

American Labor: Progress and Regress

1. UMW: Historic Breakthrough for Union Democracy

Don Stillman

THE UNITED MINE WORKERS BUILDING sits like a fortress on the southwest corner of McPherson Square in downtown Washington, D.C. With its fireplaces, marble stairs and polished wood paneling, one gets the impression of being in a fine men's club, which is exactly what the building housed before John L. Lewis bought it in 1936.

Sitting in one of the comfortable leather chairs and looking out across a room the size of a basketball court, it's easy to see how the inheritors of the Lewis legacy feel so far out of touch with the men they were paid to serve. Somehow, chewing tobacco and coal dust and pick-up trucks seem very foreign to that environment in which the only health hazard seemed to be an over-active air conditioner on one of the Cadillac limousines.

Today, the limousines are gone. The new UMW officers put them in storage until they could be sold by sealed bid open only to coal miners. They called it an "end-of-an-era clearance sale" with the goal of seeing that, after years of being ignored, the rank-and-file was finally back in the UMW driver's seat. The Cadillac auction followed other symbolic actions aimed at narrowing the gap between the membership and the leadership.

Arnold Miller, the new UMW president, cut his salary from \$50,000 to \$35,000 and Mike Trbovich and Harry Patrick, vice president and secretary-treasurer, dropped theirs from \$40,000 to \$30,000. New staff members took cuts of 20 to 40 per cent and did away with the automatic \$8-a-day per diem of the Boyle era. With the \$400,000 saved by the salary and expense cuts, Miller said he hoped to expand the UMW's safety division, which had consisted of only three men under Boyle.

Miller, the 49-year-old coal miner who toppled the dynasty of Tony Boyle, wasn't given much of a chance last May when a convention of 450 miners from across the coalfields chose him as the Miners for Democracy candidate in the court-ordered re-run of the Yablonski-Boyle 1969 election. Boyle, although battered and bruised by exposé after exposé, fought on with all the tremendous resources of the incumbency.

For years, he had exercised autocratic control through a system of district trusteeships set up by John L. Lewis. In 19 of the UMW's 24 districts, Boyle appointed all the district officials and they served at his will. Although Miners for Democracy attorneys were successful in having

the trusteeships declared illegal, Boyle controlled all the district offices during the campaign because the district elections had not yet been held.

MILLER OPENED HIS CAMPAIGN IN HARLAN COUNTY, KENTUCKY—the famous “Bloody Harlan” where men died to build the UMW in the early organizing days. Harlan had another, more immediate, significance. It was the birthplace of Albert Pass, the Boyle-appointed executive board member indicted for the murders of Jock Yablonski, his wife and daughter. When Yablonski sought the UMW presidency in 1969, he refused to campaign in eastern Kentucky, knowing his life would be in extreme danger there. By holding the first major campaign rally in the heart of Boyle territory, Miller hoped to begin breaking down the cycle of fear used to intimidate the membership—particularly the 80,000 pensioners who form a major voting bloc in the 205,000-man union.

“The era of fear and violence in this union is over,” Miller told a packed house at the Evarts Community Center there. “We’re going to return this union to the rank-and-file.” Miller mined coal for 24 years and his soft-spoken style contrasted with that of Boyle. Boyle, pasty and aging at 71, shouted, stomped, ranted and raved, exhorting miners to reject Miller and his running mates because they were drifters and drunks controlled by “outsiders” and communists. The miners didn’t buy it. Taken together, the nine-man MFD slate had a total of more than 200 years in the mines and the cry of outsiders didn’t take hold.

Miller, Trbovich and Patrick traveled across the coalfields, rising early to go to the bath-houses where miners shower after the shift. They campaigned at more than 200 mine-sites talking about the need for a union leadership that would back the men up on safety issues and grievances. “Under my leadership, coal will be mined safely or not at all,” Miller told the men.

Instead of campaigning solely on the issue of Boyle’s corruption, they talked about the need to win sick pay benefits. (Incredibly, in what is the most dangerous and unhealthy major industry in the country, the miners have no sick pay and a man who misses a day’s work misses a day’s pay.)

Through the *UMW Journal*, the union magazine which was opened to MFD by court order, they appealed to the pensioners by calling for a nationwide organizing drive to rebuild the UMW Welfare and Retirement Fund, which gets its money from a royalty on every ton of UMW coal mined.

And, perhaps most important, they talked about the need to make their union leadership responsive. “Let’s Make the UMW Great Again,” was a slogan repeated over and over.

In the end, the barnstorming bath-house campaign worked. Miller

carried the race by more than 14,000 votes, surprising almost everyone but himself. After a moment of silence in memory of Jock Yablonski, Miller told a victory press conference that "the era of one-man rule in this union is over." His actions in the first months as UMW president indicate he meant what he said.

SOME THREE HOURS AFTER BEING CERTIFIED, Miller announced that elections would be held in all trusteeship districts. At the same time, Miller moved decisively by dismissing the Boyle-dominated executive board members from the trusteeship districts and appointing a "caretaker board" to run the union until the district elections occur. This, for the most part, ended any chance that the shrinking cadre of Boylists might frustrate the reforms voted for by the rank-and-file.

The energies of UMW reformers have turned inward—to begin solving some of the problems they talked about in the campaign. Health and safety loom as the top priority. "I saw a lot of sick men in this campaign," Miller said afterward. "I saw a lot of men who choked when they tried to breathe. I saw a lot of men who had stumps where their legs should have been. I shook a lot of hands that had missing fingers. There's been too much blood on the coal. It's going to stop."

Miller is expanding the safety division to include mining engineers, doctors, lawyers and rank-and-file miners who know the ins and outs of the machinery and the mines and the safety problems the membership faces with every shift. While fatality rates have declined somewhat, the injury rate in 1972 rose almost 20 per cent, to about 46 per million man hours compared with 15 per million man hours in manufacturing industries. Miller wants a safety crew that will travel the coalfields unannounced to the operators—making inspections and shutting down mines they find to be unsafe.

Miners are unhappy with the performance of the U.S. Bureau of Mines, the agency charged with enforcing the federal mine health and safety act. It is clear that under Miller the UMW will take an adversary role with government agencies. The new UMW officers were outraged recently when the deputy director of mine health and safety for the Bureau said it was now safer to mine coal than to drive a car on the highways. Mike Trbovich, the vice president, immediately called for the official to resign. Other government agencies can expect a more difficult time dealing with the mineworkers. The Appalachian Regional Commission, for example, has already come under heavy fire for failing to see that miners are adequately represented on the boards of proposed clinics for black lung diagnosis and treatment.

The whole question of energy policy for the country is a major issue confronting the new leadership. Miller's staff is busy trying to sepa-

rate "energy crisis" fact from fiction, at a time when crucial decisions affecting the country's energy policy for the next 25 years are being made. Proposed shifts to move coal-fired generating plants present the UMW with difficult decisions to be made on issues such as strip mining and air pollution. Western coal is low in sulfur content and can be strip mined at costs far less than those for deep mines sunk in the Appalachian coalfields where most of the UMW membership lives and works. Miller, who in the past has advocated banning of strip mining in areas where reclamation is impossible, will have difficult and complex choices to present to the rank-and-file on the energy issues.

Many of those decisions will be decided in state legislatures and the U.S. Congress. The UMW, although not large in terms of numbers, is one of the wealthiest unions in the country. Yet, until now it has had no effective counterpart to the AFL-CIO's COPE Fund. Miller is drawing up plans for a political action fund that should provide the UMW with real clout on both the state and national level. Particular targets for the UMW will be legislatures in states like West Virginia that have, until now, been run as arms of the giant coal companies.

In addition, the UMW will attempt to build relationships with other unions that share similar legislative goals on social issues. But how and to what degree this will occur is unclear. The UAW and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees are two that are likely to have a close relationship with the new UMW. Both Leonard Woodcock and Jerry Wurf have talked with the new officers. Miller joined Wurf in a press conference urging recognition of Charleston, W. Va. sanitation workers in late January. But other labor unions are eyeing the UMW like the new boy at school, unsure of exactly how to react. And given the nature of the UMW's rank-and-file leadership, some have good reason to be wary.

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN RECENT HISTORY, rank-and-file union members were able to topple entrenched union leaders. In an era that has seen union president after president lining up to hold hands with one of the most anti-labor of all the U.S. presidents, the Miller victory makes it clear that it can be done—rank-and-filers can run and win. But the incredible circumstances in the UMW—the murders, corruption, health and safety problems, and utter unresponsiveness—made it a unique situation. Other unions have the same kinds of problems, but few have them to the same degree and all at the same time. It is unlikely that other existing reform movements will be successful in the way Miners for Democracy was.

I. W. Abel stands unopposed in the Steelworkers election and the Fitzsimmons-Hoffa thrusts and parries leave little room for rank-and-file reformers. Here and there, such as in the National Maritime Union, there is hope that reformers may repeat MFD's knock-out punch. But

for the broad segment of the labor movement, it is unlikely that union presidents of Boyle's ilk will leave their chins sticking out as he did.

The real promise of the Miners for Democracy victory must be the continued input of rank-and-file miners on a daily level. The philosophical righteousness of running against a Tony Boyle must be transformed into true and lasting reform. That can only happen with a constant flow of rank-and-file in and out of the union bureaucracy. Miller and his new officers are moving in that direction. "Stay close to the men," was the advice of one West Virginia miner to Miller when he won. It looks like that will happen and, in the process, coal miners could once again become the "shock troops of the American labor movement."

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2. Growing Bureaucratization of the UAW

Paul Schrade

SINCE THE DEATH OF WALTER REUTHER in 1970, the United Auto Workers has been going through a quiet process of transformation the extent of which has not yet become apparent to its million and a half members.

A critical event in this process occurred early in 1972 when three members (President Woodcock and Vice Presidents Bannon and Great-house) of the International Executive Board caucus* engineered my defeat as Western Director in violation of caucus rules. Another part of the process was the premature departure of two other key Reuther loyalists, Education Director Brendan Sexton and International Affairs Director Victor Reuther, whose talents will be sorely missed by the union.

These events have helped spotlight a rarely noticed aspect of the UAW. The union has the reputation, in some ways deserved, of being democratic and progressive. But little attention is given to the tre-

* The International Executive Board Caucus is an official political group of 25 members of the Board with rules and a mutual assistance pact that has guaranteed centralized political control of the UAW for over 25 years. It evolved from the broad-based Reuther Caucus made up of hundreds of rank and file members who helped Reuther win the presidency and full control of the Board. A small rank and file caucus chosen carefully by the Board Caucus still meets just before conventions and as a matter of ritual endorses candidates and policies recommended by the Board Caucus. Other caucuses of rank and file members have been formed in the past to promote issues or candidates in opposition to the Board Caucus but all such efforts have been easily beaten back or absorbed.