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LESSONS OF THE MINERS' STRUGGLE (Rough Draft) Labor Discussion  
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## Introduction

The miners strike ended March 24, 1978. It was the largest, most bitter U.S. labor struggle in recent memory. It was also probably the most significant. This was not because of its outcome--it was basically a standoff--but because of what it revealed about what lies ahead. The strike showed in the clearest possible way the enormous dangers facing not only the miners, but all U.S. workers. It also gave some clues as to what will have to be done to face up to them.

On one side in this battle were the coal capitalists of the Bituminous Coal Operators Association (BCOA), including some of the greatest U.S. corporations--oil and steel giants like Occidental Petroleum, U.S. Steel, and Bethlehem Steel, as well as traditional coal giants like the Peabody Co. Despite their enormous profits, these companies have not escaped the tightening grip of the deepening crisis of the U.S. economy. They are being pressed by industrial producers, as well as the U.S. government, to increase production and lower energy prices, in a high-cost U.S. economy under tremendous pressure from foreign competitors. To cut costs, they must break the control still exerted at the point of production by militant miners, who have used the wildcat strike weapon to maintain conditions, to the great expense of the operators. The operators of the BCOA therefore openly aimed, in the recent strike, to deal a crippling blow to the mineworkers, and the UMWA.

On the other side were the miners of the UMWA. They were undoubtedly the best-organized and most militant rank and file workers in the country. They had been tested in over a decade of more or less continuous struggle by direct action. Again and again, they had launched mass, direct actions--wildcat strikes involving tens of thousands of miners--in a manner without parallel anywhere else in the labor movement. Moreover, in the course of their struggle, they had succeeded in breaking one of the tightest, long-standing, and most corrupt of the union bureaucracies--the Lewis-Boyle machine. Emerging from the struggle, there had arisen a new opposition leadership, the Miners For Democracy (MFD). The MFD was a group of union reformers who had organized themselves to defeat Boyle at the polls, clean up the union, institute a democratic union constitution, and represent the miners' demands in dealings with companies--and they succeeded in wresting office from Boyle in 1972. Nevertheless, despite their unparalleled level of militancy and despite their success in cleaning up their union, the miners found themselves giving into the recent strike and in danger of seeing their union disintegrate before their eyes. Already in the previous contract of 1974, they had found they could not count on the recently-elected reformers from the MFD, now in office, to represent them. In the following years, as they had to carry out wildcat strike after wildcat strike to defend their safety conditions and their shop floor organization, they found they had to struggle not only against the companies but against their own leadership. Going into the strike, therefore, their aim was purely defensive: to maintain their hard-won health benefits; to



equalize pension benefits for old-timers and young miners alike; and most of all to defend their right to strike to defend their safety and their lives in the pits. It was the gross disparity between the extraordinary fighting capacity displayed by the miners for more than a decade and their weak position in the face of the employers' attack which best pointed up the quandary in which the miners found themselves.

## II. The Employers' Offensive

The energy crisis is a household word. But what gives the energy crisis its real significance is the far deeper crisis which lies behind it: the general crisis of the U.S. economy, and indeed of the world economy as a whole. For at least a decade, the U.S. economy has been unable to break out of stagnation. It has experienced the interlocking problems of declining productivity, declining profits, and the failure of the corporations to invest in new equipment. By the early 1970's, the rate of profit on investment after taxes for U.S. corporations was half of what it had been in 1965, dropping from 10.1% to 5.2%. The rate of growth per year of labor productivity had been cut in half, falling from an average of 3.2% per annum between 1947 and 1966, to a rate of 1.7% per annum between 1967 and 1973. The companies were caught in a double bind. Because of low rates of profit, they were unprepared to invest in new equipment, feeling that the general economic climate was unfavorable. On the other hand, to increase the rate of profit, it was necessary to cheapen production, and the way to do this was to invest in new equipment to make production more efficient. There was only one other way out: to cut costs by taking it out of the hides of the workers: to cut pay and step up the intensity of labor. And this has, indeed, been the general policy of the corporations since the late 1960's.

The definitive onset of the employers' offensive was signaled by the introduction of Nixon's New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971 which instituted a wage freeze. At the same time the NEP gave tax breaks to the corporations, which ultimately had to be paid for out of the workers' pockets. In addition, new tariffs were placed on foreign imports and the dollar was devalued to make foreign goods more expensive: this protected U.S. industry and helped profits, but it meant that workers would have to pay more for less-competitive, more-costly U.S.-made goods, and thus a further attack on their standard of living.

Simultaneous with the introduction of NEP, the corporations instituted productivity drives all across industry. One of the best known was in auto in General Motors, where the famous GMAD (gone-mad) speed-up system was brought in. The introduction of GMAD set off big strikes throughout the auto industry in 1972 and 1973. In fact, the same thing happened almost everywhere. Attacks on working conditions in telephone, longshore, Post Office and other industries brought a series of strikes in the early 1970's.

Still, by the middle 1970's, the employers had partially succeeded in their attack, cutting wages and undermining working conditions. For example, in 1976, the average spendable weekly earnings for a worker with a family of four (real wages minus taxes and social security) had fallen back to the level of 1965. At the same time, many social services were cut back, further lowering the standard of living.

Now it must be emphasized that the employers' drive to increase their profits at the expense of the workers--and indeed the intensification of this drive in recent years--is not a simple matter of the greed of the capitalists. If the owners do not maximize their profits, they cannot invest and they cannot grow; if they cannot grow and cheapen production they cannot compete; if they cannot compete, they will go out of business. This means that in the long run, so long as the capitalist system continues--so long, that is, as industry is organized on the profit principle--the profits will have to be the number one priority. Workers' needs, to the extent they come into conflict with profits, will have to be sacrificed. More important, in the short run, it means that the attack on the workers' wages and conditions will continue and intensify, for the source of this attack is in fact the employers' declining profits and the slowdown in growth bound up with the continuing economic crisis.

The fact is that the employers' offensive has failed to solve the employers' problems. Profits have been brought back up somewhat, thanks to the takeaways from the working class. But the methods through which this restoration of profits has been accomplished--that is, raising prices, as well as cutting wages and intensifying labor--have not improved the business climate. There is a general decline of buying power and growing unemployment (the "acceptable" unemployment level is now between 5% and 6%). Meanwhile, inflation continues. In these conditions, the employers have been generally unable to make the economy grow, or to substantially increase productivity. In the 1970's, the average rate of growth of the economy as a whole has been under 3%, as compared to 5% between 1961 and 1966. In the 1970's the average rate of growth in the productivity of labor has been , as compared to between

Here's where the "energy crisis" comes in. Obviously, all of U.S. industry depends on the supply of energy, and in the current conditions of slow growth, profit squeeze, and stagnant investment, they need a cheap supply of energy. They need cheap fuel, especially cheap coal. As a result, in the short run, there is great pressure on the coal owners to keep coal prices down. At the same time, the coal producers have to be allowed to make high profits, so they will invest in developing energy resources, so in the long run there will be a great enough energy supply and prices will not skyrocket. The capitalists who use coal have to have their profits protected through a policy of relatively cheap fuel coal; at the same time, relatively low fuel coal prices cannot be allowed to hurt the coal companies. Again, there is basically one solution: to make the miners pay.

This is the simple background for the vicious attack on the miners and their union which reached a climax in the recent strike: the employers' must attack the miners' working conditions and their organization, because these stand in the way of profits. It is a simple fact, shown in study after study, that to provide conditions which are conducive to the safety of miners costs a lot more money than failing to do so. The miners' right to safety, insured through the miners' right to strike, thus was the natural target of the employers. On average, miners died in mine accidents in . Yet, saving these lives is incompatible with the needs of profits in a period of capitalist economic crisis; for this reason, so is a strong UMWA.

To weaken the UMWA, the coal operators have pursued a two-pronged strategy: they have gone around the miners and gone directly at them. On the one hand, they have opened up massive new mining operations. In part, these are strip mines located in the West. In part, they are mine pits located in the traditional coal country of the South East. In both cases, there has been every attempt to prevent unionization, and it has been largely successful. Between 1973 and 1977, the proportion of all coal mined by the UMWA fell from 70% to 52%. Thus, going into the recent strike, the miners were observing their power slipping away, simply by virtue of the fact that much of the mining labor was no longer in the UMWA. On the other hand, the employers aimed to attack the miners' organization at its heart: the point of production. In the face of an ever more explicit attempt by the so-called reform leadership to sell them out, the miners had retained the power to wildcat when they found their safety in the pits was in danger. It was this strength which the operators of the BCOA aimed to break in the recent strike, and which they continue to see as their top priority.

What resources do the miners have to resist the employers and go on the offensive themselves? To answer this question, it is necessary to follow their history of struggle, their forms of organization and the nature of their political ideas.

### III. The Legacy of John L. Lewis

The miners have a well-deserved reputation for militant struggle. When U.S. workers have been on the move, the miners, almost always, have been somewhere near the center of the action. On numerous occasions, they have carried on alone. In the 20th century, the miners' movement has usually developed through the miners' union, the UMWA. But for the period between the middle 1920's and the early 1970's, the union was governed under the autocratic rule of John L. Lewis and his successors, and their handpicked union machine. There were numerous periods of struggle: but for close to a half century, the UMWA bureaucratic apparatus remained firmly in the driver's seat. Now, there is no doubt that John L. Lewis was at times a remarkable union leader. Nevertheless, he was always a bureaucrat, and acted like one. His career provides enormous insights into the problem posed for the workers' movement by the emergence of the labor bureaucracy as a distinct layer between the employers and the rank and file. This layer, the hierarchy of full time union officials, emerges out of the labor movement and depends on it. But it nonetheless separates itself from the labor struggle and places powerful limits upon its development--even while giving it leadership.

John L. Lewis' bureaucratic approach was above all manifested in his explicit acceptance of the profit system, the need for the labor movement to live by its governing rule: "Don't kill the goose that lays the golden egg." Translated into the language of the bureaucrat speaking to the rank and file, this means: "Unless you see to it that the employers are making a profit first, you can't protect your own wages and conditions." Lewis devoted his life to making the coal industry a profitable one. The reverse side of this approach to capitalist profits was a profound distrust for the independent organization of its rank and file. Sure, strikes might at times be necessary to bring the capitalists into line, to force them to give the workers their "fair share." That's what unions are for. But how and when to fight was, from the viewpoint of Lewis and the other labor officials, a decision which should be left up to the bureaucrats. The rank and file answers merely to their gut needs, in the eyes of the bureaucrat--their immediate problems on the shop floor (how to make enough to survive, how to prevent getting maimed on the job). Their fighting spirit, from the viewpoint of the bureaucrat, is a blind militancy which can be dangerous to themselves. They have no understanding of the economy, the needs of "their own" industry. Their striking out against the employers can therefore lead to the destruction of their "own" industry, and thus hurt their union and themselves. Thus, Lewis sought from the first to gain total control over the entire union organization. Indeed, from the later 1920's, he exerted a monolithic rule, running the union from the top down, through a corps of hand-picked lieutenants. Indeed, the legacy of Lewis' bureaucratic dictatorship, passed on to his successor Tony Boyle, was one of the main obstacles to the re-emerging rank and file movement in the 1960's.

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of Lewis' career, although it does, in fact, give indispensable insights into the meaning of the bureaucracy for the working class movement (See Appendix, for some notes on Lewis' career in relationship to the bureaucracy and to the rank and file). It is sufficient to state that throughout the 1920's, 1930's, and 1940's, the miners were at the center of titanic struggles against the mine corporations, backed up by the states. At all times, Lewis devoted his energies to keeping this struggle within bounds. He aimed to tie the miners' mass movement to the bureaucracy and to the traditional political parties, as well as to keep it from threatening the operation of the profit system. He tried to prevent it from adopting more radical strategies and politics, from broadening their struggle and forming alliances for direct action with other sections of the labor movement; from fighting for nationalization of the coal mines and for a labor party.

To achieve his ends, Lewis had to adopt different tactics at different times. In the 1920's, he directly crushed an emerging radical movement in the mines, which had succeeded in pushing through the UMWA convention policies for organizing the non-union mines, for strike action in alliance with the railway workers, for mine nationalization, and for a labor party. By the end of the 1920's, Lewis was in control, but the union was a shell, having been destroyed by the offensive of the coal operators.

In the 1930's, on the other hand, Lewis was one of the bureaucrats who saw most clearly the handwriting on the wall: he saw that the rank and file workers not only in the mines, but all across industry, were on the move. He saw that it was necessary to break with the old AFL and to support the struggle for industrial unionism, in order to prevent it from going too far, from posing a challenge to the bureaucracy and to the system as a whole. In this period, Lewis helped to build the CIO, while creating the conditions under which a new CIO bureaucracy could consolidate itself. In this period, Lewis led organizing drives, but he was instrumental in de-railing some of the great rank and file led actions of the period: the rank and file upsurge in steel at the time of the 1934 general strikes, the sitdown strike wave in auto which took off from the famous sit down success at Flint, and the moves for a mine-steel alliance at the time of the great defeat in the Little Steel strike.

Then, in the 1940's, Lewis led the mineworkers in strike after strike. During World War II, practically alone among labor officials, he defied the "no-strike" pledge, which had been imposed by the government and the corporations, with the willing support of most of the bureaucracy. This was probably Lewis' finest hour. It is in the wartime strikes, and those which immediately followed the war, that what reputation he enjoys among the mineworker militants was probably established. In 1946, the miners struck, and achieved a landmark victory: the establishment of a health and welfare fund, into which the companies had to pay 5 cents for every ton of coal mined. Between 1946 and 1952 the miners struck seven times, on occasion defying Taft-Hartley and government threats. By 1952, the royalty had reached 40 cents a ton.

Nonetheless, the legacy of Lewis for the current generation is a bitter one. During the 1950's, he reverted to his old policies of business unionism, indeed outright collaboration with the employers. Between 1952 and 1971, there were no national strikes in the mines. The royalty payment remained at the 1952 level. Meanwhile, Lewis cooperated with the mining companies in the introduction of new machinery into the mines which threw thousands of miners out of work. Between 1950 and 1960, productivity doubled, while employment fell by 60%, and this trend continued well into the '60's.

During this whole period, the percentage of unionized miners fell steadily. In the late '50's and early '60's, many of the eastern Kentucky mines were lost to the unions during the process of mechanization. The companies would close mines to introduce new machinery; then they would reopen them as nonunion mines. When the rank and file miners tried to fight back with strike action, the Lewis machine refused to support them. Indeed, the UMW's bureaucracy's response to the companies' anti-union drive in eastern Kentucky was to recall the medical benefit cards and deny the pensions to any of the miners involved in strike action. Later, the mine construction workers were also written out of the union for a period because of their dissident activity.



#### IV. The Revival of the Mineworkers Movement

However, the sixties witnessed a new beginning for rank and file activity. Employment stabilized as a pickup in demand for coal counterbalanced the continuing productivity drive. Instead of having the fearsome John L. Lewis to deal with, dissidents faced the relative nobody, Tony Boyle. So the rank and file began to move increasingly confident. In 1964, in the eastern Kentucky mines, roving pickets attempted to shut down mines that were refusing to pay royalties for the health and welfare fund, but they failed without official union support. The miners didn't think much of the results of the contract negotiated by Boyle that year and 18,000 struck unofficially for 18 days. 1964 also saw a challenge to Boyle in the election. The candidate, Steve Kochis, who ran against Boyle, was uninspiring but there was enough "anybody-but-Boyle" feeling to bring many of the oppositionists into his campaign.

In 1965, six miners were fired in a dispute over safety, and a 20 day wildcat followed involving as many as 40,000 miners, although it failed to win reinstatement for the fired miners. The 1966 Boyle contract produced a strong reaction by the rank and file--40,000 struck for 17 days after it was signed. In the same year Lou Antal ran for District 5 president against the Boyle machine, and many union dissidents were involved in his campaign. There was also some opposition to the '68 contract: as in all of the contracts Boyle negotiated, the only significant improvement was in wages. By 1969 and 1970, the number of strikes in coal, mostly wildcats, had shut up to 451 and 500, from the average of around 120 per year in 1960.

Out of the struggles of the mid-60's, there emerged a network of militants who could provide leadership and cohesiveness to the struggle. As yet there was little in the way of formal organization. But from this time onwards, the movement developed rapidly.

#### The Black Lung Association (BLA)

The BLA was organized following the Mannington mine disaster\* in late 1968 to win benefits for miners afflicted with Black Lung. The BLA initially tried to meet with Boyle, but he refused to see them. Then the BLA took its case before the W. Virginia legislature. The bill they drafted was given to some liberal Democrats and they quickly got the bill trapped in committee. In the meantime, however, the BLA was getting itself organized throughout the W. Virginia mines on a local-by-local basis. Boyle and Co. attempted to stop the organization of the BLA, forbidding union members to contribute money to it. They further demanded that the BLA withdraw its black lung bill in favor of an official UMW bill which was much weaker. Neither order had any effect.

Meanwhile, legislative hearings on the black lung bill continued to drag on. Finally, on February 18, 1969, miners at one mine walked off the job to protest the stalling. The wildcat spread. After a week 30,000 were out. The BLA was the active organizer of the strike. It held mass rallies and spread the strike from

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\*Mannington mine disaster--buildup of methane and coal dust in the Mannington mine caused an explosion which blew up the mine and killed some 200 miners.

mine to mine. The liberal Democrat "friends of labor" roundly condemned the strike as lawless. But it got them moving and after two weeks of the strike a much diluted version of the BLA bill made the floor of the House. Nevertheless, the miners in the BLA said they wouldn't go back to work for so weak a bill. The bill was therefore amended and strengthened. In another week it was passed by the Senate. The miners resolved to stay out until the governor signed the bill. He signed it promptly, and they went back to work the next day.

The Black Lung strike was the largest political strike in recent United States history. 40,000 miners, 95% of the miners of W. Virginia had participated in it. The rank and file had opposed the union leadership as well as the companies and forced the government into action. And the miners won. The Black Lung wildcat proved that the miners could depend neither on the legislature nor on legal tactics, nor their "own" union leadership--but only on their own organized self-activity.

The BLA continued to build, but it lost some of its original militancy. The presidency of the BLA passed to Arnold Miller. Miller left the mines to set up an office in Charleston, and took a salary from the government program Designs for Rural Action (connected with Vista). The BLA continued to grow until 1972 when it was effectively disbanded following the Miners for Democracy (MFD) victory in the UMW elections.

#### The Disabled Miners and Widows

During the same period, the Disabled Miners and Widows were also organized in W. Virginia, around demands for pensions and medical benefits for disabled miners and widows. Like the BLA this rank and file group also led a big strike, in May and June of 1970. At the height of the strike 18,000 were involved, striking primarily against their own leadership. The strike did not have the successful conclusion of the BLA strike, but it helped to build a powerful and lasting network of militants which still exists.

The actions of the BLA and the Disabled Miners and Widows were accompanied in these years by large-scale safety wildcats, contributing to rank and file preparedness and militancy. When the old contract expired in 1971, the miners stopped work even though no strike had been officially called by the union. In fact, the UMW had not called a national strike since 1952, and had granted continuation on the 1971 contract. But Boyle was forced to sanction the 1971 strike by providing strike benefits. Still, the contract was lousy, as usual, and some 80,000 miners didn't go back to work for several weeks after it was signed.

#### V. The Miners for Democracy (MFD)

The rank and file movement which emerged in the late 1960's and early 1970's was basically at the level of elementary militancy. It had little formal organization and not much in the way of program to hold it together. The BLA and the Disabled Miners and Widows were networks of militants which could help to organize the still mostly spontaneous and unorganized activity of the rank and file movement. This unorganized movement was opposed by the corrupt Boyle machine. Out of this ferment of activity there arose an organization which aimed to throw out the Boyle machine. It was made up in part of liberal reformers and out-union bureaucrats, but certainly had the backing of much of the rank and file movement itself.

The roots of the MFD were in the Jock Yablonski campaign for UMW president in 1969. Yablonski was part of the Boyle machine, an executive board member of District 5 where he was an old-style bureaucrat with a capital B and had sometimes played the

role of hatchet man for the Lewis-Boyle leadership. Yablonski tried to strong-arm Lou Antal out of running for the District 5 presidency in 1966. But he had always had a yen for the top spot. When the rank and file movement began to build up steam, he saw his chance. In the 1969 campaign, Yablonski was praising Boyle up until a month before he declared his candidacy. Despite this background, he ran on a good program, and his campaign drew in some of the best of the rank and file movement.

The election was thoroughly crooked. Lots of votes were stolen from Yablonski, and he was defeated. (In fact, he was probably outpolled in the election in actuality not just the vote count) A few weeks after the election he and several of his family were killed on Tony Boyle's orders.

Following the assassination the MFD was set up. The leaders were Yablonski's lawyer sons, the Nader lawyer Joseph Rauh, and Mike Trbovich, Yablonski's campaign manager, but the group drew in many rank and file militants. The program of the MFD remained a program of union reform and legalistic methods. The MFD journal, Miners Voice, attacked corruption in the union primarily and the companies only occasionally. The lawyers in the leadership tried to keep the rank and file within the path of safe legal reform, lawsuits, and legislation. They started up a whole series of lawsuits around the Yablonski election and the 1970 Antal campaign, trying to get new elections, and they also put forward lawsuits to get autonomy for the Districts. What the rank and file was supposed to do, according to the leadership of the MFD, was just trust in the lawyers, the legal methods, and the voting process for union officers. If they didn't want to spoil their chances, they should take no direct action, like going out on a wildcat.

When the Disabled Miners and Widows wildcat occurred, the companies went to the courts and the companies was that the MFD people not only disclaimed all responsibility for the wildcats, but in fact condemned the wildcats. When the miners refused to go back to work following Boyle's 1971 contract, the MFD leader Harry Patrick went on television. His message: everyone should go back to work.

The commitment to legalistic reform and opposition to direct action was spelled out by Ken Yablonski at a Cokeburg rally. The Cokeburg rally. The Cokeburg rank and file had been among the most active, the most involved in the wildcats and rank and file organizations, and Yablonski totally lost his temper with them at the rally. They must "act within the law" and "abide by the union constitution" (which forbade all wildcat strikes--any wildcat was grounds for putting the district into receivership). Yablonski said, "We cannot resort to mob rule...rebel strikes never got you a thing."

Yablonski's preaching, of course, went against all the miners' experience. Only two years before the miners had been able to force the black lung bill through the legislature only by resorting to massive wildcats. The fact was, moreover, that it was only the unauthorized, direct action of the miners which made some of the MFD lawsuits successful. Paul Nyden, who has written a detailed history of the miners' struggle in the recent period (which provided much of the information for this pamphlet reviewed the past records of the courts on cases similar to those brought by the MFD. He concluded that under normal circumstances given the precedents, the courts would have ruled against the MFD, but that the miners' action had forced the courts' hand. In 1972, the courts overturned the 1969 UMW election and the 1970 District 5 election. Nyden concluded, "it is very unlikely that these decisions would have been handed down were it not for the anger of the rank and file themselves." There had been 500 strikers in bituminous coal and lignite in 1970; in 1971 there were 606; and in 1972 there were 963!



Because the MFD wanted to limit the activity of the rank and file to legal bounds they had to keep a tight rein on the movement, and avoid having touchy issues come up at the meetings. The Miners for Democracy never really pretended to be a membership organization controlled by the rank and file. For example, only 4% of the 1971 mass meeting of the MFD was unsolicited comment from the floor. The rest was all tightly controlled. The Moundsville meeting six months later carefully avoided the election of leaders, since the process might be divisive. As a result, Trbovich, who had never been elected to the post, continued in his position as head of the MFD.

In May of 1972, the MFD held their convention in Wheeling W. Virginia to select candidates for the coming election. The Wheeling Convention was the focus of a lot of rank and file hopes. The MFD had emerged as a force with a strong chance of unseating Tony Boyle. But the convention was tightly controlled by the leadership. The watchword was pragmatism. The purpose of an election campaign was simply to win. The big changes in the contract and the union that the rank and file movement had been fighting for were tabled off the agenda. Moreover, for the top slate the rule was, "no hunkies, no blacks," so as not to alienate any southern anglos. This was, in fact, a very dangerous step for the future of the mineworkers' struggle. For many of the most active rank and file leaders were black. These included the first presidents of both the Black Lung Association and the Disabled Widows. Many of the black and hispanic miners present at the convention (or hearing about it later) were deeply disturbed by this racist approach. But for the MFD it was worth risking alienating a minority--even if they were among the most militant of the miners--in order to win the votes of the majority. Clearly, if the miners were to forge a fighting unit for an effective struggle against their employers, they had to deal directly with the problem of racism, especially by championing the special demands of the oppressed minorities. Only in this way could the Anglo majority win the confidence of the black and brown minority--and, an all-anglo slate is counter-productive to this end, but the MFD evidently did not think the miners needed this sort of active conscious unity. Winning the majority at the ballot box was enough.

There were two possibilities for the MFD presidential candidacy: Mike Trbovich and Arnold Miller. Trbovich had functioned as the ad-hoc chairman of the MFD, although he had never been elected as such. He had run it in a top down way without attempting to turn it into a group really controlled by the rank and file. He had surrounded himself with Naderites and liberal lawyers. Miller was the ad-hoc president of the Black Lung Association, although he had never been elected to the position either. He had removed the Black Lung office to Charleston and filled it with liberal lawyers and Vista volunteers. He had steered the BLA to a path of purely legislative and union reforms instead of fights against the companies. Nevertheless, both of these men were long standing union dissidents and Miller in particular had good credentials as a leader of rank and file struggles. If you were looking for some who had his "heart in the right place", who wanted the best for the rank and file, Miller fit the bill.

When the vote came, a majority of the Pennsylvania delegation, who knew Trbovich better, voted for Miller. A majority of the W. Virginia delegation, who knew Miller better, voted for Trbovich. Miller won. Miller and the MFD went on to victory over the Boyle machine in the election of December 1972.

### The Limitations of the MFD

The MFD leaders, in particular Arnold Miller, undoubtedly "meant well": there is no reason to doubt that many of them had as their goal improving the miners' condition. But the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Despite the best intentions in the world, the MFD leadership ended up by selling out the rank and file, much like any other bureaucrats. This makes it all the more necessary to understand the limitations of the MFD, why its sell out was inevitable and predictable.

To put it in a nutshell: the MFD did not see as its primary task the development of the self-organization and the political understanding of the miners' rank and file, indeed the working class as a whole; it therefore had no material base to stand up to the employers offensive set on by the capitalist crisis. Without a strategy to combat the employers, the MFD inevitably had to cave in to them. Thus, the basic premise upon which the MFD operated was that there was no incompatibility between strong trade unionism and the operation of capitalism in this phase of economic crisis. They thought they could win gains for the rank and file through the tried and true methods of "give and take" with the employers. After all, these methods had "worked" for other union officials over several decades of post-war prosperity. But the years of prosperity were over. The capitalists in this period will give up nothing to the workers without a terrific fight; and this fight can only be waged by a well-organized and politically prepared rank and file.

The MFD strategy was pretty straightforward. They would win control of the union and wipe out the corruption of the old Lewis-Boyle machine by means of electoral victory and court suits. This was a logical method given the assumptions of the MFD. The MFD thought that if only they could win offices, they could represent the rank and file and win what they needed--better mine safety, better health care, better pensions--through the "normal" channels of collective bargaining over contracts and the grievance procedure. The old leadership could have done this, in the MFD view, but they had been bought off by the capitalists and separated from the workers. Therefore, from the MFD standpoint, it made sense to subordinate everything to getting elected. It made sense to cool down hot-headed militants who might be too far out in front of the rest of the rank and file. For this reason wildcat strikes and political strikes were ruled out. It made sense to keep divisive issues and controversial political positions off the agenda. Therefore, the problem of racism within the union was shoved under the rug. Votes were of the essence. The best way to win the elections was not to turn anybody off but to create a passive unity of the rank and file behind a lowest common denominator program. Once in office, the MFD would do what was necessary to protect the rank and file's interests.

Nonetheless, the MFD's strategy was so much wishful thinking. For the economic pie was shrinking. From the employers point of view, busting the shop floor power of the unity was seen as necessity to cut costs and raise profits. It was, for the miners, literally a life and death struggle. In this situation, any group of rank and file leaders with a hope in hell of succeeding in defending the miners had to view the employers offensive as the basic reality, the key problem. On the other hand, no group of rank and file leaders, no matter how well they understood the situation could hope to lead a fight against the employers unless the rank and file had itself been consciously organized to carry out the struggle. The mobilized rank and file is the only weapon which can possibly combat organized employers. This meant not only unleashing hot head militants, rather than restraining them. It also meant getting them to actually build a rank and file organization of conscious

fighter--an organization in the interests of the rank and file which was controlled by the rank and file. This was not just an organizational problem, it was a political one. Solving it required getting across to the rank and file the implications of the capitalist crisis: that to defend themselves, the miners would have to fight not only their own employers, but the courts, the state, indeed the capitalist class as a whole. This meant, finally, devising a political strategy to fight back. So even in the short run, more than mere militancy was required; the miners had to reach out to build alliances with other sections of the working class, such as the steel workers and the oil workers, who had the same employers as the miners. This would enable them to begin to counteract the organizations at the disposal of the capitalists: the Democratic and Republican parties, the courts, the entire state apparatus.

Now obviously, none of this could have been accomplished overnight. Perhaps it could have been accomplished in 1972, when the Miners For Democracy ran its campaign. But it was obviously on the agenda. For even by this time, the miners had already learned a great deal: for you can learn a lot in struggle against the employers. At least in a gut manner, the rank and file miners had learned that you cannot trust the courts, you cannot trust the legislature, you cannot trust the grievance procedure, you cannot trust the hierarchy of paid officials. You can only rely on yourself. For again and again, they had experienced all this in practice. What was required was to begin to concretize these lessons in the form of a rank and file organization which would begin the task of creating a strategy to counter the employers offensive. But it never occurred to the Miners For Democracy even to pose these problems.

Nevertheless, the sad fact was that in 1973, the rank and file miners had not, in fact, created any alternative to the MFD. In this situation, it would have been self-defeating not to give critical support to the MFD: to support the victory of the MFD, while all the while explaining its limitations, and posing the need to build an actual rank and file class struggle organization. The MFD had to be supported, because a victory for the Boyle forces, after years of struggle by the rank and file to overthrow them, would have demoralized the movement. At the same time, a victory over Boyle, would break the old machine, which had kept the rank and file from exerting any influence over their own union, and it would give the rank and file a great deal of room to maneuver. In fact, in the 1973 Convention, after the MFD victory, the miners got the right to vote on the contract struggle. They also won autonomy for the districts, that is the right for the districts to elect their own union leaders (rather than have them appointed from the top). Before the MFD victory, it must be remembered, the Boyle machine had complete control over the entire apparatus: the national scale committee consisting of handpicked Lewis-Boyle appointees would invariably ratify any contract put before them. In contrast, the last two contracts, the elected bargaining council has turned down contracts, and there has been opposition even to the contracts which were ultimately passed. Thus, the MFD victory gave miners a lot more freedom of action, more ways to exert pressure...if they could get themselves organized.

Nevertheless, the bottom line was that the MFD itself had not organized the rank and file and did not intend to. It therefore faced the employers on the rampage with little mobilized force of its own. In this situation, it is not surprising that the MFD tended to "be practical" to search for "compromises." Did it make any sense to risk the union in a confrontation with the powerful and blood thirsty owners of the BCOA? The MFD had never put much stock in the power of the rank and file. Now, as officers of the union, they were freed from the pressures

to fight the employers which are built in to the struggle for existence in the pits. On the other hand, their new jobs for which they had long been preparing themselves-- had as its definition, the day-to-day task of negotiating with the employers and coming to some compromise. (It did not require organizing direct action--to protect one's own safety) Given the tremendous power the employers had at their disposal, and the ever-present pressure from the government, is it surprising that more and more the old MFD leadership came to see that the operators had some points on their side?

From the very first UMW convention after the MFD victory, the slippage toward "responsible leadership" was evident. The MFD leaders, now in office, pushed through the convention a resolution which would allow the International Executive Board to revoke a district's or a local's autonomy for 6 months to a year, in order to "assure performance or enforcement of collective bargaining agreements." This new provision was hotly opposed by many rank and filers, but it passed by roll call vote of 822 to 675. Later in the convention, a clause was voted into the UMW constitution that obligated UMW miners not to engage in any strikes except those authorized by the union officials. This meant of course, that the wildcat wave, which was at that time accelerating, was to be illegal within the UMW. It set up an inevitable confrontation between the newly-elected "reformers" and the rank and file militants.

In order to stop the inevitable slide toward a position of total collaboration with the operators against the miners, the MFD leaders would have had to find a practical method to oppose the operators. As liberal reformers they had never seen the independent organization of the rank and file as the only weapon against the employers. As the realistic and responsible union officials who wished to defend the union organization, they had in the long run, to crush the hot headed militants. For these rank and filers didn't realize that in refusing to compromise with the corporations on such issues as mine safety, they were jeopardizing their own organization of defense, the UMWA. Thus, the MFD leadership were inevitably transformed from "honest militants" to collaborators with the BCOA, and the process transpired in a shockingly short space of time.

## VI The MFD in Office and the Rank and File

### The 1974 Strike

The MFD victory coincided with the intensification of the employers' offensive, and the MFD leadership faced its first important test with the 1974 contract. There were a number of important gains the miners were hoping to win. They were no longer willing to settle for the wage gains which had been all Boyle had gotten them. They wanted supplementary unemployment benefits (SUB) funds, a good cost-of-living clause, and eliminated or reduced differentials between the most highly paid and the least highly paid in the mines (differentials had grown dramatically under Boyle to about \$8 a day difference). Finally, they wanted the right to strike over grievances. The companies paid the grievance procedure little respect, so if they were to have safety in the mines, they had to have the right to strike. These and other demands were passed at the '73 convention.

With these demands, the new militant UMW leadership went into contract negotiations sounding plenty fiery. But in the strike and contract negotiations that followed, most of this fire turned to hot air. After calling the strike, Miller and the new officials did nothing to mobilize strikers, to involve them in leadership, to set up rank and file strike committees. Under pressure from the companies, the MFD leadership showed their true colors as garden variety union leaders by limiting themselves to the minimum contract they could sell to the miners.

Since the rank and file miners were stronger than they had been in the Boyle years, they would not go back without some improvement in fringe benefits--and some gains in fringes were made, including improved sick pay, vacations, COL, pensions. But to make the settlement as cheap to the coal operators as possible, the union leadership sacrificed a group of miners who could in no way threaten their control--the miners retiring before 1975, who couldn't vote on the contract. They agreed to a pension settlement which put the older group of miners retiring 1975 on the "1950 plan" at \$225 per month. The pensions for the miners on the "1974" plan would average \$450 per month. Many other demands on fringes were dropped.

Instead of the right to strike, the Miller leadership sold, as the big victory on safety, a clause providing for safety committees with joint representation from the union and the company. In addition the companies agreed to have helpers for the roof bolters. This change would have provided over 10,000 jobs if it had been carried out.

Finally, there was a fairly sizeable wage settlement. This would buy labor peace for the companies. The new officials, commanding greater authority over the miners than Boyle ever could, would in return for this settlement, exert their control over the rank and file to bring back the level of labor discipline that existed in the fifties and early sixties.

Nonetheless, selling the contract proved to be a problem. The Bargaining Council rejected the first Miller contract, exposing the weak and factionalized character of the new bureaucracy. The next contract was narrowly ratified by the membership, 41% to 46%. Many of the illusions that miners had in the new leadership were soon abandoned.

#### The Right to Strike Wildcat 1975

Following the contract, the mine owners interpreted their success in preventing the miners from winning the right to strike over safety as a sign of union weakness. They assumed the right to interpret and violate the contract freely. Instead of hiring roof-bolter helpers, they just said that the ventilation person would also be the bolter helper. Moreover, the new safety committees were totally ineffective, because the companies never bothered to provide their representatives for the committees, and grievances piled up.

The result of this offensive by the companies was a series of wildcats. The companies, who owned the courts, got injunctions. They also got the courts to levy fines against the strikers. Finally, in August 1975, a Logan County West Virginia local president was jailed. The strike quickly spread to neighboring Boone county and within four weeks, 80,000 were out. The rank and file of the UMW were out in opposition to their own elected leadership from the MFD. Arnold Miller had back the right to strike in his campaign, and as we've noted, he dropped it in the 1974 contract. Now, he and his new "reform" official allies were actually trying to break the struggle for the right to strike by issuing order after order telling the miners to go back to work and attacking those who were providing a lead. Miller and Co. helped the press and others to unleash a heavy red-baiting attack on the wildcatters, when they "discovered" the open fact that socialists were in the leadership of the Miners Right to Strike Committee, which was a part of the strike. The District 17 Executive Board called on the miners not to support the strike because many of the militants were young miners "with little experience as miners," a deliberate but not very successful attempt to split the older workers who had come in before the "dry" period of the 1950's from the young workers who entered the industry with the economic upturn of the 1950's. Then, about 250 elected officials of District 17 agreed to return to work and called for a punishment of holdout strikers and "instigators" of the strike. Finally, the International Executive Board passed a ten point anti-strike program. This revoked the long standing "24 hour rule" whereby all three shifts of a mine strike if one goes



out. It also forbade the use of UMW funds for the defense of miners who picketed mines other than the one where they worked (i.e., spreading wildcats to other pits), or to pay fines and damages assessed against union locals for their participation in wildcat strikes.

Under this barrage from the union officials, the wildcats of 1975, not surprisingly, did not succeed. A fine of \$700,000 was levied against the International. As a result of this defeat for six months there were few wildcats in the mines.

#### Safety Wildcats 1976

The second round of safety wildcats began in the summer of 1976. The fines against the locals began to get heavy--sometimes as much as \$100 to \$200 per month. Finally, the Cedar Coal local was found in contempt of an injunction against a wildcat. Its 213 members were fined \$50,000 with an additional \$25 for each day they refused to go back to work and were threatened with jail if they weren't at work within a week. This sparked the second national wildcat. The local presidents of District 17 (West Virginia) were the spokespeople for the strike and a national strike committee was formed with representative from each district. Within three weeks, 120,000 were out.

Alarmed by the rapid spreading of the strike, the companies and the government decided to do a deal with the miners at Cedar Coal. They reached a settlement with them which was accompanied by a media drive to convince miners nationally to return to work. "Miners Return to Work Monday," the papers announced. At this point, the network of local presidents, which had up til then provided much of the leadership of the strike, pulled back and withdrew the pickets they had organized. Most of the UMW local presidents are working miners, not full-time officials, so hardly big-time bureaucrats. Even so, as part of the union hierarchy, even at its lowest level, they are subject to special pressure from the higher officials and the companies. They are often forced into the position of middle men, whether they like it or not, and may end up playing a broker role for the bureaucracy, trying to sell a deal to the rank and file. So while it was a good thing to have the local presidents initially joining with the strikers and contributing to spreading the strike, it was a serious error to make them the sole representatives for the rank and file. As a result the strikers were left leaderless at this key point.

But what the mass of miners clearly wanted, and what the strikers continued to demand was a settlement for all of the miners--not just Cedar Coal-- a settlement which would drop the fines that had accumulated and guarantee that there would not be further use of injunctions in the mines. Fortunately, in this case, the miners had retained the capacity to act independent of their officials at any level to further their own demands. When they went to work that Monday, even though there were no pickets, they refused to go down in the mines and left without doing any work. This happened virtually at most of the mines in West Virginia spontaneously. The strike regained most of its momentum.

After several more weeks, the \$700,000 which had been levied against the International earlier had been tied up in court in the appeals process ever since, was dropped. Miners knew they had beat the courts, and returned to work together. Injunctions continued to be issued, but after this victory they had no sticking power. The miners believed that they had won the right to enforce the contract at the worksite, and in the next year there were 4,500 wildcats.

The Health and Welfare Wildcats: 1977

In 1977 the companies attempted to regain the offensive. The health and welfare funds of the UMW had always been underfunded, because during the Lewis and Boyle years many miners were forced to retire as a result of the productivity drive in the mines, leaving fewer working miners to earn the royalties that financed the funds, while the level of royalty payments was not increased to cover the increased costs of pensions and health benefits. Now the companies claimed, the funds were going broke, and with the vote of one of the UMW trustees\* they cut the health benefits so that miners had to pay \$300 deductibles before receiving any paid medical coverage. The companies claimed that the wildcats had diminished the royalty income of the funds, necessitating the cutbacks. This lie was supposed to pressure miners to stop wildcat activities so that the companies could reassert control in the mines.

Another national wildcat followed; 80,000 were out for several weeks. This strike, however, was intended to be primarily a short protest against the cutbacks. It was weakened by the fact that it was the third national wildcat in the mines in three years, and the contract was only six months away. The miners had to begin to save money and energy for the contract fight.

During the national health and welfare wildcat, the role of the union ex-MFD officials was invariably to do all they could to break the wildcats and get the miners back to work. Almost all of the ex-MFD people at the district and national level including Arnold Miller, Harry Patrick, Lou Antal, et al, played this strike breaking role. A few of the district level officials did on occasion side with the wildcats. But usually they were just attempting to ride the movement and use it to gain positions of national prominence. Very few individuals from above the local level of the bureaucracy (Cecil Roberts, for example) actually did lead the movement forward in any sense. But their role was at best inconsistent, more a product of rank and file pressure than a stimulus to further action.

Other demands included: increased powers for and training of union safety committee members; elimination of compulsory overtime; more personal and sick leave; and equalization of pension for all retirees, thus ending the discrimination against the earlier retirees.

At this very beginning of negotiations, true to form, the UMW leadership dropped the key demand for the local right to strike. So from the start, the miners were on the defensive. Their own leadership would not fight for the right to strike. The bargaining would begin from the company's demand that miners who wildcat be penalized. It appeared the companies had the miners where they wanted them.

Nevertheless, there was one factor the operators of the BCOA had failed to take into account: the determination and fighting spirit of the rank and file miners themselves. Soon after the strike had begun in December 1977, the Wall Street Journal was announced the renewal of "the Coal War." Miners fanned out through

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\*H. Huges, who was rewarded for this by the Miller leadership; they made him the chief UMW negotiator for the '78 contract.

the mining country to overturn truckloads of coal and pursue scabs. In so doing, they took on the state police, the coal guards, the national guard. In one not untypical confrontation, some 1,000 coal miners trapped a group of scabs in northwestern Alabama in direct defiance of on-the-spot state police--this only a couple of weeks after Alabama Governor George Wallace had dispersed 500 miners with tear gas. Eventually, two hundred state troopers had to be called to rescue the scabs. As the cops went in, their police cars were hit with small arms fire, while their helicopters were fired on.

Throughout the strike, moreover, the miners organized demonstrations in the industrial heartland to publicize and explain their cause, and to gain the support of workers in other industries, through exposing the union-busting goals of the BCOA. In early February, for example, hundreds of miners marched through Pittsburgh stopping to demonstrate outside the headquarters of U.S. Steel, Duquesne Light, and Consolidation Coal--all major coal producers. They attacked the press for its one-sided handling of the strike.

Meanwhile with their supplies running low, the miners were seeking financial support from other workers, and the response was beyond all expectations. In Pittsburgh, in early February, 500 rank and file unionists from steel, teamsters, and other industries organized a "Miners Bowl" football game to raise money for the strikers. Plant gate collections brought money pouring in from all over the country. Indeed, the unexpectedly strong rank and file support for the miners evidenced in local fundraising efforts, was probably one of the important factors which induced the big bureaucrats in auto, steel and other unions to make their big contributions after the second contract was rejected and Taft-Hartley was invoked.

In the face of the initiative and stubborn fighting spirit of the rank and file, the Miller leadership was doing everything in its power to sell the miners down the drain. Early in February, they came up with their first settlement: a total capitulation to BCOA demands: in particular granting the right to the operators to fine wildcat strikers. But the opposition of the rank and file miners was so vociferous, this deal didn't even get through the Bargaining Council which overwhelmingly rejected it. Then about a month later, under tremendous pressure from President Carter, the leadership brought in a new agreement, which this time won the approval of the Bargaining Council. It was not any where near as bad as the first, rejected settlement--the most insupportable anti-strike clauses had been deleted. But it was still a dangerous contract, including provisions to fire "instigators" and "leaders" (i.e., spreaders of wildcats). It was resoundingly defeated by the direct vote of the rank and file.

Now the government stepped in with the Taft-Hartley injunction. But the miners ignored it, as they had done in the past. "Taft can mine it, Hartley can haul it, and Carter can shove it" became the miners battle cry, an inspiration to workers across the country.

Still, the miners could not strike forever. Without any real hope that their "leadership" would ever get them a good contract, it seemed there was less and less reason to hold out. In fact, the miners' resistance had been extraordinarily successful at least in defending the status quo. By standing firm for 113 days, by cutting down scab coal, by bringing their case to workers all over the U.S., the miners succeeded in getting the companies to drop the most dangerous parts of their union busting program. The demands--that there be an explicit no strike clause; that there be fines for wildcat strikers; that union safety committees be prevented from closing unsafe mines--were all defeated. So the miners finally ratified. Still, they did not avoid serious losses under the new contract. They saw their health plan largely dismantled. Pensioners on the 1950 plan at \$250/month lost their chance to get parity with those on the 1974 plan at \$500/month. Incentive plans were included in the new agreement, although supposedly voluntary.



The miners had staved off defeat. Yet, the fact was, after the most powerful struggle mounted by any group of U.S. workers in many a year, the miners had failed to win, and even suffered take-aways. This frustrating outcome does not bode well for the miners struggle. They had struggled as well as they could in the tried and true manner, but had not succeeded in beating the BCOA. It was obvious that the miners would have to develop a new understanding of their overall position, as the basis for building a new strategy to fight back.

#### Role of the Officials in the Strike

The people who led the UMWA to this near-disaster were the same ones who only six years before were the men on white horses who were going to save the union. District 5 President, Lou Antal, supposedly among the most militant of the MFD people, tried to sell everyone of the contracts. He was greeted at the March 19 meeting of the District 5 local presidents with chants of "resign, resign, resign," Harry Patrick, who less than a year before had run against Millers as the self-styled rank and file opposition candidate, campaigned for the second contract on the grounds that it was "in the national interest" that the strike be settled quickly. Patrick has taken a job as no doubt also in the national interest. The overwhelming majority of the MFD officials defeated entirely, at no time backing the rank and file fight.

Indeed there were no sections of the full-time officials which emerged to provide an alternative leadership for the struggle. Given the sell-out at the top by Miller and Co., the divisions within the leadership and the tremendous militancy in the ranks, conditions appeared to have been ripe for a break among the bureaucrats. Surely, if there were elements within the bureaucracy who could be looked to for leadership in the future, this was the time for them to show their true colors. That there was no break shows once again how mistaken it is to look to any section of the bureaucracy for a lead. This is not to say that it cannot happen--it may well be that, at some point, certain bureaucrats will come over to the rank and file's fight. The point is that the rank and file cannot count on them, or base a strategy around them.

Why didn't some district level officials come forward? For them to have broken with their leadership would have involved great risks. In the first place to lead the strike they would have had to take responsibility in any number of instances for technically illegal tactics. Had they failed to mobilize the rank and file sufficiently they could easily have ended up in jail. But this is only small part of the story. To align with the rank and file openly against the top leadership and to organize them would have meant risking their careers. For had they failed in this strike effort, they would certainly have been subject to official sanction when the strike was over. The top leadership would certainly have done everything in their power to see that dissident district officials got their come-uppance. Having no need themselves to lead a fight and having on the other hand little confidence in the ability of the organized rank and file to win, they refused to accept the risks of retribution from the companies, the government, and the national leadership that break from district bureaucrat to rank and file leader would necessarily have entailed. Some were willing to carp loudly about the Miller sell out, but talk is cheap. Few individuals above the level of local president (local presidents are generally working miners not full time officials) provided any alternative.

### The Need for an Organization of the Rank and File

In face, to the degree that the strike was actually organized, it was the rank and file who did it. Indeed, the miners waged a truly heroic struggle against heavy odds, and devised all sorts of tactics to stave off defeat. Nonetheless, they suffered desperately from the lack of any real organization of their own, through which they could have planned ahead and coordinated their actions.

The miners were from the first, in real danger of being starved out. They had been through three national wildcats and numerous other work stoppages in the last three years since the '74 wontract. The health and welfare strike of the previous summer in particular had left them short on cash. If they had had any organization of their own, they could have worked out in advance means to win financial support from other unions and groups of workers, or at least moved more quickly and effectively to do so once the strike was on. As it was, the move to go beyond the UMWA and seek financial help from other unions and other groups of workers was just about 100% rank and file initiated. The UMWA officialdom had stood on its hands; once the moves for support had gotten underway, some district officials went along. Unfortunately, the move came three months after the strike had started and had too little organization. In one district a rank and file controlled relief fund was actually established. But by and large when the money finally did start to come in, thanks to the magnificent support of unionists around the country, most of it poured into the UMWA relief fund, controlled by the Miller bureaucracy. Miller kept it all in a UMW bank account and withheld every cent from the miners until the ratified contract.

Stopping the movement of non-union coal was crucial to winning the strike. UMW mines now mine only slightly more than half of the nation's coal supply, the rest coming from non-union strip mines in Indiana, Ohio, and the West, and from non-union deep mines in Kentucky. During the first few weeks of the strike, roving pickets were organized to stop non-union coal and they were very successful. 75% of the nation's coal supply was stopped. But with the increasing intervention of the state and the use of the national guard, the movement of non-union coal increased. Those few higher level officials who had organized roving pickets now withdrew their support, afraid to really take on the government and, especially after Taft-Hartley was invoked, picketing stopped altogether and non-union coal moved freely.

A rank and file organization of miners could have prepared for this. There are 175,000 miners in the UMWA. What was needed was to involve them by the tens of thousands in direct action. Had it been possible to bring miners into action, it would have been possible to stand up to the police and the national guard. Perhaps even closing down power stations as had been done in England by striking miners would have been possible.

A rank and file organization, had it existed, could have gone a lot further. Thousands of workers beyond the mines recognized the miners' fight was not only just a struggle, but in some sense a struggle for them. That's why they supported it so enthusiastically. Nevertheless, most people outside the mines were not really familiar with the miners' actual problems, nor did they fully grasp the

Armass rank and file organization of miners which understood the significance of the employers' offensive themselves and the rest of the US working class might have been able to begi to get their message across to thousands of workers and from there it might have been possible to organize direct solidarity actions of other workers in support of the miner.

### VIII What Next for the Miners?

The miners' strike of 1930 was no more than an episode in a continuing battle. It is not difficult to predict at least the main lines of the struggle which lies ahead. The coal companies are moving to ever-greater reliance on non-union coal. Indeed, before the start of the strike the UCOA had raised its production up to 75% of normal, simply by using the non-union mines. The UMW and its rank and file faces difficult situation they must stand up to the continuing onslaught of the coal companies on their conditions, while watching their own membership dwindle in the face of the rise of non-union mines. Clearly, the task of organizing the unorganized is a matter of survival.

Now there are a number of reasons why the western strip mines will be very difficult to organize. There are relatively few people working at any time-- one minesite. The mines are to a great extent in right to work states in the west. Given the high productivity of the strip mines, the mine owners are willing to pay higher wages than union miners receive to prevent unionization. Still this does not necessarily spell disaster for the UMW. The coal operators still depend to a very great extent on the deep mines in the east. For this reason the place to apply pressure at this point is probably the non-union deep mines of eastern Kentucky.

Nevertheless, it is doubtful if the UMW bureaucracy or any section of the leadership can organize in these mines. There is, on the one hand, tremendous distrust of the UMW in eastern Kentucky, left over from the days when John L. Lewis betrayed the eastern Kentucky miners and effectively wrote them out of the union. On the other hand, the UMW has so far shrunk away from the sort of massive, direct action tactics which are necessary to win: massive confrontations not only with the companies but with the state. Thus, when the union does make an organizing drive, the efforts tend to be drawn out and demoralizing. Ever conscious of the threat to their treasure inherent in defying the courts and ever fearful that their own rank and file once in motion, will turn on them, the UMW bureaucracy has adopted an almost passive attitude in organizing strikes. The Brookside mine strike, which was documented in the motion picture Harlan County, went fifteen months before the union finally achieved settlement. All through the strike scabs ran the picket lines and it took the shooting death of a miner to finally get the company to give in a sign the contract. The strike at Stearns, Ky, which has been the scene of all-outgun battles, has gone on for two years now, and there is no end in sight. The union cannot win the massive unionization it needs if it continues to work in this way. To organize the non-union mines will require the intervention of an organized rank and file. Only a militant, mass action will provide the muscle to stop scabs and coal shipments, and only this can rebuild the confidence in the union among miners at eastern Kentucky. This, once again puts the creation of a national rank and file organization at the top of the agenda for defending the miners.

### Building a Rank and File Organization in the Mines

To build a rank and file organization in the mines is easier said than done. The experience of the MFD has led many miners to distrust all national, centralized leadership. They, therefore, tend to look toward a strategy of local autonomy and decentralization. Such an approach, however, would obviously be a disaster. The miners, de-centralized in their districts and locals, could not stand up to the coordinated offensive which has been launched by the BCOA backed up by the government. Nor could it begin to face up to the problems facing all miners--organizing the unorganized.

The first task, therefore is to convince miners that the experience of the MFD need not be repeated. This means getting across, in the first place, the point that the MFD was not, and never intended to be, a rank and file organization for direct action against the employers. It was an organization to win office by election. The MFD only intended to replace an old, corrupt group of leaders by new honest ones. That's why the MFD made no pretense of being really democratically controlled by its membership. That's why the MFD, far from organizing wildcats and direct actions, did everything they could to prevent these--since such actions were in conflict with their electoral goals. That's why the MFD dissolved itself as soon as the Miller slate won office. What must be gotten across therefore, is the idea of an organization for the purpose of mobilizing and coordinating struggle against the employers. This organization would see the fight for union office as part of, but strictly subordinate to, that end. Since it would understand that power to counter the employers does not come primarily from office, but from the organization of the rank and file, it would see the development of massive participation and democratic control by the rank and file as top priority. In other words, what must be gotten across in the mines is the understanding that the sell-out of Miller and Co. was not the result of their weaknesses, or personal faults, or corruption, but their losing strategy of electoralism and legalism. Therefore, the miners problems cannot be solved by getting better, tougher, more honest, more seasoned leaders in office. Without a strong rank and file organization to back them up and keep them fighting it does not matter who is in office--all will be under unendurable pressure to give in to the companies.

To say this is to say that what is facing the miners is not just a question of organization but, built up with that, the question of politics that makes the rank and file organization indispensable is the nature of the capitalist crisis and the employers' offensive to link with it. As the crisis deepens, the BCOA will have even less room to compromise with the miners. It is a struggle of life and death for the miners and they cannot go back to the old methods of self-defense--basically local self-reliance. Unless the miners begin to radically broaden their perspective--to look to the organization--organizing of the unorganized, and beyond that to forging links for direct action alongside other sections of the working class, they will not in the medium run, command the resources required to stand up to the employers. What is on the agenda for miners, as for other sections of the working class, is to mount the sort of fights which made it possible to win the last period of capitalist crisis, the 1990's. If one looks back to that era, it is easy to understand what is required to get just the right to a union in a capitalist economy which is contracting, where profits are ~~to-get-ja-~~ shrinking: sitdown strikes in which the rights of private property were trampled; mass actions in

in the streets in which the national guard was confronted; the end of pure and simply trade unionism, the forging of alliances between the organized and unorganized and the employed and unemployed. All this was necessary just to win trade unions. And the established union officialdom could never be counted on to lead such struggles.

### The Role Of Socialists

In fact, since the miners have just been through a strike of 100 days in which they fought bloody battles with national guards and police, were opposed by the federal government with Taft-Hartley, and had to seek aid throughout the union movement just to survive, the ideas which lay behind the struggles of the 1930's may not be so strange to many of them. In any case, to make them explicit as the rationale for building a rank and file organization which can counter the employers' offensive is the indispensable role of socialists. It was no accident that socialists were at the center of nearly all the great successful struggles of the 1930's--the general strikes in Toledo, in San Francisco, in Minneapolis 1934, the sitdowns leading to the foundation of the UAW and UAW in the auto and rubber industry in 1936-1937 to name a few. Socialists were able to play these leading roles not because they were braver or more militant than the next person--although they did not have to take a back seat to anyone on this score. What made them successful was their understanding of the nature of the capitalist system--of the needs of capitalists for profits at all costs; of the collaborationist role of the bureaucracy and thus need for organization independent of it; of the role of the state in standing behind the capitalists. To begin to build successfully a rank and file organization in coal it will be necessary once again to get across these ideas to an ever larger minority of miners. An understanding of the employers' offensive must become, as much as possible, the basis for such an organization. It is no accident that the handful of rank and file organizations which have emerged with any staying power in the last decade have had socialists near their center. The example of TDU is only the most recent example. And the miners' struggle will be no exception.



## RANK & FILE AND REFORM MOVEMENTS IN IS LABOR WORK

by the Los Angeles Branch

### I. The Deterioration of I. S. Labor Perspectives

During 1974-75, the I.S. attempted to intensify its already serious intervention in the class. In what was called "The Turn to Agitation" it was assumed that the economic crisis would cause a major upturn in the class struggle and bring significant numbers of workers into the revolutionary party. It was assumed that the bureaucracy would move to the right, leaving a vacuum of leadership. In this situation, the IS could lead by being the best fighters. The IS could recruit because the workers would join the organization in order to fight the class struggle.

This approach had 2 devastating weaknesses. In the first place, it drastically overestimated the impact the crisis would have on working class consciousness and action. It failed to understand the degree to which, and the reasons why, the U.S. working class was relatively unprepared to fight -- despite the "necessity" to do so. In brief, it failed to see that, although the crisis had indeed changed the political landscape and opened up new opportunities, nevertheless the possibilities for the Left to intervene, organize, recruit out of the working class were relatively restricted. We would have to pick our spots.

In the second place, this approach underestimated the need for politics, for political intervention by the revolutionary party both in order to recruit and to build the rank & file movement. Thus, it should have been taken for granted that revolutionary politics is indispensable for winning and holding workers in the party in this period. But it was not. It should have been understood that political strategy is necessary for intervention in the class. But it was not. It should have been realized, finally, that recruitment to the IS would be extremely difficult out of the industrial working class and that, to grow, we would have to orient, in addition, to public workers' struggles, to the independent women's and black movements outside the workplace, and to independent leftists and left intellectuals outside the working class. But it was not. As a result:

(a) Under these conditions, it is not surprising that the organization underwent intense de-politicization and political disorientation. Since politics was considered to be (in practice) relatively unimportant for recruitment or intervention in the class, the membership did not see their own political development to be a practical necessity. The EC recognized (but has not yet faced up to) the enormous gravity of the situation when, in its CC-document last summer, it said,

"Our group is held together today more on the basis of common practice than common political understanding and analysis... There are many questions our ranks have never discussed or internalized."

The problem was made a lot worse because -- ostensibly for tactical reasons and due to lack of resources -- we were relating only to a restricted section of the working class; we were hardly involved in the women's struggle or the black struggle beyond the factories in the communities; and we were not attempting to win over independent left politicians. It was thus to be expected that all of the pious resolutions for political education were never put into practice. It was almost inevitable, moreover, that our tactical narrowness would have political consequences, and, over time, this did contribute greatly to the

degeneration of IS' basic politics.

(b) Failure of the Turn and Political Adaptation to Working Class Conservatism

Given the non-political manner with which the "Turn to Agitation" was carried out, it is not surprising that the failure of the perspectives of the Turn -- especially that large scale working class motion did not develop and that we could not recruit and hold large numbers of workers -- led to an 180° reversal. When the working class failed to flock to our banner, the IS leadership began to turn around and adapt its politics to existing working class consciousness. The response has been pragmatic, responsive to day to day pressure. Our politics have changed, but bit by bit, and never with a full acknowledgement of how much has changed.

But, in fact, the drift to the right has been increasingly evident in both theory and practice -- especially with regard to the labor bureaucracy and to the need for a rank & file movement independent of the bureaucracy. In particular, in recent documents and action: (1) the EC has argued that sections of the bureaucracy are "moving to the left" and, for all practical purposes, have dropped the key strategic approach of critical support; (2) it has argued that pressure from the companies (not a rise in rank & file activity from below) will force local leaders to initiate the opposition to the companies, in particular regional and national oppositions; (3) it has spoken and acted as if there is no real distinction between "rank & file movements" and bureaucratic reform oppositions, so that Miners for Democracy, Teamsters for a Democratic Union, the Sadlowski Fight Back organization, the mineworkers' wildcat movements, are all lumped together under the general heading: "the union reform movement".

II. Are Sections of the Bureaucracy "Moving to the Left"?

The recent IS Labor Perspective states, "For the first time in 30 years important sections of the American labor leadership are moving to the left. The flurry of class struggle rhetoric that has come from Fraser, Kirkland, Winpisinger, and others is not an off the wall mistake. Nor is it just rhetoric to fool the masses. It is a genuine move to the left." (pp. 24-25) For "the move to the left represents a change of ideology of a number of top leaders from corporate liberalism to social democracy."

What is the meaning of this strange statement? There is a great deal of ambiguity about its significance. The document is careful to say that these top labor leaders are not about to lead the class struggle. But the fact remains that it ends up opening the door to an entirely different perspective on the bureaucracy, one which has ramifications, as we shall see, for all aspects of our work.

For if there is an ideological move to the left, this must, at some level, have consequences for actual politics. Otherwise, it's not any change in ideology, just a change in rhetoric, which we can pretty well ignore. For by ideology we do not just mean a cover of words for what people do, but a way of looking at the world, with implications for action. Is this "action" to take place in the legislatures or on the streets?

The Labor Perspective gives the impression (it is not too clear) that the "left-moving" strategy will be manifested at the level of national politics, in the electoral arena and in the halls of Congress. Presumably, there will be sharper pressure on the Democratic Party to deliver reforms. Now even suppose this were to happen, there is reason to wonder whether it would mark anything particularly new, or for that matter, particularly left. For, we know that for years the labor bureaucrats have had a strategy of pushing the Democratic Party for reforms in Congress precisely to avoid having to wage the

industrial class struggle. Is this legislative-lobbying substitute for the class struggle really a move to the Left? And can it produce anything in a period when the politicians are moving to the Right? Will this "left bureaucracy" do what the European Left Bureaucrats have failed, refused to do?

By giving the impression that Fraser and Co. intend to do more than give lip service to the fight for reforms -- at any level -- we can open the way to dangerous illusions.

But how about action led by the left bureaucrats on the shop floor? Far more dangerous is the attitude the Labor Perspectives proposes that we take toward "left-moving" bureaucrats at this level. The document states, quite correctly, that "It is quite clear that, at least for some time to come (our emphasis), the left moving bureaucrats have no intention of changing their fundamental approach to labor relations at the industrial level."

How (and why) then are we supposed to relate to these bureaucrats?

Simple. On page 40 the document simply reverses the earlier assessment and tells us, "In situations where the issues are real and important ones, particularly those related to the defense of the integrity and power of the union vis a vis the employer, we believe the burden of responsibility lies in the direction of support and helping to elect the left moving sections of the bureaucracy. The reformers can use the campaign to educate people on the issues around which the campaign focuses. This does not mean emphasis on how terrible the opposition candidate's past record is, and how nothing will change. It means trying to build real sentiment among the membership favoring aggressive bargaining or organizing... Discussing the issues will give the reformers more opportunity to educate people on how organizing drives and contract bargaining should be done than the ham-fisted attempts so typical of the American left in explaining why this candidate won't ever get it right because of his social position." This ambiguous statement is not a new position for the EC. It represents a deepening of an earlier position in which the EC tells us that the crisis and employers' offensive are forcing sections of the bureaucracy to move to the Left... not just in words but in deeds. This is stated explicitly in Bringing Our Analysis Up to Date, the document which first set the current IS line that the employers have broken their long-standing deal and are forcing the bureaucracy, or sections of it, to move to the left.

"We have seen the growing tension between the International leadership and local officials. As the International allows conditions to deteriorate further and further, the local leaders must take the brunt of rank & file dissatisfaction -- usually by losing or nearly losing elections. So, their demands on the International grow and they take independent actions. There can be little doubt that over the years this dynamic will grow. On the one hand, this clearly means that any opposition that forms down the road will include a number of local officials right from the start. In fact, it is most likely that they will initiate any opposition." (Bringing Our Analysis Up to Date, revised edition, page 9)

There can be no doubt that the employers' offensive has put the low level officials in a bind. But this is nothing new to this period. Conditions on the shop floor have been deteriorating for years. The top bureaucrats never put up a fight. It is rare, moreover, that the low level officials do anything to fight back on their own. For this reason the turnover of officials at the bottom level has always been great. But this has not led to



any significant section of the local bureaucracy breaking toward class struggle in the past, nor can it be expected now.

In the first place, the bureaucrats understand that although they might lose, because they have not protected the rank & file, a defeat will not mean the end of their careers. Indeed, it is not uncommon for bureaucratic "in" and "out" slates to play revolving doors with one another, in election after election. On the other hand, leading a struggle does pose a big threat to the local bureaucrat, especially in the big industrial unions, with their powerful, disciplined, and authoritarian machines (USW, UAW, IBT). In almost every case, making a break toward organizing a movement would mean going against the upper levels of the bureaucracy. This could end a career, especially if the action is unsuccessful. For the top levels of the bureaucracy do not readily tolerate disobedience.

On the other hand, to lead a local struggle against the company is to tie one's future to the potential of rank & file power. Most local officials do not believe that the rank & file can get itself organized; in this respect they do not differ from the upper layers. There is, indeed, little in recent experience to show that the rank & file will fight effectively. Moreover, the officials think that even if they can organize their own ranks to fight locally, they generally need broader support to win against the big companies, and they are probably right. To the local bureaucrats this means looking to the support of higher officials; but they also know that such support probably will not be forthcoming. The low level officials generally cannot conceive of building the necessary broader solidarity and organization through relying on the rank & file. The idea of a national rank & file movement, built independently of, and against the upper bureaucracy, appears to them a pipe dream. So, even if they want to fight the companies in order to keep the rank & file on their side, they do not really see this as a viable possibility.

Finally, it must be remembered that the low level bureaucrat is just that -- and not a rank & file organizer with a long run perspective. Their ideas have been shaped by their activities. Their experience, the whole definition of their job, has been primarily as a grievance representative and as a negotiator. They have served as lawyers for the workers and mediators between the company and the workers, having to compromise as best they can. Moreover, these officials did not get office by organizing the rank & file to struggle against the companies, but merely by winning an election. They take the electoral road. As a result, when they win office, they still have not built up the power necessary to fight the company. The official has usually won office by promising to do things for the rank & file. In turn, the membership elects the official thinking he/she will act for them. As a result, once in office the official has only a passive base, a following which does not, in fact, expect to fight.

Now, we are not saying that once the rank & file starts to move and puts pressure on the local officials none of them will come over. Probably some will (but this is a very different thing from predicting as the EC does, that, under pressure from the companies, and in the absence of rank & file leadership, the local bureaucrats will take the initiative.) Nor is this to say that no local official will ever, on their own, lead a strike. Of course, sometimes they do. The point is, however, that we cannot count on the local officials to do this. we can't look to this layer for leadership, or expect it.

Recent events in IBT demonstrate this to the hilt. For when, as in the Bay Area, local IBT officials did, under rank & file pressure, end up leading a strike, their cynicism about the rank & file, and their fear of the international prevented them from doing

so in a way which can win. So the strike was run in the classic bureaucratic fashion. Just about every attempt by TDU to get the rank & file involved, by building rank & file strike committees, mass meetings, mass actions, etc. was sabotaged. The leaders feared the workers would get out of hand.

There's a similar lesson in the recent Phoenix-LA grocery strike. In this case, as noted, TDU, with no assistance from the officials actually succeeded in organizing militant cross union solidarity strike linking Phoenix strikers with LA grocery workers. Despite the relatively high level of organization and militancy, despite the totally sell-out program offered by the top officials, the local officials stood fast with the bureaucracy. Not a single official from any of the 5 or 6 locals involved in the strike did anything but subvert the rank & file effort. They tremendously discredited themselves before the rank & file in doing so. But this only emphasized the point: the officials would rather risk the wrath of the rank & file, and take their chances with rank & file action against them at the polls, than go up against the bureaucracy and the companies.

#### Bureaucratic Reform Movements and Rank & File Movements

The tendency to give up in practice the tactic of critical support for left talking bureaucrats and to expect local level bureaucrats to initiate action culminates in the EC view that the key positive force in the working class today is the "reform movement". What, exactly, this movement is is never explained. There is no doubt that the failure of the bureaucracy to protect the rank & file has opened up opportunities for union oppositionists. But in the absence, at least so far, of massive rank & file action, most opposition will itself develop within the bureaucratic mold, whatever the subjective intent of the oppositionists. Typical will be the election campaign of "reformers" or "oppositionists" who aim to replace the old rotten machine with new people more committed to doing something for the membership. These oppositionists are, of course, nothing new to this period. But there is no doubt they represent an important phenomenon because they do become the focus of rank & file interests and concern. For this reason it is important to understand them and know how to relate to them.

It should be stated, right off, that at least so far, none of the reform organizations that have appeared have been rank & file movements. It is disastrous, therefore, to run them together with genuine rank & file movements, as recent IS documents have done. The IS has lumped together the wildcat strike movement in the mines, the Miners for Democracy, the Teamsters for a Democratic Union, the Sadlowski Fight Back organization -- all under the head of "the union reform movement". Or else what are clearly bureaucratic reform organizations have been called rank & file movements. The Sadlowski campaign, for example, was termed a rank & file movement. Now, unfortunately it's not a mere question of words. For, if we do not identify reform movements as something different from rank & file movements, it obviously makes no sense in that context to try to explain the need for, to prepare for, and ultimately attempt to build rank & file movements independent of the bureaucracy.

The reformers have certain things in common which sharply distinguish them from rank & file organizers. Above all, their main strategy is electoral. They are out to change the union and fight the companies primarily by winning an election, and then carrying out reforms within the union and fights against the companies, using their newly-won office.

In other words, the reformers' "electoralism" is no mere tactic but indicates an entire political conception. It is a reformist position and suffers from the disastrous weaknesses of reformism in this period. This means that the tried and true methods of honestly negotiating contracts, vigorously prosecuting grievances, while desirable, will be of little use in the face of the companies simply stonewalling it. Similarly, the reformers' electoral approach ignores the fact that in this period the most power (mobilization of the rank & file and greater politicization) is necessary to make possible a successful fight back. For these reasons, when a bureaucratic reformer wins office, he is usually hamstrung. Having failed to organize a rank & file organization to support them and keep them honest, they can usually do little for the rank & file. This leads to cynicism at best. Moreover, under tremendous pressure from the employers and the rest of the labor bureaucracy the reformer, however well meaning, may simply sell out.

It is crucial to be clear: both rank & file movements and electoral reformers may use elections. But they have a very different place in their overall strategy... and this is one of the key things which distinguishes the two. So, for the bureaucrat reformer, since getting elected is the key to getting power, everything must be subordinated to getting elected, and this includes subordinating rank & file self-organization, militancy, politics. Getting elected necessarily means a "lowest common denominator" approach -- and this approach contradicts building rank & file self-reliance, rank & file militancy, rank & file politics. Why is this? Because the basic fact, the starting point, in nearly every situation we will be in (outside of the instances of rank & file upsurge where rank & file organizations will have already come into existence) is that the union membership, in its majority will not be militant (for example, open to the use of illegal mass tactics), will not be political (for example, in favor of policies of cross union alliances, for fights against racism to build unity, etc.), will not even understand the idea of self-reliance (the idea that only the rank & file has the power to change things). There is therefore every reason, from the point of view of the reformer, to make the campaign as mild and widely acceptable as possible -- even at the cost of undermining independent rank & file initiative, militancy and politics.

But, let us be concrete. Some examples.

### The Sadlowski Campaign

Most recently, we saw this in the Sadlowski Campaign. Leftists, including the IS, entered the campaign. In part, it was the intention to get Sadlowski elected, to break the McBride machine. But it was also intended to use the campaign to try to organize the rank & file: for example, to organize local demonstrations on local issues, to set up local newspaper in the plants, etc. The IS Steel Fraction's document I. S. in the Sadlowski Campaign, states straightforwardly that the IS thought "Sادلowski would be forced to appeal to the ranks and run on the issues that affect them and to make every effort to involve them in the campaign." "We expected a mass campaign... to either generate local Fight Back groups or generate a climate in which they could easily be built," (p. 4) In fact, as this document reported, "Fight Back consistently discouraged rank & file initiative or shows of militance." Moreover, "at every level the campaign staff had a 'better safe than sorry' attitude." Furthermore, "Sادلowski was fearful that a highly organized and aggressive rank & file would limit his options and push him and his campaign where he didn't want to go." (pp. 6, 8)

In fact, we should have been able to predict what Sadlowski would do. It is not a

question of his subjective intentions. Sadlowski may be a good guy, think of himself as a socialist, want the best for the rank & file. But he was not a rank & file leader, nor was he organizing a rank & file movement. He was a bureaucratic reformer, whatever his personal ideology. This was because his method of struggling was dominated by electoralism. As the I. S. fraction reported, he subordinated everything to winning, most especially, the independent organization of the rank & file. Sadlowski is perfectly typical in this respect, and his tactics were logical from his own, reformist perspective.

Nor was it wrong for us to work with people in his campaign. It is necessary to make connections and gain the respect of the rank & file activists by working alongside them in support of their projects even if we want to go further than they do. What was wrong with our intervention was that, in intervening, we began with the expectation that Sadlowski would do something else. This showed a misunderstanding of the nature of the reformer's approach. Then, in the campaign, we largely failed to maintain an independent presence, especially in our own press. We did not use the campaign as an opportunity to explain what a rank & file movement was, that a rank & file movement had, of necessity, to be able to function independent of the bureaucracy. This does not mean it can't have officials in it; but these officials must be responsible to, and controlled by the rank & file. There was no chance to make the Fight Back campaign such a movement; we did not have the forces. But it was necessary to begin to educate people to the necessity of such a movement; and part of that process was explaining the limitations of Sadlowski and Fight Back. This we did not do.

We did not carry out this position of critical support, because at that time we were beginning to work out the theory that there is no difference between the rank & file movement and a reform movement of the Sadlowski type. The CC document which evaluated the Sadlowski campaign stated, "The Sadlowski campaign was a rank & file movement. Despite the fact that it was run top-down, despite the passivity of many of its followers, and despite its lack of organization." This statement typifies the current thinking of the IS leadership. It is compounded of a double error: on the one hand, a misunderstanding of the reformers, an overestimation of what they can or will do; on the other hand, a cynicism about the rank & file, which implies that they cannot understand critical support; that they cannot, at this point, see there is anything more possible than say a Sadlowski type campaign; that it is impossible to reach the rank & file if we politically distinguish ourselves from the reformers.

### The MFD

The disastrous consequences of giving up the critical support position, and of failing to distinguish between the reformers and the program of the rank & file movement independent of the bureaucracy, are clear if one refers to what happened in the mines. The Miners for Democracy was the classic reform organization. It came out of far more of a mass movement than any other reform group we have seen. But its orientation was clearly legalistic, non-militant, above all electoral. This does not mean that the MFD did not intend to improve the workers conditions against the bosses. Certainly they did. Certainly Arnold Miller did. Their program called for all sorts of necessary improvements. But their strategy precluded their doing so.

Their strategy was the same as Sadlowski's essentially. Elect us, we'll do things for you. to carry out their strategy, they demanded their followers stop wildcatting so much, because it would turn some people off. They covered up the racism in the union, because



it was a divisive issue. They did, in short, what they thought was necessary to win at the polls. Should we have supported them? Of course. A victory for Boyle would have been a setback for the movement. Should we have implied they were a rank & file movement, like TDU? Should we have said they were part of the "reform movement" and refrained from criticizing their approach? This would have been disastrous. For although it was important for tactical reasons to defeat Boyle, it was also clear that Miller and Co. could not fight the companies. Not because they were bad guys, but because they had a bad political approach. It was absolutely essential, for anyone trying to advance the mineworkers struggle at that point to say that Miller and Co. were not a rank & file organization, that a real rank & file organization was in fact needed... and as much as possible to be trying to build it. Perhaps a majority of miners could not have understood this. But certainly we could have begun the process of education and organization and no doubt reached a minority of militants. Had we uncritically backed Miller, as the answer to miners' problems, we would have been in the much worse position after he took office, of having to explain why we uncritically supported such a sell out. This is not a question of our "moral duty" or our "good reputation". It is a question of whether we believe that political analyses and principles have any practical relevance to the struggle. If, indeed, we think it makes no difference what a conscious minority says or does -- whether or not we actually try to intervene around the correct analysis makes no difference -- then we might as well quit the business. For then we are saying that workers can't learn through the intervention of a conscious minority and/or they will do the same thing, no matter what we say or do.

In fact, because miners have not been presented with any political alternative to the MFD their conclusion from the MFD experience is that all central leadership is bad and cannot be trusted. Many of them see no choice but local autonomy for the districts and locals -- a terrible option. This is because they have no conception of a qualitatively different relationship between leaders and rank & file, based on a bottom up rather than top down organizational form and on a realistic understanding of the political strategy needed to stand up to the employers' offensive.

The mess which the failure to distinguish reform campaigns from rank & file movements get us into is manifest in the IS recent book on coal, Battle Line. Here we have absolutely nothing to say about why the MFD failed, or how such a failure can be avoided in the future. One wonders if we any longer understand, since the Labor Perspectives document makes the outlandish statement that Miller and the MFD "turned into their opposite". (p. 26) Miller and the MFD did NOT turn into their opposite. They were reformers from the start. As such, they inevitably had to capitulate to the companies, because they had not put into practice a strategy which would have allowed them to stand up to the employers' offensive. In the coal pamphlet all we can say is that "the fight to impose union power at the local mine site level is weakened by bad leadership." Our conclusion: "A new team is needed." (p. 90)

What is this but saying that all that's needed is to get good leaders in rather than bad leaders? The document later goes on to say that "The real material for a new leadership team, the militants at the district and local levels, are not prepared to move for top leadership positions right now. But they will be gaining experience and confidence by various campaigns to pressure the Executive Board." (p. 94) But this seems misleading advice, to say the least. For what is to prevent these new militants who presumably will get elected now, from selling out just as Miller did? After all, Miller, Patrick and

others started out as simple rank & filers, trying to get the best for the miners. They didn't sell out because they were bad guys, but because they had a bureaucratic-reform approach. Here's the concluding message to the miners in Battle Line: "The hope for the UMWA lies with the ability of the local and district leaders and activists to initiate and pressure for organizing drives, and to organize and prepare for the next series of elections." (p. 95) Nothing about the need for an organization of the rank & file miners independent of the bureaucracy in the entire pamphlet! Nothing about the politics needed by such an organization to face up to the employers' offensive. Merely, the call to prepare for the next elections.

### The TEAMSTERS

From the book Battle Line one could easily conclude that the IS had itself adopted the politics of the reformers. Our actual tactics in the Sadlowski campaign would lead to the same conclusion. But what about teamsters? Here, it certainly must be said that we are operating within a genuine rank & file organization. But one wonders how the EC and the IS majority see this. In the first place, in all our writings, the EC has consistently classed TDU with the Sadlowski campaign, the MFD, the Balanoff operation, etc. Fortunately, so far TDU has not become any of those things. It remains firmly in control of the rank & file; it does not depend on any of the (few) officials involved within it. But one wonders if this is by design or by accident.

At the 1977 TDU Convention we invited Harry Patrick of the UMWA to be the keynote speaker and made him an honorary member of the TDU. We did this despite the fact that by this time the MFD had shown its true colors time and again. The MFD leaders, in power since 1973, had tried again and again to smash wildcat strikes. Patrick himself from the early days of MFD had participated prominently in the MFD policy of opposing wildcats (this is documented in the work by Paul Nyden referred to in Battle Line). Moreover, in the months before the TDU convention the UMWA leadership was trying to crush another mass wildcat and Patrick was going along with them. He even appeared on TV to urge the miners to go back to work. Nonetheless, we put forward Patrick to the TDU convention. Whatever we intended this to mean, and whatever Patrick actually said, there was a strong message which was inevitably conveyed: "Here's Harry Patrick. He is a progressive official. He and the MFD got elected and succeeded in cleaning up the UMWA. We want TDU to become an organization like the MFD, to act like the MFD did." True, many teamsters do not distinguish between the reform approach of the MFD and that of the independent rank & file movement. But that's just the point. By bringing in a slick left-talking official like Patrick, we merely re-confirm the established old modes of thinking -- which overwhelmingly lean toward trying to do things through good leaders -- rather than encouraging a break.

Again, there is the question are we trying to make a break. During the local teamster elections of the fall and winter of 1977, the IS leadership advised the organization to "go for power" -- i. e. run in elections to get office. There was no explicit recognition that getting power and getting office are two very different things. It's one thing to get office on the basis of having built a rank & file organization, which can back you up, give you power, and keep you honest. It's another to get office as the road to power. Indeed, in Workers' Power we systematically confused these 2 methods in the one election where there was a real need to distinguish. Here Pete C. was running for election as representative of TDU. Pete Karagozian was running with the classic "out"

reform group, Concerned Members. WP headlined: "Vote for the Two Petes". Its article did nothing to distinguish between the approach of the two groups, or the manner of supporting either, or what could be expected from each. Nor has this been done subsequently. One wonders how we can expect to politically develop TDUs if no distinctions are made, how we expect TDUs to learn the difference between the rank & file movement and the "reformer" approach. If they do not learn the difference, there will be no way to prevent TDU from becoming the instrument of a "genuine" reformer should "the man on the white horse" happen along.

### Balanoff, District #31, and the Steel Pact

This brings us, finally, to our current work in steel in District #31, where we are operating in a caucus headed up by Jim Balanoff, District Director. The question is not, once again, whether or not we should be in the caucus. It may well be that, for the moment, this is the best place to work. The question again is one of method; of our understanding of the position we are in, of the necessity to establish our political independence.

Whatever Balanoff's subjective intentions, or his personal ideology, he is very much restricted by (a) the political strategy he has pursued; (b) the objective balance of forces he now faces. Balanoff, whatever his past, took the classic electoral reform road: He ran for office, parallel to Sadlowski's bid for the USW presidency; like Sadlowski, he did this without having built a rank & file organization of the appropriate scope to back him up. Now, he is in the position common to those who adopt this strategy. He faces an offensive from the powerful steel companies, he is being viciously attacked by the USW machine who have surrounded him in his own district; he has relatively little in the way of an organized base in District #31, especially once one gets beyond the R&F Club of Inland Steel.

None of this means that we cannot work with Balanoff, get whatever help we can from him, collaborate where this is possible. What it does mean is that we cannot count on him; or build a strategy based on his leadership. To succeed, it will be necessary to build a rank & file movement, which does not have to rely on Balanoff. It may well be that we cannot move organizationally to do so at this point, or that doing so is a long way off. Nonetheless, we have to build our own operation. This means beginning to politically convince those we are working with, even small numbers, of the political necessity to build a rank & file movement independent of Balanoff. . . in order to defend the rank & file. It also means positioning ourselves and our collaborators to intervene, should the situation in the class struggle change, for example in the event of wildcats or other direct actions, . . . where Balanoff may find it difficult, or from his point of view undesirable, to intervene.

As we remember, Weisman, who we were working closely with in auto in CGC, failed to support a strike at his own plant while in alliance with us. There is no reason to say absolutely that Balanoff will not support direction, hopefully he will. Our point must be that the rank & file cannot rely on him to do this, that they can rely only on themselves, and it's our job to help them build this independence. This does not require an attack on Balanoff personally. In fact, if Balanoff has the goal of strengthening the steel workers vs. the companies and the bureaucracy, he will not object.

That is why the IS publications, notably Workers' Power and in particular the steel pamphlet, The Crisis Within, have not been doing the necessary job. They have not spoken to the question of what is necessary in steel, and Crisis Within has given the impression that there is already the model of what's necessary in District #31. Crisis Within states clearly that the "reform movement" or the "rank & file movement" in District #31 (the two terms are used interchangeably) not only exists, but includes Balanoff himself, extending from the ground floor right up to the district director. This conveys an impression of power that does not exist; it conveys an ideal of organization that is not ours; it gives illusions that the existing organization (which we may want to work with and support) can do things which it cannot. Thus, in Crisis Within, there is no explanation of why an electoral strategy cannot work. There is no explanation of the sort of pressures which face the district director. There is no explanation of the need for a rank & file movement independent of the bureaucracy, such as does exist in teamsters in TDU. Once again, what is at issue is not the need to expose this potential seel-out or that. It is the need for the political development of the rank & file. This cannot proceed without some account of the inadequacies of what is, the necessity for building what does not yet exist.



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