People's Energy Project
POWER FOR PEOPLE, NOT PROFIT!
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UMW vs BIG Oil

By Paul Johnson

A fine portrait of the coal situation in the United States will visit Kansas University on April 22. It is a film by Barbara Kopple, entitled "Harlan County, U.S.A." The movie focuses on the bottom line consideration for the coal miners: decisionmaking--who makes the decisions, who profits from them, and who ultimately suffers.

Miners Art Grp.-LNS/cpf

After viewing the film, you will see the incredibly dangerous jobs these miners do and how, after sacrificing their health for our standard of living, the coal operators and government still waver on whether to pay the miners health costs. Big oil has taken over the coal fields and will carry on life's age-old axiom--a buck is a buck no matter how it's made. Government cannot be counted upon to restrict the abuses of mine safety. The mineworkers need not be told this: they have lived and died with that reality. Besides demanding adequate salaries and fringe benefits the miners should demand half ownership in the mines.

Miners have already paid the price in terms of their health, lost miners, and grave environmental degradation. Big oil need never live in West Virginia or Kentucky. With the movement to greater uses of coal, this country will see clearly how quickly an area can be mined or stripped and left to waste. Boom/bust economics has been a way of life to break unions and take advantage of scarce resource situations. If full accounting for health hazards and environmental concern is ever to come, it will be the miners as part owners demanding complete accountability.

As part owners, the miners would develop our coal supplies on a reasonable basis. The rate of production would be set around a host of factors--need for the coal, safe rate of extraction, plus economic and environmental impact on the surrounding community. The miners want something to pass onto their children. There is a full, rich tradition which cannot be translated into hard and fast dollar accounts. For Wyoming, quick exploitation of that coal will occur since those people have no tradition with that area. For Appalachia, the scenery and style of life means much.

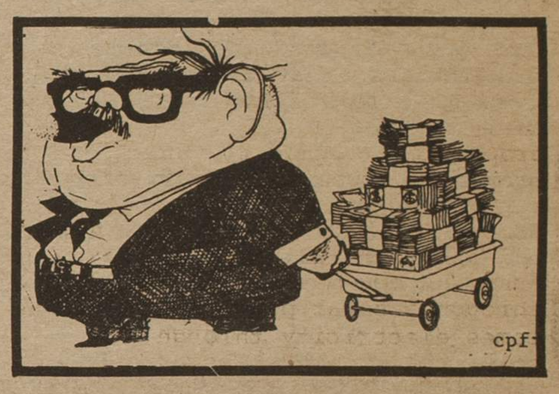
The mineworkers recognize the stranglehold that big oil has been developing. If electric utilities cannot obtain coal, they will have to burn oil supplied by the very same people. What is happening is that the prices are being pushed upward by comparing the heat value/cost of coal to that of oil. The cost of coal has more than tripled in price since 1970. No one at this time has the power to hold big oil companies accountable for this energy monopoly. Besides coal and oil, they have substantial control over natural gas and uranium. At any turn, big oil has the final say over our energy future which is a reality that the mineworkers are fighting.

Rachel Burger/cpf

In Appalachia, there is a century supply of low sulfur deep mine coal to be had. There is also significant reserves of high sulfur coal that can be taken with the least damage to the surrounding terrain. Presently we are seeing the introduction of coal burning technology that will allow us to burn high sulfur coal cleanly.

Coal needs for utilities should start to decline as the introduction of solar technology becomes economic. People who are heating electrically will convert over as the prices keep skyrocketing. Solar water heaters will make the greatest impact initially as people phase out heating water electrically. The introduction of photovoltaic cell (electricity from sunlight) will go the way of hand calculators as the necessary silicon chips are mass produced. For 1985, it's already cost effective with nuclear power (source Dept. of Defense) and subsequent breakthroughs will drop the cost significantly.

If we buy ourselves into a heavy electrical future via large powerplants we will not have the flexibility to integrate sensible alternatives into the plan. Big oil and the utilities will have already committed our capital, giving most consumers no other option but to pay for their fiddler. The mineworkers I believe would opt for a plan that entails sensible long term development of the mines for their lives and those of their children. Big oil and the previous coal operators had many chances to pursue sensible



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development of our energy reserves. Their greed and push for profit had them accelerating and abusing the development of coal and oil. The mineworkers deserve their chance to have an equal say in how the future development of their mines and lives will unfold.

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