

Jimmy Carter and the 1977-78 coal miners strike

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The death of 100-year-old former US President Jimmy Carter triggered a wave of tributes from political figures and commentators, which concealed the right-wing legacy of the 39th US president. Predictably, the labor bureaucracy joined this canonization of Carter whose presidency from 1977 to 1981 epitomized the turn by the American ruling class from a policy of relative class compromise to outright class warfare.

“Jimmy Carter’s life was defined by a deep commitment to service,” AFL-CIO President Liz Schuler declared. “As president, he brought the voices of America’s communities to Washington and challenged the status quo. His dedication to justice and equality set an example for generations.”

Similar praise came from the leaders of the American Federation of Teachers, the Service Employees International Union, the International Association of Machinists, the United Electrical Workers and other unions.

Only one tribute, by United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) President Cecil Roberts, referred to Carter’s March 6, 1978, decision to invoke the anti-strike Taft-Hartley Act against 160,000 coal miners fighting the Bituminous Coal Operators Association.

“I was saddened to learn of the passing of President Jimmy Carter yesterday,” Roberts wrote in a December 30 statement. “While not the most pro-labor President of my lifetime, he was the most pro-coal President I have ever seen. The UMWA gained thousands of members during his term in office as he pursued energy policies that included greater coal utilization.

“He also invoked the Taft-Hartley Act when the UMWA went on strike in 1977. That did not win him any friends in the labor movement at the time, but the truth is miners largely ignored his order to return to work and we won our strike.”

“As we confront the challenges before us today,” Roberts continued, “we can learn something from how Jimmy Carter lived his life after his White House years. When we treat others with kindness and respect, when we seek a peaceful end to conflict, when we look for solutions that embrace all people, we become a better society.”

Like all the other tributes, Roberts’ comments are aimed at concealing the fact that Carter was a ruthless defender of American capitalist interests, at home and abroad.

The miners courageously defied the injunction imposed by Carter, but they did not win the strike as Roberts claimed. Instead, they were betrayed by the bureaucracies which controlled the United Mine Workers of America union and the AFL-CIO labor federation. This included Roberts himself, who was then the vice president of UMWA District 17 in Charleston, West Virginia, and a loyal lieutenant of UMWA President Arnold Miller, who functioned as Carter’s tool inside the UMWA. Like the rest of the UMWA bureaucracy, Roberts welcomed Carter’s efforts to contain the rebelling miners.

On December 31, the *World Socialist Web Site* posted an assessment of Carter’s political legacy by Patrick Martin. While Carter is celebrated for

his humanitarian post-presidential efforts, his presidency marked a transitional period in American politics, in which the Democratic Party carried out a sharp turn to the right.

On a world scale, this included backing Islamist guerrillas in Afghanistan to destabilize the Soviet Union and fostering relationships that gave rise to groups like Al Qaeda, as well as the “Carter Doctrine,” which prioritized American control over Persian Gulf oil, paving the way for future US military interventions.

Domestically, Carter embraced free-market economics, deregulating industries and resisting social program expansion. His administration’s failure to crush the coal miners’ strike and its subsequent anti-working-class measures, including the appointment of Paul Volcker to the Federal Reserve and drawing up the plans to smash the air traffic controllers union, laid the groundwork for the attacks on labor under his successor, Republican Ronald Reagan.

Carter’s death provides the opportunity for a review of the 1977-78 coal miners strike, based on the extensive coverage of the struggle in the *Bulletin* newspaper, one of the forerunners of the WSWWS, and the active intervention of the Trotskyist movement carried out by the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party in the US.

The 1977-78 strike

The 111-day walkout by coal miners, which began on December 6, 1977, was a major strategic experience for the American and international working class. It demonstrated the enormous fighting capacity and revolutionary potential of the working class, along with the burning necessity for workers to develop a politically independent movement of their own against both capitalist parties and the profit system they defend.

During the strike, the Workers League was the only political movement fighting to develop a revolutionary leadership among miners to break the straitjacket of the pro-capitalist labor bureaucracies. This took the form of the Workers League’s demand for the unions to break with the capitalist Democratic Party and build a Labor Party to fight for a workers’ government and socialism.

In the context of the period—when millions of militant workers still looked to the mass trade unions to defend their interests and were able to exercise a measure of influence over these organizations—the Labor Party demand played a critical role in exposing and opposing the union bureaucracy’s subordination of the working class to the capitalist parties and fighting for its political independence.

The international situation played a prominent role in the period leading up to the strike. The decision by Arab oil-producing countries to halt petroleum shipments to the US in retaliation for the US government’s support for Israel during the 1973 Yom Kippur War led to a quadrupling

of oil prices, widespread gasoline shortages and high inflation. When Carter took office, he called the energy crisis “the moral equivalent of war” and outlined an energy policy centered on producing cheaper coal, doubling production by 1985 and reducing US imperialism’s dependence on foreign oil.

As in Britain and other countries, the coal miners were historically the most militant and class-conscious section of the working class. Therefore, the efforts by the ruling class to force workers to pay the costs of the economic decline of American capitalism required breaking the industrial might of the miners.

But the miners had a long, proud record of resistance, which stretched from the Mine Wars of the 1920s and the UMWA’s leading role in the formation of the CIO industrial trade unions to the defiance of Roosevelt’s strike ban during World War II and wave of wildcat strikes in the years before the confrontation with Carter.

The rank-and-file insurgency of the 1970s initially arose against Tony Boyle, the hand-picked successor of long-time UMWA leader John L. Lewis. In 1974, Boyle was convicted for the December 1969 murder of Jock Yablonski, a UMWA district official and his chief challenger in a bitterly contested union election. The assassins also murdered Yablonski’s wife and daughter.

In the Labor Department-supervised election in 1972, Boyle was voted out and replaced by Arnold Miller, the candidate of the Miners for Democracy movement. But like so many other union “reform” movements then and now, this did not change the pro-capitalist and class collaborationist character of the labor bureaucracy.

When 120,000 miners struck in 1974, Miller attempted to push through two sellout contracts, which were rejected by the UMWA Bargaining Council. This reflected massive rank-and-file opposition to the imposition of a two-tier pension plan which discriminated against older retirees, and the demand that Miller include a right-to-strike clause in the contract. Miller’s third contract narrowly passed by a membership vote of 56 percent. Over the next three years, however, tens of thousands of miners were involved in wildcat strikes in an upsurge that culminated in the historic national contract strike in 1977–78.

A November 29, 1977, article “Countdown to coal strike” published in the *Bulletin*, the newspaper of the Workers League declared:

One thing, however, is clear—when the miners walk out on December 6, they are in a battle with the Carter administration itself. They are in the frontlines of the fight of every section of the labor movement which refuses to accept this government’s policies of mass unemployment, spiraling prices and attacks on union rights. The miners’ fight is your fight!

It continued: “Demands must be raised that the AFL-CIO leaders mobilize the full force of the labor movement to block any attempt by Carter to break the miners’ strike via Taft-Hartley or any other means.” The *Bulletin* warned that AFL-CIO President George Meany, United Steelworkers President Lloyd McBride, UAW President Douglas Fraser, Arnold Miller and other union officials “put Carter in office and they are maintaining him there today.”

The potential to mobilize the industrial power of the working class was very real. The miners strike was one of 517 major strikes by US workers in 1977–78, involving more than 2.2 million workers. These included walkouts on the East Coast docks, on the iron ore ranges, at defense contractors Lockheed and McDonnell-Douglas, and a 16-month strike at the Blue Diamond Coal Company in Stearns, Kentucky, where 110 miners and family members were arrested for stopping scabs before the national miners strike erupted. The economic crisis and depressed crop prices even

provoked a strike by farmers, with 4,000 farmers rolling their tractors through Carter’s hometown of Plains, Georgia and blockading traffic.

Carter was counting on the expansion of non-union coal to undermine any strike. But when the walkout began, miners organized convoys of hundreds of cars to shut down non-union mines in Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana, Pennsylvania and West Virginia and won widespread support from unorganized miners. At first, Carter relied on Democratic and Republican governors to dispatch the National Guard and state troopers to carry out massive arrests.

During the strike, three UMWA miners—Mack Lewis, 65, Robert Lee Marshall, 36, and John F. Hull, 33—were murdered on the picket lines. While decrying the supposed “violence” of the miners, the police and courts sanctioned the murderous actions by the coal bosses and their hired thugs against striking miners.

With the strike leading to power shortages, imminent factory closures and layoffs, Miller announced on February 6 that he had agreed to terms drawn up by the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service and the coal operators. Members of the UMWA Bargaining Council were informed that they would not get any details of the content of the tentative agreement because Carter had called Miller personally and insisted on secrecy. Instead, they were told it was their “constitutional obligation” to approve the deal and ram it down the throats of the membership.

But the terms of the agreement were leaked out through the *Bulletin*, which published the details of the deal and called for its rejection in the February 10 edition of the newspaper that was widely circulated in the coalfields.

The settlement included no right to strike, fines and other disciplinary measures against wildcat strikers, an absentee control plan, provisions for incentive plans and a committee to boost productivity and the imposition of a new 30-day probationary period on newly hired miners. It also turned the union’s health and pension plans over to the employers and forced workers to pay part of their health insurance premiums for the first time since the days of John L. Lewis.

With anti-contract rallies across the coalfields registering widespread opposition and hundreds of rank-and-file miners traveling to the union’s Washington D.C. headquarters for the vote, the UMWA Bargaining Council rejected Miller’s White House-dictated deal by a margin of 30 to 6 on February 12.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* perspective on Carter noted, the Workers League’s newspaper “was so influential, according to one UMWA official, at a meeting in the White House, the president brandished a copy of the *Bulletin* and expressed outrage that it contained details of contract proposals that Carter and the coal companies were seeking to impose.”

Staggered by the defeat, Carter responded with moves to begin the shipment of scab coal with FBI agents riding shotgun in coal trucks and threats to invoke Taft-Hartley to break the strike. Responding to demands that he end the strike, the UMWA president installed three new members to the bargaining committee and tried to get the Bargaining Council to approve a second tentative agreement without recommendation on February 18. That failed and the council rejected the deal by 37–0, with every member, including Miller, voting against it because they knew it would never be approved by the membership.

The political challenge facing miners

In a February 24, 1978 column, headlined “Trotskyism and the miners strike,” the *Bulletin* drew out the broader historical significance of the struggle. The column read in part:

The working class now confronts its next great historic task—the establishment of its political independence through the construction of a labor party and the fight for a workers' government.

Only the Trotskyist movement, the Workers League, has prepared for these developments. In opposition to every brand of Stalinism and revisionism, we based our perspectives on the objective revolutionary character of the American working class.

While every other tendency started from a perspective of American exceptionalism, treating the American proletariat as some special non-revolutionary class, and implicitly adapting themselves to US imperialism, we began from the standpoint that the American working class and its development could only be grasped as part of the development of the international working class and the world revolution.

The miners' strike has decisively settled accounts on that question. But this is not a time for applauding the spontaneous movement of the working class or adapting to its spontaneous consciousness. The emergence of the working class on the battlefield of political struggle requires that the fight for revolutionary politics and for the development of Marxist theory be taken to a new level through the penetration by the party into whole new sections of the working class.

With the defeat of the second sellout, Carter accelerated his threats to issue a strikebreaking injunction or to carry out a temporary government seizure of the mines as President Harry Truman did in 1950 to impose a contract on the miners. The *Bulletin* responded by urging workers to demand that the AFL-CIO Executive Council, whose members were then meeting in Bal Harbour, Florida, to issue an immediate call for a general strike to defend the miners.

This required an all-out fight against the AFL-CIO bureaucrats who were trying to rescue Carter by peddling the lie that the intransigence of the coal operators could be broken by government intervention, including the seizure of the mines. Desperate to prevent a political break with Carter, they were supporting a policy that would set the stage for the "government imposing a contract, establishing military-style discipline over the labor movement and tying the unions more closely to the capitalist state," the *Bulletin* declared.

AFL-CIO President George Meany expressed this most clearly, telling reporters in Bal Harbour: "If I was President, I would seize the mines and lay down conditions that the miners can accept." He added, "After all, Taft-Hartley is part of the law of the land. We don't like it. But if the President feels it's his only alternative, then we won't criticize him."

Under the president's orders to end the strike, Miller reached a third sellout agreement, which was approved by the Bargaining Council and sent to the members to vote on between March 3 and March 5. Despite the UMWA's TV and radio ads to sell the contract and threats by the Carter administration to cut off food stamps to the families of strikers if the deal was defeated, the miners delivered a stunning rebuke to the White House and UMWA bureaucracy by voting down the contract by a 2 to 1 margin.

Carter invokes Taft-Hartley

Twenty-four hours later, Carter invoked the Taft Hartley Act (See video). Claiming that he was acting to prevent power shortages and mass unemployment, and "protect the health and safety of the American public," Carter said, "I've ordered the Attorney General, under the

Taft-Hartley Act, to prepare for an injunction to require the miners to return to work and the mine owners to place the mines back into production."

Operators would be permitted to impose the terms of the rejected contract on any miners who returned to work, Carter said, and the injunction would only be lifted after "negotiated contracts are ratified by the UMW membership." The president added that "the 1978 wage package is a generous one which reflects the special conditions of coal mining. And I must say, quite frankly, that I do not support and would personally oppose any more liberal and inflationary wage settlement."

As the *Bulletin* noted, Carter issued orders to deploy US Marshals, FBI agents and federal troops to enforce the injunction against "law violators," i.e. those miners who defied his back-to-work order and upheld the principle of "no contract, no work."

In addition, the *Bulletin* outlined:

- The law bans all picketing and any attempts to block shipments of scab coal.
- The law subjects the national UMW treasury and district and local offices to fines which could bankrupt them.
- The law provides the legal basis for serving injunctions on individual officers and members of the UMW and jailing them.
- Carter has specifically ordered food stamps cut off to strikers who defy Taft-Hartley.
- Frame-up charges of conspiracy to violate Taft-Hartley could be brought. FBI agents are now roaming the coal fields.
- The president is authorized to use federal troops to enforce Taft-Hartley. Army Chief of Staff Bernard Rogers is reviewing Operation Garden Plot, the contingency plans for Army intervention in "civil disturbances."

In comments to the *Bulletin*, miners expressed their determination to defy the injunction. Irving Stanton, a retired miner and financial secretary of Local 6623 in Harlan, Kentucky, said, "I think that Carter can take Taft-Hartley and go to hell with it. And he can take Arnold Miller with him. The men aren't going back to work.

"The miners won't work until they get what they want. That contract they gave us wasn't worth the paper it was printed on. They can bring in federal troops but they can't make miners dig coal. That kind of slavery has gone out of existence. Miners will dig coal when they want to dig coal and not before."

A young miner from a US Steel mine in Lynch, Kentucky said: "The men won't go back. I think it was pretty slick the way Carter did it, though. They could've given us the same contract in the beginning, but they let it go this long to make it look like the miners' fault for turning it down. They were almost threatening us the whole time and that contract wasn't any damn good. Big business still gets all the breaks. I honestly thought Carter would be different but he's through as far as I'm concerned.

"My local voted this contract down 5 to 1. I guess Miller found out about his silent majority. They talk about disunity in the UMW. Hell! We're more united now than we've ever been."

Joe Short from the Glenbrook mine in Harlan, Kentucky, where miners voted down the contract 83 to 7, said, "My reaction is, that if he wants coal, he'd better get a pick and shovel and dig it out himself. The National Guard is not going to do him any good."

The Carter administration was deeply humiliated by the miners' defiance. Despite the strength and solidarity of the rank-and-file, however, the UMWA bureaucracy was able to push through another deal in a second vote three weeks later, by a margin of 57 to 43 percent, and force the miners back to work on March 26–27. The agreement abandoned the miners' demand for the right to strike over local issues, forced miners to pay for medical treatment that had been free of charge for nearly 30 years, and maintained substandard retirement benefits for older retirees.

The defiance of the miners deeply undermined the credibility of Carter in the eyes of the ruling class, which would soon look to Reagan to prosecute its class war policies through mass unemployment, union-busting and savage austerity. It is noteworthy that Reagan deliberately avoided a confrontation with the miners when their contract expired and they struck again for 10 weeks in the spring of 1981, choosing instead to target a small union of professional air traffic controllers for government union-busting several months later.

In 1982, Richard Trumka and Cecil Roberts—both affiliated with Miller’s Miners for Democracy movement—took over the presidency and vice-presidency of UMWA. They replaced the UMWA’s traditional policy of nationwide strikes to shut down all mines, union and non-union, until every union mine had a contract, with a “selective strike” policy. This led to the isolation and defeat of the AT Massey (1984–1985) and Pittston (1989–1990) strikes, the arrest and frame up of militant miners and the murder of AT Massey miner John McCoy.

These betrayals opened the floodgates for mass layoffs, the expansion of non-union mines and bankruptcy restructurings, which transformed the coal communities into centers of economic desperation and opioid addiction.

For his near destruction of the UMWA, Trumka was rewarded with the top position in the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. He served as president from 2009 until his death in 2021, when he was hailed as a “close friend” by President Biden, who outlawed the strike by 110,000 railroad workers four months later. As for Cecil Roberts, after succeeding Trumka as UMWA president, he oversaw the sellout of the Warrior Met strike in central Alabama and now heads a union which has around 10,000 active members in the mines.

As he was betraying the Pittston strike in 1989, Trumka gave an interview to the *Charleston Gazette*, which said more than he intended. If the coal operators were successful in eliminating the UMWA, which Trumka said had worked so hard to bring “stability” to the industry, he 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.”

Today, miners and every section of the working class are posed with building new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees that do not “alibi” for the capitalist system, but wage a relentless struggle for what workers need.

Such committees will transfer power and decision-making from the union bureaucracies to the workers themselves to defend jobs and living standards and oppose unsafe conditions and capitalist exploitation. They will unite American workers with their class brothers and sisters around the world in common struggle against the transnational corporations under the direction of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

This is the only way the working class can organize itself to oppose the historic onslaught on its social and democratic rights by Trump and his government of oligarchs and fascists, which plan to destroy the achievements won through generations of struggle by workers, carrying out the policy of Carter and Reagan to its logical conclusion.

The resurgence of the class struggle poses the need for a new generation to draw the lessons of the historic 1977–78 strike, revive the powerful traditions of class struggle and socialism in the working class, and commit themselves to building the revolutionary leadership needed to put an end to capitalist exploitation once and for all.



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