

Unions vs. Workers

In the minefields the battle heats up

anon.

1977

From the May 3 *Wall Street Journal* comes some interesting information about the United Mine Workers (UMW) union that bears heavily on future energy schemes, especially those dictated by our peanut president. Carter's new energy policy calls for increased use of coal as a major energy source, but the underground miners of Appalachia are not showing much enthusiasm for digging it out.

Despite a resolution adopted in 1975 by the UMW executive board to discipline wildcatters, the strikes have continued. Coal production losses from wildcat strikes increased 12% last year and 60% in the first two months of 1977! The union, always a primary instrument in crushing wildcat strikes in all branches of industry in Western capitalism, has never been able to completely dominate the miners in the coal fields.

The union is even more crippled currently because of splits in the leadership over who should be the big boss. Arnold Miller, the professor-like reformer, now has a former member of his staff and another executive board member challenging him for the presidency of the union in the June elections. Each candidate is promising the miners everything and this, along with the general dissatisfaction in the mines, will almost certainly guarantee a strike when the national contract expires in December. The wage and benefits package that the miners will win in this strike may be sweet indeed.

The interesting correlation in this situation is between a chaotic and ineffectual union leadership and strong and self-determined workforce rivaled by none in the U.S. The powerful position of the workers is due in part to the importance of their product, but mainly to the weakness of the union leadership. People who argue that workers are strong when their union is strong will be scratching their heads when the UMW leadership (whoever it will turn out to be) runs around like fools trying to beg miners to accept their contract this winter.

In fact, there will probably be chaos in the upper ranks of the union until a bureaucrat comes along who is strong enough to crush the costly wildcats.

Then you will have a strong union and weak workers.

fifth Estate

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