
Summing Up the Coal Strike:

**THE LESSONS
TO BE LEARNED**



INTRODUCTION

During the first several months of 1978, the 109-day-long national coal strike became the major event in the life of the country. The longest, most militant and hard-fought strike in many years, this strike vividly revealed the antagonistic contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. As the fighting coal miners daily pressed their just demands against the coal monopolies, the state and the labor bureaucrats of their own union, the capitalist class was forced to unleash a wide range of tactics, including a Taft-Hartley injunction, to try to undermine the strike and force the miners back to work. Finally, after the third contract proposal, a massive rejection of United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) President Arnold Miller and countless violent clashes between the workers and the state, a settlement was reached. But only by a slim margin.

IMPORTANCE OF THE COAL STRIKE

The national coal strike demonstrates the growing consciousness and organization of the working class movement in its war against capital. In the first quarter of the year, there were well over 1000 strikes in a wide range of industries. The range of political demands, the increasingly violent rejection of the labor bureaucrats and the rise of genuine rank-and-file organization, all reflect the steady sharpening of the class struggle. In the coal strike in particular, the capitalist class unleashed a calculated campaign to try to separate the fighting miners from their class by arguing that the coal strike was "not in the national interest" and that the people of the U.S. have to assume still greater "sacrifices" because of the miners. The bourgeoisie daily threatened workers with massive energy shortages and layoffs.

This itself is a sign of the deepening crisis in which the capitalist class and its reformist and revisionist agents find themselves. As a result, they must resort to an ever greater propaganda effort to try to deceive the proletariat and lead it down the road of class peace.

But far from achieving this objective, the national coal strike was fought down the line by rank-and-file miners and received widespread material and political support from many sectors of the working class. The length of the strike, its political character,

the mass character of participation in the strike by coal miners, the rejection of the reformist trade union leaders, all signal the fact that this strike truly reflected the growing revolutionary upsurge of the working class movement. In reviewing this strike, it is important to draw some lessons on the state of the working class movement today, in regard to such questions as the influence of reformism, the role and importance of strikes, the necessity for a revolutionary trade union movement led by communists, and the importance of basic democratic rights in the trade union movement.

In order to grasp the significance of this important class battle, we must begin with an understanding of the present crisis of imperialism in general, and the energy crisis in particular.

The energy crisis is a powerful expression of the all-round general crisis of imperialism. The capitalist countries of the U.S., Japan and Western Europe find themselves in the grip of soaring energy costs and increasingly unstable supplies. Last year alone, the U.S. had to pay \$25 billion for imported oil. After two years of endless haggling, the capitalist class has still been unable to work out a unified energy policy in the U.S.

Imports of foreign oil are increasing, contributing to a massive trade deficit and the steady decline of the dollar.

U.S. dependence on foreign oil greatly weakens the position of the U.S. in its global contention with the Soviet social-imperialists. The ability of the U.S. bloc to fight and win a conventional war against Soviet social-imperialism depends, to an important degree, upon a reliable source of oil.

The oil that is sought after of course, is located in the Middle East. Rather than bear the costs of developing the ample U.S. supplies of oil and other energy resources, the U.S. continues to exploit Mid-East oil which brings in enormous superprofits for the imperialist oil monopolies. For the allies of the U.S., Western Europe and Japan depend 92% and 100% respectively on imported oil.

For the Soviet Union, its vast oil deposits are located in Siberia while its population centers are located in its western regions. Mid-East oil is essential to maintain Soviet domination over the revisionist Eastern European countries. Control over Mid-East oil supplies is a vital link in the ambitions of both superpowers for world domination.

Because of the increased contention between the imperialists, and in reaction to the rising tide of national liberation in the

various oil-rich countries of the world, the U.S. bourgeoisie has been forced to try to establish a plan for energy self-sufficiency. A chief component of this plan is the drive to increase the production of coal by two thirds by 1985.

It is in this context that the importance of the coal industry and the UMWA to U.S. imperialism can be seen. Far from the stable, reliable contract between capital and labor that U.S. imperialism desires to maintain, coal production per man-hour in UMWA mines has been dropping — due to the increasing wave of wildcatson the part of coal miners. This situation has proceeded to the point that the bourgeoisie's plan for 1985 is seriously threatened.

Coal in the U.S. is controlled by the huge oil monopolies, such as Exxon, and the huge steel companies, such as U.S. Steel and Bethlehem. What has arisen over the years are fully integrated energy monopolies, who control or manage virtually every available source of energy in the U.S.

Recognizing their problem, the capitalists seek to utilize their agents within the ranks of the working class, the reformist trade union leaders and the revisionists, to try to saddle the workers with a "contract", to insure the reliable and steady production of coal. It is the task of the reformist trade union misleaders to transfer the burden of the capitalist crisis onto the backs of the workers, by undermining the fighting ability of the coal miners on all economic and political questions.

For example, for the bourgeoisie to achieve its goal of increased coal production as well as to take back more hard-won demands like the health fund, the reformists must have tighter control over the miners.

The miners are, however, increasingly rejecting the policy of class collaboration of certain reformist trade union bureaucrats. The miners are on the leading edge of the workers' movement, and looked to by many workers in other sectors as an example of how to do battle with the capitalists. Their large-scale militant actions were carried out in direct opposition to the peaceful means advocated by the trade union bureaucrats to resolve the contradictions with the coal operators.

The attitude of the bourgeoisie toward the strike and the UMWA was that the militancy of the miners had to be broken either through the spread of reformism or else the destruction of the union.

For both economic and political reasons, the coal strike

assumed much greater significance than any other strike in recent years.

An essential element in understanding the importance of the coal strike is the special role that the UMWA has played in the trade union movement.

THE UNITED MINE WORKERS OF AMERICA

The UMWA is an old union with a militant history, becoming one of the stronger unions in the country through fierce struggles. It was one of the few unions, for example, with a comprehensive health policy, which workers had to pay almost nothing for. At its peak the UMWA controlled over 90% of coal production. Today, however, the miners are no longer a cohesive whole. In the 1940's there were 500,000 working miners in the UMWA. By 1964, this had dropped to 92,000. Today, it has climbed back up to close to 200,000. But at the same time, the percentage of coal mined by UMWA members has dropped drastically. In 1932 UMWA coal accounted for 90%, in 1972, 70%, and today it is less than 50%. Effectively what this has meant is that the fighting strength of the miners has been weakened. Some are in company unions like the Southern Labor Union while others are simply non-union. During strikes this means scab coal continues to flow, thereby breaking the effective economic leverage against the capitalists. But it also means that workers of the same industry are not united as a single force, to organize to take control of their union and turn it into a weapon against the capitalist class. It means the organizational unity of the miners is not a solid whole. This is an extremely important demand of all workers and why "organize the unorganized" is one of the main demands of miners.

In addition to the continual weakening of the union through lack of organizing, the union is led by class collaborators. The history of this collaboration is a long one. John L. Lewis, long-time leader of the UMWA, was notorious for his dictatorial rule over the union. He would pack conventions with loyal henchmen to make sure that his power remained intact. He would threaten and intimidate any opposition. This heritage was continued by Tony Boyle, to the point where Boyle had his opponent in a UMWA Presidential race, Jock Yablonski, killed in 1968. Boyle allowed absolutely no chance for rank-and-file miners to have any voice in the union.

In the 1974 election, opposition had been built to challenge Boyle's autocratic rule of the union. Arnold Miller, running on the slate of more union democracy, came to power. He promised reforms like the right to ratify contracts, a return of some district autonomy and moving the international offices from Washington, D.C. to the coalfields. Some of these were granted, like the right to ratify, but soon Miller too began openly to collaborate with the capitalists.

The Miners For Democracy, that began with Yablonski and Miller, become something of a model in the trade union movement for reformism. Ed Sadlowski in the Steelworkers Fightback consciously followed the Miners for Democracy. In the Teamsters, similar developments have grown up. In several unions, reformists have risen up to try to channel the just struggle for union democracy into paths that serve their own narrow interests. The recent history in the UMWA has been at the center of these developments in the trade union movement.

Grievance procedures became increasingly clumsy and unworkable as a result of the creation of the Arbitration Review Board in the 1974 contract negotiated by Miller. With literally over one thousand grievances backed up, miners were forced to wildcat over almost all issues to get any results. Miller's response to the wildcats was to set up a ten-point program for stopping wildcats. It provided punishment for initiators of wildcats and fines for district and local officers who failed to stop them. But Miller could not stop the wildcats.

Under Miller the machinery of the union began to fall apart. Basic tasks like organizing drives never got going. Even the one drive which began in 1976, the Stearns drive, was not and is not being carried out to win. Organizers, unless they were trusted confidants of Miller, were fired. Miller began a spy network to check up on any potential opposition. Legal work was abandoned. In the national strike, the situation got further out of hand when certain districts began to threaten to split from the International and negotiate separate contracts, saying that the International was incapable of fighting for them.

The situation in the UMWA became increasingly chaotic. This had a dual character. On the one hand, because of the lack of control over the union by the trade union bureaucrats, it presented many opportunities for the rank and file under correct leadership to rebuild the UMWA into a strong and fighting union. On the other hand, the chaotic situation with the lack of organ-

izing meant that all miners were not coming into the one unified organization to struggle. This could also have led to a complete disintegration of the union. The calls for districts to break away and form separate unions, the introduction in the last contract of separate bargaining over incentive plans all point in the direction of the breakup of the union. It was the cry of "save the union from destruction" that the bureaucrats used to try to get miners to accept the intolerable contract proposals.

These events — the energy crisis, the growing upsurge in the workers movement, and the new centers of reformism already partially exposed by Miller's actions — set the stage for the strike.

THE STRIKE

More than 160,000 members of the UMWA struck for 109 days, the longest contract strike in mineworkers history, and one of the longest strikes in the nation for many years. The miners' main tactic was to stop non-union coal. Coal trucks were overturned. Loading docks were picketed and sabotaged. Long, roving caravans trekked the back roads to shut down scab mines. On countless occasions the miners met the armed force of the state police and the private armies hired by the scab coal companies. In such confrontations the miners stood their ground. Shots were often exchanged. The united, mass struggle of the miners, their uncompromising stand, definitely threatened the capitalists.

Nightly the evening news was filled with stories about the strike. These stories were of miners who did not want to be on strike, of schools being closed down, of the threat of massive layoffs, of the danger to the economy. Carter took the opportunity to broadcast his accusations that the strike was led by only a few "radical" miners who were keeping the vast majority out of work.

But for all of Carter's demagogy, he could not hide the fact that federal troops had to be employed to protect the scab coal production. Steadily the picture began to come through that the federal troops were required because thousands, tens of thousands of miners were fighting to stop the scab coal. Federal troops were required to protect the scabs against the armed caravans of miners.

The sight of thousands of armed coal miners marching on the scab coal operators was a sight that Carter and his class did not want to be seen. For in the eyes of the working class, this

told the true story of their own struggle and their own battles ahead.

The capitalists understood early that this was to be a hard and bitter battle. From the outset they accumulated huge stockpiles of coal. Then when the strike broke out, they began the steady stream of lies and demagogery that there was a coal shortage, when in fact, this was not the case at all.

The first contract offer by management was so out of line with the workers' demands that it did not even get past the bargaining council. It proposed the elimination of the right to strike, health funds tied to productivity and fines on wildcats, an extremely low raise in pension funds, inadequate wage raises, and similar unacceptable offers.

After the flat-out rejection of the first contract, the bourgeoisie and the reformist trade union bureaucrats resorted to calling in some of the outspoken district officials. In the 12th week of the strike a second proposal was offered. Nothing really had changed from the first contract. This was a big mistake for the capitalists and the trade union bureaucrats, as the fighting miners were outraged. All across the country contracts were burned by miners. A campaign was begun to recall Anold Miller. Finally Carter was forced to utilize the notorious Taft-Hartley Act. Federal seizure of mines was threatened.

Though Carter invoked the Taft-Hartley Act, he was well aware that the wide-spread deployment of federal troops, or the attempt to actually seize the mines, might have resulted in some very widespread and extremely sharp clashes between the coal miners and the state — the kind of clashes that the bourgeoisie wants to avoid whenever it can, particularly Carter, who has painted himself as a defender of everybody's "human rights".

A miner was killed in southern Indiana by a scab and thousands of miners marched in protest. The bourgeoisie together with the reformist trade union leaders tried to arrange separate contracts with some districts in order to break apart the unity of the ranks. Finally on March 24, after 109 long days of pitched battle, a contract was ratified by a very slim margin in the coal-fields.

OUTCOME OF THE STRIKE

The contract that was finally signed represented both ad-

vances and setbacks for the miners.

In the economic struggle, the miners obtained an advance in wages and some individual safety rights were maintained. At a time when, for many workers, wages and safety clauses are losing ground, this was an important achievement for the miners.

The duration, unity and militancy of the strike represent an important development in the class consciousness of the coal miners. The direct confrontations with the state, the extremely bitter confrontations between countless groups of rank-and-file miners and Miller, all served to educate the coal miners and the working class in general about the fundamental antagonistic contradiction between the interests of the workers and the interests of the capitalists.

There were also important setbacks in the contract. Only now are many miners beginning to realize the extent to which the new contract sells them out.

The UMWA health plan was not reinstated and was replaced by private insurance plans, which are so unstable that many miners are now forced to pay for health costs themselves.

Pensions were not equalized, still leaving older workers with a pittance for a living. The door was opened by this contract for incentive plans which are now being presented in several mines.

Previous rejections of the contracts had managed to oppose the original plan of the capitalists to outlaw strikes, allowing the companies to fire workers and fine the local unions. However, the new contract upholds all previous rulings of the Arbitration Review Board. Effectively, Arbitration Review Board ruling number 108 — which permits companies to fire striking miners — is no different from the original proposal by management, only that it is hidden in the wording of the new contract.

From this strike we must conclude that the broad character of the participation in the strike and the rising class consciousness of the battles being fought represent an important advance in the class struggle. The recent strike signifies the further development and extension of a long fighting tradition of coal miners in response to the conditions that workers face. It is a reflection of the general movement from an ebb to a flow period in the class struggle.

In evaluating the strike, the contract is an important factor, but not the only factor. Under capitalism, the contract will only set the terms on which workers sell their labor power.

Yet we will always fight resolutely for the best possible contract. What is most essential is the rise and development of the consciousness of the working class movement and the struggle for revolutionary trade union organizations. Within this context we can consider some of the most important lessons to be learned from this strike, about the state of the working class movement and our tasks.

REFORMISM IN OUR MIDST

The greatest barrier to greater victories for the miners was not the fact that the miners did not hold out longer for a better contract or that they did not shut down enough scab operations. The greatest obstacle to advancement was that the leadership of the strike was reformist. Miller and the other so-called "militant leaders" sold out the interests of the miners one by one. Under the banner "save the union", these traitors collaborated with the capitalists right down the line. The role of the reformists in misleading and subverting the working class is one of the most important lessons of the coal strike.

Leading up to the coal strike, there was great concern among miners that Miller would not fight for their main demands. This concern proved true, and the first contract negotiated was living proof. In many districts there was a mad scrambling by local and district officials to make hay off the legitimate anger of the miners at Miller. District 12 President Dawes (Illinois) and District 6 President Guzek (Ohio) talked tough, telling miners to hold out until their demands were met. It was these "militants" that the bourgeoisie turned to after Miller proved incapable of having any sway over the miners. They were called into negotiations. For both the second and third contracts these reformists made a complete turnaround and worked alongside of Miller in pushing both contract proposals. While these bureaucrats became isolated from the miners to a great degree, they caused sufficient confusion with their cries of "save the union" and their rapid turnabouts that the third contract was accepted.

During the course of the strike, many of the individual trade union bureaucrats were exposed for their stand of class collaboration. The break between the miners and these bureaucrats however, does not represent a break with the trade union bureaucracy and reformism overall.

There is not a deep and broad understanding of the role that reformism plays in the midst of the working class. Most often it is thought that the problem is one of individuals, who simply sell out for their own self-interests.

For the bourgeoisie, the reformists, both in the trade unions as well as in other areas of struggle, play an extremely important role in blunting the antagonistic contradiction between labor and capital. The reformists promote the view that capitalism can be reformed by renegotiating the terms in the sale of labor power. In the trade unions, their view is that the working class struggle should be confined to purely economic struggles, simply more wage raises and an improvement of working conditions.

The UMWA is a good example of how bureaucrats have advanced up through the capitalist system. Joseph Brennan, once a UMWA bureaucrat, did such a good job working for the bourgeoisie while he was in the UMWA, that he was promoted to the job as a top negotiator for the Bituminous Coal Operators Association! There is little contradiction for these trade union bureaucrats in moving from the union to management to the capitalist state, because in reality, they are all jobs in common service to the bourgeoisie.

Genuine revolutionary trade union leadership can only be established in the course of building a revolutionary trade union movement.

The First Congress of the MLOC adopted a Resolution on the Trade Unions which begins with the recognition that "Today the trade union apparatus has become an extension of the bourgeois state." (Class Against Class, number 10, p. 57)

This means that the rivalry, corruption and sellout activity of the reformist trade union bureaucrats are merely a part of the bourgeois character of the entire trade union apparatus, which today is controlled by the capitalist class through collusion with the sellout union leaders.

To build a revolutionary trade union movement requires that we work primarily within but also outside the reformist trade unions to promote a revolutionary program of trade union struggle, which fights for both the economic and political demands of the working class, and consistently develops and employs the tactics of class struggle against the class collaboration promoted by the reformist trade union bureaucrats and the labor aristocracy.

In the course of waging the class struggle correctly, led by a Marxist-Leninist communist party, revolutionary trade union

leaders will come forward to replace the reformist trade union bureaucrats, begin to destroy the trade union apparatus which serves the capitalists in class collaboration, and build up the revolutionary trade union movement.

Today the situation in the UMWA has some favorable conditions for construction of a revolutionary trade union movement within the union. The miners are looking for leadership which is capable of turning the direction of the union around, leadership which can take the place of Miller and the other class collaborationist bureaucrats. The miners are not going to be readily fooled by another reformist and a program of reform, like Miller's platform. They will be watching anyone who comes to power and replaces Miller to see if the same policies are pursued. The break with reformist leaders is the very beginning of the break with reformism. This crack must now be widened into an open split with reformism. This is the task before communists and class conscious workers in the UMWA.

One of the reasons why in many ways a favorable situation exists in the UMWA is because the trade union bureaucrats lack their social base of support. In most unions, the base of support for reformism is among the labor aristocracy. It is from the ranks of this stratum that most trade union bureaucrats come. Historically the bourgeoisie of every imperialist country has bought off the higher stratum of the working class. The bourgeoisie uses a small portion of its superprofits to reward and corrupt the most vacillating section of workers. Through higher wages and special privileges, this stratum becomes isolated from the ranks of the masses of workers. In exchange for these special privileges the labor aristocracy readily makes compromises with the bourgeoisie. By backing the bourgeoisie, the labor aristocracy becomes like a fifth column in the working class, introducing bourgeoisie ideology, like reformism.

In the UMWA, there is little or no labor aristocracy. This has a two-fold effect. On the one hand because there is not the dulling effect of the labor aristocracy, miners are one of the most militant sections of the working class. Also without the labor aristocracy, the trade union bureaucrats' hold over the miners is not as iron-clad as it is in other unions like the steelworkers. Once a split with the reformists begins, it could be widened very rapidly when led by communists.

The bourgeoisie also recognizes this imminent danger. Without the work of the reformists in the ranks of the working

class, the rule of the capitalist system itself is challenged. Therefore, incentive plans were introduced for the first time in the last contract. These plans, if accepted by the various locals, will create divisions among the miners and lay the basis for a higher paid section, the basis for the creation of a labor aristocracy. This is why these incentive plans must be resolutely opposed.

The situation in the UMWA is in a period which can go either way, either toward a split with reformism or a broader and deeper influence of reformism. The key to advancing the cause of the working class is clearly the development of a revolutionary trade union movement with communist leadership.

OPPORTUNISTS IN OUR MIDST ALSO CONFUSE AND CLOUD

There are many opportunist forces trying to take over the leadership of the UMWA. The Communist Party USA is one such force. Having long ago renounced revolutionary class struggle, the CPUSA today is working hard to gain power and influence to bring themselves to power. At the heart of their plan is an alliance with the trade union bureaucrats. Continuing their plan of building a "left-center" coalition, the CPUSA withheld and blunted criticisms of Miller and other reactionary trade union leaders. During the course of the strike, they did not issue a criticism of the treacherous policy of class collaboration he was pursuing, under the guise of "get a contract first, then deal with internal matters later." In fact in many issues of the *Daily World*, the CPUSA quoted Miller about how the miners were going to fight the capitalists.

In Pittsburgh in the middle of the strike, the CPUSA's Western Pennsylvania Committee to Support the Miners passed a resolution stating they would not criticize Miller or other bureaucrats. They also provided support to District 5 President Lou Antal who opposed militant actions by the miners. It was only in their summation of the strike that the CPUSA dared to criticize Miller because the sentiment of the miners was so against him. To continue to support Miller at that point would have meant isolation. During the strike the CPUSA came out in favor of nationalization of the mines, which is part of their overall scheme of placing political power in their own hands without overthrowing capitalism.

The CPUSA stated that the coal companies feared seizures and that miners favored seizures because they would lead the way

towards nationalization. But in fact, the CPUSA is quite opportunistically wrong. In past mine seizures it was the companies who benefitted, not the miners.

Often miners point to the fact that they won health benefits under government seizure. This is true. But was it because the government is more lenient than the companies, or more fair? Hardly. When the mines were seized under Truman and the miners won their health benefits it was not the government's doing. It was the fact that miners went out on strike and refused to go back to work until they won their demand that brought about the health benefits. When the government handed back the mines to the owners, the profits which were made during the course of the seizures were handed back (they had been held in escrow) and in addition almost as soon as the agreement was reached on the health benefits, the companies started saying that they were not going to accept the agreement. So miners went out on strike again. This time the government in the interests of "fairness" slapped a \$3.5 million fine on the union.

The CPUSA disregards history and the fact that the bourgeois state does not act in the interests of the workers of its own accord. It is only through militant struggle of the working class that gains are made.

The treachery of the CPUSA has yet to be exposed in the working class movement and because they parade around under the sign of communism, they are a great danger to the advancement of the struggle against capitalism.

The Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) also had a hand in misleading the working class in the strike, and has contributed to anti-communism among the miners. The RCP glorified the use of strikes in its work in the Right to Strike Committees. The RCP is notorious for its "single spark" theory which concretely comes down to running after every spontaneous outburst of the working class struggle always hoping that this might be the start of the prairie fire of socialist revolution. In the summer before the strike, they madly rushed around helping to spread wildcats through roving pickets. It apparently never crossed the minds of the RCP leadership that at times the capitalists would just as soon have the miners wildcat, weakening the workers' economic strength and making it difficult to hold out in crucial battles.

Lenin long ago spoke of such foolhardy methods, in *On Strikes*: "Factory owners will even deliberately cause strikes, because it is to their advantage to cease work for a time and to

deplete the workers' funds." This mad dashing after the spontaneous movement by the RCP has promoted the view among miners that communists stand for strikes, strikes and more strikes, regardless of their purpose or timing. This has played right into backward and anti-communist views among miners.

The work of opportunists like the CPUSA and the RCP goes hand-in-hand with the reformist trade union bureaucrats. Reformism and opportunism both serve to bolster the capitalist class. As stated in the **Draft Party Program**, "Like reformism, opportunism sacrifices the long-term interests of the proletariat for immediate gains..." (p. 35). From the violent reaction against opportunists such as the RCP by many miners, it is obvious that the "gains" of the RCP and others will be very short lived!

IMPORTANCE OF DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS

Another important lesson which can be learned from the coal strike is the importance of democratic rights in waging the class struggle. The fighting ability of the working class is greatly affected by the democratic rights that it is able to utilize. Concretely the miners have had in the past both the right to strike and the right to ratify contracts. These are rights which many other sectors of the working class are denied.

As the bourgeoisie steps up its attacks on the working class, one of the first things it will try to do is take away these rights. In steel, the workers no longer have the right to strike, and do not have the right to ratify contracts. And now their right to elect international officials is in danger. As a result of the lack of these rights and the treachery of the trade union bureaucrats, the ability of steelworkers to fight is severely restricted.

The working class fights for the fullest democracy for itself and its allies. On the one hand, the fuller the democracy, the better able the proletariat is to organize and resist. With the right to ratify contracts the miners were able to beat back the first two contract proposals which would have been substantially worse than the contract they now have. The miners have used the right to strike to force the capitalists and the bureaucrats to grant them concessions through the years, like the health fund and safety rights.

In addition, as the **Draft Party Program** explains, "The greater the political and democratic freedom gained by the

proletariat, the more clearly will the nature of the imperialist system be exposed as the source of the hardship and exploitation of the masses." (p. 41). Even though the miners had the formal right to strike and to ratify their contracts during this strike, it was clear that these rights alone were insufficient to abolish their exploitation and oppression. Because the bourgeoisie controls the means of production and the trade union apparatus, the working class can never achieve its emancipation without overthrowing the capitalists.

This is why it is essential that in fighting for its economic demands, the proletariat link them both with greater democracy and with the fight for the complete emancipation of the class. It is through step-by-step expanding the political rights of the working class that economic gains can be advanced, and more importantly, that the organizational leadership of the working class is expanded.

THE ROLE OF STRIKES

As the crisis of capitalism increases, the number and length of strikes increase. Therefore it is important that communists and all class-conscious workers concern themselves with the question of the significance of strikes, the methods of conducting them and the tasks of communists within them.

As the capitalists try to force more and more of their burden on the backs of the working class, the working class will rise spontaneously to resist this, fighting to maintain and expand its gains. The necessity of strikes in this battle is recognized to such an extent that the capitalists have tried to enforce in almost all unions and sectors of society regulations against strikes, through either contractual clauses such as the Experimental Negotiating Agreement (ENA) in steel, or laws forbidding strikes in the public sector. One of the major issues of the coal strike was the attempt to institute fines and punitive measures for strikers.

To workers, strikes represent a means to hit the capitalists where it hurts the most — stopping production and therefore the flow of profits. Strikes, in an embryonic form, directly challenge the right of the capitalists to exploit labor power and, consequently, their right to rule. Strikes reveal in the starkest manner this fact that the real force behind society is not those who own the means of production but those who run the means. The

capitalists cannot continue without the working class.

Every strike reveals that the enemy of the workers is not simply the particular mine or factory owner, but the capitalist class as a whole, including its bourgeois state. This was vividly brought to light in the coal strike, because of the interlinking of the coal capitalists with the steel and oil barons. The use of a Taft-Hartley injunction and national guard troops along with threats of mine seizures could not but throw out any illusions of state neutrality. It was clear to many miners that they were in fact battling as one class against another class.

These are the reasons why we refer to strikes as a school of war. It is important, however, to not think that therefore strikes are the war and the only way of waging the class struggle. As the intensity and number of strikes rapidly increase, as they inevitably will, there is a dangerous tendency to begin to see strikes as the only form of struggle of the working class. This is especially a danger in the UMWA.

Strikes are only one weapon in the arsenal of the workers. The use of a strike must be carefully determined and prepared for, making sure it is the proper form of struggle for a given time. At other times it may be more appropriate to utilize slow-downs, legal channels, mass demonstrations or mass uprisings.

The question of leadership of a strike is undoubtedly one of the most fundamental questions as to whether or not a strike can be successful. Lenin, in *On Strikes* states "Strikes can only be successful where workers are sufficiently class conscious, where they are able to select an opportune moment for striking, where they know how to put forward their demands, and where they have connections with socialists and are able to procure leaflets and pamphlets through them."

These aspects which Lenin spoke of are essential for the advancement of the working class in the long run. Class consciousness enables workers to link their particular struggle with the long-term battle against the capitalist class as a whole.

Determination of an opportune moment does not mean striking just because the date of a particular contract is up — but a careful selection of timing as to when the workers' forces are adequately prepared. Oftentimes, the bureaucrats give advance notice of strikes, or as regular as clockwork go out on strike when the contract is up. This gives the capitalists advance warning enabling them to stockpile products, train scabs or managerial staff to run the plants.

In the coal strike, the capitalists prepared well. They stockpiled huge mountains of coal at all main electrical stations and steel plants so other sectors of the economy would not be squeezed and force an early settlement.

Knowing how to put forward demands is also important. In strike after strike the bureaucrats make long lists of contract changes they say they are going to fight for. There is usually no clarity on which demands should be held out for and which could be compromised. As a result, confusion reigns and workers often end up with contracts with the most important demands negotiated away.

For example, the right to strike was a main demand of the miners. They rejected two contracts because of clauses eliminating the right. However, because of hidden language in the final contract, the demand was lost.

In a strike, literally twenty years becomes concentrated in a single day. Because of the open conflict between capital and labor, opportunities for exposures of the capitalists and their agents and deepening the political awareness of all workers constantly present themselves. During the coal strike, opportunities abounded for exposures of the capitalist class, the bourgeois state, the bureaucrats and the opportunists. By presenting and explaining these contradictions in the course of waging the strike, workers' awareness and understanding can be greatly advanced.

Because of the intensity and ups and downs of the actual strike, it is often easy to lose an overview of the struggle. This is why it is essential that communists maintain and promote a clear view among the workers of the protracted nature of the class struggle and remember that strikes are schools of war but not the entire war itself. The most essential task in a strike situation is to utilize all available opportunities to raise the consciousness and organization of the workers, especially the advanced workers, so that the fighting ability of the class will increase.

In strikes as in all other struggles, the task is to improve the position of the class in order to fight the whole war. "From individual strikes workers can and must go over, as indeed they are actually doing in all countries, to a struggle of the entire working class for the emancipation of all who labor." (Lenin, *On Strikes*, Vol. 4, page 319).

For this to happen requires communist leadership. We know

this was the greatest barrier to the accomplishment of this task during the coal strike. In reality, very little communist work has been carried out among the miners for over 30 years, leaving the miners under the influence of reformist and revisionist leadership.

Communist work in this strike should have been to prepare workers well in advance. This would have meant to propose a program long before the strike began, a program which would have included the main demands of the strike, the tactics to wage the strike, the tasks inside of the union and the connection of the strike to the long-range fight for the emancipation of labor.

Recognizing the potential importance of this strike, the MLOC began preparation many months in advance and decided to concentrate some of its cadre in the most important centers of the coal industry. As a young organization with limited ability to concentrate in rural areas, the process of locating cadre and obtaining jobs in the mines was a lengthy one, requiring patience and perseverance.

Overall, however, our preparations tended to tail the spontaneous movement, not lead it. A program including tactics to wage the strike was not worked out well in advance through protracted discussions with miners before the strike began. The program we published did not appear until almost the end of the strike. When it was published, it was well received and provided an important basis for serious struggle and discussion with miners. But it did not serve as a rallying point the way it might have done if published in a timely manner.

While **UNITE!** published frequent articles about the strike, they were not always timely, and the analysis of the strike — though considerably beyond anything else published — was still far from adequate to provide the kind of propaganda and agitation required.

Another extremely important lesson we learned from the strike was the necessity to boldly combat the anti-communist sentiment within the union. This sentiment is spread by the trade union bureaucrats and the companies. It is also given every aid and assistance by the opportunists, whose actions betray the interests of the workers. At first, some cadre did not recognize the necessity to stand up to this intimidation. Threats of violence and abuse were leveled at cadre and some rough scenes developed. In this situation, any tendency to back down and

shy away from the program of class struggle only served to reinforce anti-communism. Cadre learned that the only road to defeat anti-communism is through bold, dedicated and consistent class struggle, not by conciliation.

What appeared most obvious throughout the course of the strike was the almost unlimited opportunities to mobilize, educate and lead the miners. In this situation, cadre of our organization played important roles in the strike, and many came to be recognized as leaders of the strike in their area. With more experience, larger numbers and sharper struggle against right deviations in our work, we will be able to take advantage of these very good opportunities to actually come to the forefront and lead the struggle as a whole.

During this strike, the MLOC came to understand in a deeper, more all-round manner the vital importance of the policy of concentration pursued by the organization. Concentration requires not only placing cadre in the important centers of the coal industry, but actually concentrating a superior force in these centers to make a breakthrough in our work. Concentration during such a strike requires the attention of the entire organization.

In the course of the work we found as well, that such bourgeois and revisionist parties as the Revolutionary Communist Party and the Communist Party/Marxist-Leninist had very little influence or work in the coal mines. Others that follow in their footsteps, such as the August Twentyninth Movement, the Workers Viewpoint Organization, the Workers Congress, the I Wor Kuen and their like, were nowhere to be found in the strike. The Central Organization of U.S. Marxist-Leninists, who claims to have established a "national center" in 1969, was completely absent from the mines and played no role at all in the strike.

Overall, the errors of the MLOC during the strike were right errors, tailing behind the spontaneous movement. The source of these deviations was a combination of inexperience in work in a national strike and spontaneity. Without the development of a program for guiding the work throughout the strike, errors are bound to happen. These errors placed more sharply before the MLOC the danger of economism. The danger of slipping into militant trade unionism has historically been a great danger to the working class movement and continues to be one today. It is only through consistently combating these errors along with

left errors that the Party will be able to win the trade unions to the side of socialist revolution.

CONCLUSION

The recent coal strike represents in microcosm the direction that the working class movement is heading. With the intensification of the general crisis of capitalism, there has been a corresponding upsurge in the working class movement. The wave of strike activity, both authorized and, more importantly, the great number of wildcats, all point to this development. The growth of militant tactics as evidenced by the coal strike and the increased rejection of reformist leaders are significant manifestations of this movement into the flow period of class struggle.

The working class will continue to spontaneously resist the exploitation and oppression of the capitalist system as they intensify. At the same time it is correct to assess that the movement is at the beginning stage of this flow of class struggle. The lack of genuine communist leadership has significantly held back the development of the spontaneous movement into a class-conscious movement. The working-class movement has for over 30 years been under the influence of the reformists and the opportunists, diverted onto the road of class collaboration and peaceful struggle.

While communist ideas and an understanding of class contradictions do exist among the working class, this understanding is neither deep nor broad. Strong anti-communist ideas remain, like confusing communism with fascism. This, however, is not surprising when a movement has been without communist leadership for so long.

With the upsurge in the class struggle, there also comes a greater danger for the working class movement. The bourgeoisie will be forced to turn to much greater repression, especially as reformist ideas are increasingly rejected. This period of increased repression is a period of preparation for open fascist terror against the working class. When the bourgeoisie can no longer rule in the old way, through reformism and bribery under the cover of democracy, they turn to repression and eventually an open fascist dictatorship over the working masses.

In the coal strike, with the reformists unable to control the miners, the bourgeoisie was forced to utilize national guard troops, a Taft-Hartley injunction and threats of mine seizures.

In this coming period, the working class will be forced to intensify its battle for the preservation of its democratic rights, like the right to strike, to ratify and organize.

The bourgeoisie will attempt to strip the working class of many of its rights which enable it to resist in an organized manner. As well, through chauvinist and fascist campaigns, the bourgeoisie will try to divert this spontaneous upsurge toward support for its imperialist war plans.

These are all means that the bourgeoisie employs to try to temporarily resolve its crisis and make the working class shoulder the burden. During these upsurges in the class struggle, the opportunists and the reformists come more and more to the aid of the bourgeoisie. As we saw during the coal strike, each will try to contain and confuse the working class and misdirect its anger down a road of peaceful co-existence with the capitalist class.

But while there are many dangers for the working class in the period ahead, there are many more opportunities for the working class to advance its organization, consciousness and leadership. At this point, as we are moving from an ebb to a flow period in the class struggle, the main task of the working class movement is to consolidate and develop the core of its leadership with the formation of the communist party. Only this leadership will be capable of leading the working class correctly through the twists and turns of the class struggle as the workers' movement moves into the period of flow.

It is the development of a revolutionary trade union movement under the leadership of the vanguard party which is capable of ensuring that the spontaneous upsurge in the class struggle becomes directed consciously toward the final aim of political power. Step by step the new party we build must address the important questions of tactics in the coming period, the forms of organization necessary to advance and the specific program of struggle for each area of class struggle.

From the coal strike, we must take the lessons about reformism, the role of strikes, democratic rights and most of all the role that communist leadership must play and deepen them in the working class movement. From these lessons, we can advance and prepare well for future battles, like the national strike in auto in 1979 or the steel contract in 1980. By applying Marxism-Leninism, the working class can learn from the past to advance in the future. The battles which we are seeing today are embry-

onic compared to the ones that await us down the road.

Through the increasingly active intervention of the Party in these great battles of class struggle, the flow of the class struggle will move consciously toward the creation of a revolutionary situation in the U.S., and the seizure of political power by the proletariat.

