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Coal's Crippling Has Also Disabled The Mine Workers. What Will Labor Do?



Ken Silverstein

, CONTRIBUTOR

I write about the global energy business.

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The decline of coal production has led to a simultaneous collapse of the coal unions, given that they are fighting to preserve their health and pension benefits along with their negotiating power. West Virginia, in fact, has just become the 26th state to enact a “Right to Work” law letting workers opt out of union participation.

Understandably, as coal loses its political influence, the labor unions have less sway. But the industry and its miners are on the same page with respect to federal environmental rules, with both vociferously opposing tougher regulations on coal-related pollution — a pact that has helped propel conservatives to both national and statewide offices in West Virginia. But can that hold?

West Virginia has a violent past dating back to the mine wars in the early 20th Century. Today's miners, though, are conflicted: They need the coal companies to prosper and to provide good jobs with benefits. But electing pro-business candidates can backfire on them. Witness the Right to Work law:

Employees who opt out of joining unions are now being called free-loaders, as they get the same benefits espoused by those who pay their monthly dues. On the other hand, economic developers say that the law enacted earlier this month over the governor's veto makes the state a more attractive place for new

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“Republicans have successfully picked off votes from union members on social issues, even though they have voted against their economic interests,” says Evan Hansen, president of [Downstream Strategies](#), an environmental consulting firm in Morgantown, W.V., in an interview. “However, the unions have recently become activated and they may now retaliate against the Republicans.”



CHARLESTON, WV – APRIL 11: Coal miner Abram Powers and his daughter Katie attend a memorial service for the deceased miners at the Capital building April 11, 2010 in Charleston, West Virginia. The miners died as a result of a methane-gas explosion at the Massey Energy Company's Upper Big Branch Coal Mine. (Photo by Kayana Szymczak/Getty Images)

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Weaker unions mean less bargaining power and possibly precarious working conditions. It's not theoretical, given the recent

misdemeanor conviction of the former coal baron, Don Blankenship on charges that he **willfully violated mine safety standards**. That trial, which concluded last December, underscored the stresses between labor and management — and how profits were perceived to have overridden safety protocols. Indeed, the whole mess seemed like a throwback to a bygone era.

Changing Colors

At issue here is not whether Right to Work is a useful economic development tool; rather, it is the broader picture — that a state that had been so firmly entrenched in a Democratic legacy has transitioned over to one that is in line with the Republican field, which has taken up issues and enacted state laws that have been anathema to labor's cause.

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How did that happen? The conspicuous answer, of course, is the economic hardships caused by coal's fall, largely the result of cleaner, cheaper and more abundant natural gas as well as by thinning coal seams that are harder and more expensive to extract. And, yes, there's the Obama



administration's green energy initiatives that are making investments in 21st Century fuels and technologies that are replacing dingier coal plants that were born in the mid-20th Century.

"Unions don't have any clout any more," says James Van Nostrand, professor of law at West Virginia University law school, in an interview. "It is about improving the economics of the coal industry in order to save it. But this is coming at the expense of the labor movement."

Dating back to the early 20th Century, coal companies have ruled over southern West Virginia. Before unions, they were iron-fisted and had used private guards from the Baldwin-Felts agency.

Industry was all-controlling, owning the miners' housing and the stores where they shopped. And nationally, coal helped feed a growing country and eventually, a national war effort.

From afar, the coal firms looked to be upstanding. But up close, they were brutal and the working environment mirrored that. Miners then

sought to organize, which led to armed conflict between the factions. And it wasn't until 1935 when workers were officially allowed to unionize that conditions improved — the culmination of efforts by such activists as Mother Jones and Frank Keeney.

Southern West Virginia has long been the land of the working man, helping to elect John F. Kennedy in 1960 — a tradition that continued until 2008, when President Obama vowed to “bankrupt” those pursuing coal-fired electricity. It’s a promise that has held true, with the failure of about 26 coal companies, which have lost business with the major coal-burning utilities such as American Electric Power, Duke Energy and FirstEnergy Corp.

By 2012, President Obama was defeated in all 55 West Virginia’s counties. By 2014, the Republicans took control of the state legislature and they captured all the U.S. House seats, as well an open U.S. Senate seat.

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The Paradox

Those citizens need jobs. But they also need the government, which is where the current paradox comes into play: A sizable portion of the population, especially in coal-producing regions, receive federal help — everything from food stamps, to welfare benefits to social security disability. For those 20,000 or so still laboring in the coal business — down from 125,000 in 1950 — they want safe working conditions, good pay and secure medical and retirement benefits.

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If the [Kentucky gubernatorial race](#) that occurred in November 2015 is a precursor of what it is to come in 2016, West Virginians will get an earful once again about how bad Obama is and how the once-great coal industry can resurrect itself — if coal-friendly officeholders could just change



Washington. In that Kentucky race, the Republican thumped the Democrat, even though both candidates distanced themselves from the Obama administration.

That may be a convenient campaign stump speech. But it's not a realistic plan to revitalize coal country, which needs to join in the New Energy Economy. But tough times attract savvy politicians, or those who prey on voters by tapping into their economic anxiety and emotional desperation.

West Virginia's Second Congressional District, for example, elected a man in 2014 who had just gotten beat in Maryland and who before that, had run unsuccessfully in New Hampshire for Congress. But after raising a ton of cash from out-of-staters with economic and social interests in West Virginia, Alex Mooney won — despite the fact that he had not lived in the state prior to running for office, much less voted there or given of his time to the constituents he now represents.

It's the epitome of **political**

exploitation, along the same lines as the economic exploitation once endured by the miners. Mooney hates the government, yet he loves the paycheck that taxpayers have given him his whole adult life.

“The more elected leaders that are part of the community and have the public interest at heart, the better decisions we will make,” says Downstream’s Hansen. “We need to make thoughtful and hard decisions about how to expand the economy. People who are rooted in the community and who have been here for the long haul have a strong interest in making better decisions.”

Path of Destruction

Just as the coal companies are accused of extracting the state’s riches and leaving behind a path of destruction, West Virginians are at risk of having foreign interests connected to political parasites with no real local connections do the same. More than a century later, the story is essentially unchanged and the parallels are striking. Where does it go from here?

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The antipathy toward President Obama remains. But so too do the long-standing economic circumstances: a region subsumed by the extraction industries that have flooded state governments with revenues but which have also left the little guys overly dependent on their companies, which are now crippled and which therefore want to curtail employee benefits and bargaining power.

Coal-centric campaign speeches won’t create jobs. Rather, the goal here is to diversify Appalachia’s economies. West Virginia, specifically, needs hope, not false promises. Without jobs, the economic and emotional desperation will only deepen, and the labor

movement will, in time, re-shift its allegiances.

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