR](#))

Actually, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health [reported](#) last July that "one in ten underground coal miners who have worked in mines for at least 25 years were identified as having black lung ... coal miners in central Appalachia are disproportionately affected with as many as 1 in 5 having evidence of black lung — the highest level recorded in 25 years."

What's the response of the Trump administration to this epidemic? The excise tax on coal mining that's used to finance black lung benefits is scheduled to be reduced from \$1.10 per ton to fifty cents on Dec. 31, 2018. That's sixty cents per ton added to the profits of outfits like Arch Coal, which made \$582 million in 2017.

The real war against coal miners

There never was a war on the coal industry, as Trump has claimed. But there's been a war on coal miners for at least 150 years.

Trump's own commerce secretary — Wilbur Ross — owned the Sago mine in West Virginia where a dozen miners were killed on Jan. 2, 2006.

Just from 1900 to 1970, the [U.S. Labor Department](#) recorded 101,704 coal miners who lost their lives.

That's a larger figure than the 94,725 GIs who died in the dirty U.S. wars against the Korean, Vietnamese and Laotian people. And that's not counting more than 76,000 miners who died of black lung since 1968, [according to former Labor Secretary Thomas Perez](#).

Fabulous fortunes were made, like that of Henry Clay Frick. His estate's art collection on Manhattan's Upper East Side is probably worth at least a billion dollars.

Frick's coal mines fed Pittsburgh's steel mills. As a partner of steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie, he broke the 1892 strike of steelworkers in Homestead, Pa. If he were still alive, Frick would be praising Trump on Fox News.

In the 1870s, Pennsylvania anthracite coal mine bosses framed Irish mineworkers and their supporters, the Molly Maguires. Twenty-one of these labor heroes were hanged.

The same Keystone State capitalist class is today keeping the innocent Mumia Abu-Jamal and MOVE 9 in jail.

Mineworkers built the labor movement

It was the rise of the United Mine Workers union that eventually brought down the death rate in the mines. The UMW supplied the funds and many of the organizers in the the great labor organizing drives of the 1930s.

UMW president John L. Lewis became president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations — the mighty CIO. Former UMW president Richard Trumka is current president of the AFL-CIO.

But the UMW, like many other unions, has been decimated by automation. Membership has dropped from 500,000 to less than 70,000. Especially affected were Black coal miners, who numbered 55,000 in 1930. [By 2014, there were less than 2,500 Black mineworkers.](#)

Wyoming's largely nonunion open pit mines accounted for 316 million tons of coal in 2016, compared to the 184 million tons mined in West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Kentucky.

Steam locomotives are not coming back. Neither are the anthracite coal mines that once heated homes and employed 250,000 miners.

What's left are poor communities throughout Appalachia whose wealth was stolen by the billionaire class. Trump lied to the mineworkers, and attacked black lung benefits.

But there's a new wind of struggle in West Virginia, where 20,000 teachers went on strike in 2018. These education workers are the future, not Trump's bigotry.

