

The Black Lung Movement In The U. S.

Black Lung Associations and Brown Lung Associations were two Organisations of US Coal miners and textile workers respectively. The bulk of their membership came from disabled workers or their widows and their heroic struggles paved the way for better H & S for all.

Coal mining is a hazardous occupation and one of the earliest unionisation campaigns in the mines gathered momentum in the aftermath of a serious accident. In 1869, an accident in Avandale mine in Pennsylvania killed 179 miners due to the refusal of the mine-owners to build an escape exit. Speaking to the people gathered to mourn the dead, John Siney, President of the Working Men's Benevolent Association (forerunner of the United Mine Workers, said "Men, If you must die with your boots on, die for your families, your homes, your country, but do not consent to die like rats in a trap for those who have no more interest in you than in the pick you dig with". Thousands of people joined the Association that day!

Despite these pledges to work for health and safety, the struggles for health and safety at work were at a low key, with the struggle of the Union for survival, expansion and improvement in terms of employment being more central. As the union grew, the union bureaucracy in UMW became more entrenched. The union had a department dealing with health and safety but this was not able and did not do much to improve working conditions.

It was only the sixties that the movement for better working conditions took off. The focus became the struggle to get pneumoconiosis- "black lung"- recognised as a compensable disease. State and federal government authorities had for decades denied that coal dust was a hazard and caused disease. In the early sixties diseased workers and some socially active doctors began to tell other workers of the dangers involved. "When we found out what was actually going on," says Bill Worthington, a leader of the Black Lung movement, "we began to get pretty angry. Coal Companies were making millions of dollars off us, and when we got too sick to work, they said we had "miners asthma" for which there was no compensation."

In November 1978, Consolidated Coal Company, Mine No. 9 in Farmington, West Virginia, blew up killing seventy eight miners. Judith Henderson, widow of miner Paul Henderson recalls, "It was cold and snowy that November 20th morning when I had turned the morning news on and heard the world

that were to begin a terrible nightmare. The rumour that there had been an explosion was confined, and all but 21 on the midnight shift were trapped. This was where my husband worked and where the nightmare began. We waited, hoped, prayed that our men would be saved, but in vain. On the 10th day they announced the mines would be sealed because the Company Officials felt that no human life could live after this time."

The UMW leadership took advantage of public sympathy to press for a federal mine safety law, ignoring the issue of Black Lung compensation and Occupational health - believing it would jeopardise the passage of a safety law. The Black Lung (BL) movement received a spurt in the membership and an added thrust after the Farmington disaster. The various state Black Lung Associations together with Associations of Disabled Miners and widows along with progressive physicians and lawyers pressed for BL compensation and controls on Coal dust.

In January, 1969, the Virginia (where Farmington mine is located) BL Association was formed and in February and March of that year, 42,000 of the State's 44,000 miners walked off their jobs, pressing for a new law. They marched to the State Capital and demonstrated in front of the State Legislature brandishing blackened lungs obtained from autopsies of pneumoconiosis (Black Lung) victims. The strike hailed as "the most important political strike in modern labour history" forced the first state compensation for Black Lung in West Virginia.

In December 1969, came a new federal law, the Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969, a comprehensive bill dealing with Black Lung compensation, exposure to coal dust and safety. It specified that coal miners, or their widows, could apply for permanent black lung benefits regardless of when they had quit the mines. Benefits were paid from federal tax revenues and at first 60 percent of the applicants won the benefits. The law also created a federal inspection system to enforce safety and coal dust standards.

The passage of the Act gave new strength to the BLAs. Retired miners and widows who had successfully secured benefits began to lead others through the social security maze, and consolidated themselves into effective country-level organisations. A coalition of such groups was formed for tackling specific national level political battles like the

passage of a new law, seeking to relax the medical eligibility requirements under BL benefits. The Black Lung Benefits Act was passed in 1972, under which a miner who had worked for 15 years underground was presumed to have compensable black lung, if he was totally disabled by lung disease, regardless of what X-Ray findings indicated. However, the social security administration was successful in reducing claims success rate from 60% to 10%.

Yet, despite limitations in the implementation of the Act, the black lung revolt has resulted in half a million families getting some financial benefit. The annual payment of a billion dollars is twenty times the total paid out for Occupational Disease for all other workers. Conditions in the mines too have improved, with annual coal mine accident deaths falling from 260 to 132 between the year 1970 to 1974.

The initiative for the BL movement was taken outside UMW, by the force of rank and file pressure. As a conscious organising strategy, partly determined by the nature of the issue, it was the old retired workers, many already ill, who were in the leadership and therefore, free from threat of company reprisals. The movement developed new strategies and a language of its own, with folk songs written about their work lines by many BL members. Two of the

songs (reproduced in this issue) were written by an 83 old miner who had spent 40 years in the mines. The use of songs reflects the mass nature of the movement.

In most chemical-caused diseases, exposure is limited to a section of the work-force and very often, unless there is a vigorous educational campaign, it becomes difficult for people to recognise disease as work-related. Once the health effects of coal dust were understood, the obvious and widespread nature of the hazard was one of the reasons of the relative success of coal miners securing compensation for Black Lung. Due to the peculiar nature of the Industry, the position of the miners vis-a-vis the owners was strong. Demand for coal is high, and most coal is manufactured in mines owned by large companies with large unionised work-forces. The public too was sympathetic to the obvious hazards of the job and miners have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to strike and shut down the mines. These factors can be identified as favouring the emergence of the Black Lung revolt.

The BL Movement changed the face of the Union movement in the mines as well as paved the way for health and safety to become an issue on the agenda of Union struggle and legislative action.

-L. R.

