

# THE MILITANT

**INSIDE**  
René González's diary of Cuban 5 trial presented in Havana  
— PAGE 7

A SOCIALIST NEWSWEEKLY PUBLISHED IN THE INTERESTS OF WORKING PEOPLE

VOL. 82/NO. 10 MARCH 12, 2018

## Bosses attacks unravel miners gains against black lung

BY BRIAN WILLIAMS

“Black Lung Disease Comes Storming Back in Coal Country” read the headline in the Feb. 22 *New York Times*. They’re talking about a debilitating and deadly disease that had been pushed way back by a powerful battle waged by miners, retirees and family members in the coalfields in the late 1960s and ’70s. This fueled a revolution won in blood by the United Mine Workers of America. In their drive for profits, coal bosses have pushed back gains union miners made in workers control over safety and conditions as the union weakened. Black lung, also known as coal workers’ pneumoconiosis, is irreversible, and often fatal.

Two miners were killed in West Virginia mines this month. James Whitlock was killed doing electrical work on machinery at the Pocahontas Coal Company Devils Fork 2 highwall mine in Raleigh County the same day as the *Times* report. Leonard Griffith was killed Feb. 6 at the Wolf Run Mining’s Sentinel mine in Barbour County working on a continuous mining machine when a block of coal came loose from the wall.

A study by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health at three

Continued on page 9

## W.Va. teachers: ‘We’re fighting for all workers’



Charleston Gazette-Mail/ Chris Dorst via AP

West Virginia teachers, school workers, miners and other supporters at Feb. 26 strike rally in Charleston. Fight won widespread solidarity, taking on aspects of broader social movement.

### School workers’ struggle wins broad support in W. Virginia

BY MARY IMO-STIKE

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — Chanting “We are united!” and singing “We’re not going to take it any more!” thousands of teachers, school workers and their supporters locked hands

Continued on page 6

**Tentative settlement reached**  
See page 6

### Organize the unorganized! Build fighting unions!

“Look at the nonunion workers at Walmart,” Scott Whitt, a school bus driver on strike alongside teachers and other school workers in West Vir-

## EDITORIAL

ginia, told the *Militant*. “They have no leg to stand on.”

It’s not only Walmart where bosses are stepping up their assaults and indignities on workers.

Continued on page 9

## Syrian rulers escalate war against toilers in E. Ghouta

BY TERRY EVANS

The Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad, backed by Moscow and Tehran, has intensified its murderous assault on the 400,000 people in the besieged Damascus suburb of eastern Ghouta.

Mass mobilizations against Assad’s dictatorship shook Syria in 2011. The regime struck back with military violence, filling its prisons with working people. In the subsequent civil war, Assad’s forces lost ground, until Moscow intervened with airstrikes in 2015. Tehran-backed militias and Hezbollah also bolstered Assad. Today working people in Syria continue to confront obstacles to advancing their interests — the intervening capitalist powers, the hated Assad dictatorship and a number of reactionary Islamist forces.

As of Feb. 27, the regime’s recent round of sustained bombardment of eastern Ghouta has killed more than 500 people. The bombs and artillery have destroyed hospitals, the main remaining bakery and dairy factory. Pro-Assad troops, including Tehran-backed militias, are mobilized along the area’s border. Some Islamist forces within Ghouta have responded by shelling civilian neighborhoods in Damascus.

Washington and others on the U.N.

Continued on page 9

## Cuba’s literacy drive ‘changed society, made us revolutionaries’



Casa de Maryland

Griselda Aguilera, a volunteer in Cuba’s literacy campaign in 1961, tells workers learning construction skills at Casa de Maryland in Hyattsville how the revolution eliminated illiteracy.

BY ARLENE RUBINSTEIN

WASHINGTON — “We made the revolution and began to change society. As we changed society, we changed — we became revolutionaries,” said Griselda Aguilera Cabrera, describing her and her generation’s experience as participants in revolutionary Cuba’s literacy drive in 1961

that taught workers and peasants how to read and write.

Seventy-five people attended the Feb. 16 meeting at the St. Stephen and the Incarnation Episcopal Church to learn more about Cuba and how the lessons from its revolution are an example for workers and youth today.

Continued on page 7

## Walmart winning ‘retail wars,’ putting squeeze on its workers

BY BRIAN WILLIAMS

Walmart and Amazon bosses have been battling for domination in market share and profits. The Walton family owners of Walmart have been winning, as Amazon has proven unable to launch any serious challenge to their utter domination of the brick-and-mortar store market.

Walmart has 11,695 stores worldwide, with 4,672 of those in the U.S. They like to brag that they have a store within 10 miles of 90 percent of the population.

The company is moving to expand online sales, striking at Amazon’s strength. Walmart’s online sales grew 23 percent in the last three months of 2017.

They ran a prime-time ad campaign for Walmart.com during the just-completed Winter Olympics, featuring both their e-commerce and their order online and pickup at the store options. The company has invested millions to set up six giant server

“cloud” operations, each larger than 10 football fields.

At a number of its brick-and-mortar stores, Walmart has separate warehouses where workers pick and pack

Continued on page 5

## Inside

New evidence shows Meek Mill railroaded to prison 2

US rulers’ Afghan war drags on amid ‘great power competition’ 4

‘I’m going to see Cuba, because the system here isn’t working’ 6

### —On the picket line—

‘We can build unions that inspire workers to fight’ 3

Ukraine miners fight bosses, government over back pay 5



# Court reinstates frame-up charges in Amtrak crash

BY SETH GALINSKY

Common Pleas Court Judge Kathryn Lewis reinstated criminal charges Feb. 6 against Brandon Bostian, the engineer who was driving Amtrak Train 188 that crashed May 12, 2015, in Philadelphia. Eight people died and 200 were injured when the Washington-to-New York train rounded a curve at more than twice the 50 mph speed limit and derailed.

Rail bosses and capitalist politicians have tried to blame Bostian and divert attention from the real culprits — the disregard for safety by the bosses and their government, including their continual efforts to slash crew sizes in search of higher profits. But from the beginning they have had difficulty making their frame-up stick, as Bostian was well respected among co-workers for working safely, and government investigators admit Bostian hadn’t used drugs or alcohol, and wasn’t on his cellphone.

The Philadelphia District Attorney’s Office refused to bring charges, saying there was no evidence of criminal intent. Just days before the statute of limitations ran out, the Pennsylvania Attorney General’s Office stepped in and filed frame-up charges against Bostian, including 200 counts of reckless endangerment, eight counts of involuntary manslaughter and one of “causing or risking a catastrophe.”

Municipal Court Judge Thomas Gehret dismissed the charges in September 2017, saying he also saw no evidence Bostian acted with criminal intent. Lewis overruled the decision.

A National Transportation Safety

Board report after the crash said Bostian likely had been distracted by reports on his radio about a nearby train that was forced to stop after vandals smashed its windshield with a rock, injuring the engineer.

When the government-funded passenger line was created in the 1970s, a minimum two-person crew was required in each Amtrak locomotive. But since 1983, over the objection of the rail unions, Amtrak began running its Northeast Corridor trains with a locomotive crew of just one engineer.

Rail workers and their union protested the efforts to frame up Bostian for the accident. If a second engineer had been in the cab to assist him “in managing the multiple tasks confronting him, there would have been no accident,” Dennis Pierce, president of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, said in a 2016 statement.

The Transportation Safety Board dismissed the union’s view.

Three years since the crash, Amtrak — like most passenger and freight railroads — still runs its trains with just one engineer.



AP Photo/Mel Evans

Engineer Brandon Bostian, inset, faces criminal charges for May 12, 2015, Amtrak crash in Philadelphia, where eight died. Rail bosses seek to frame Bostian to cover their own disregard for safety.

At the time of the 2015 crash, Amtrak had what is known as “positive train control” on the southbound tracks leading into the deadly curve, but not the northbound one that Bostian’s train was on. The system is designed to slow down and stop any train that is going above the posted speed. Since the accident, the northbound control system was activated.

There has been a string of recent

Amtrak derailments, with deadly consequences. An Amtrak train on the way to Florida Feb. 4 was shunted onto the wrong track and crashed into a freight train in South Carolina, killing two — the engineer and a train conductor — and injuring 116. Amtrak’s inaugural run on new track in Washington state from Tacoma to Portland, Oregon, derailed and crashed at high speed Dec. 18, with three killed and over 100 hurt.

## New evidence shows Meek Mill railroaded to prison

BY OLIVER HAMLET

PHILADELPHIA — In the face of a spate of new evidence that rap artist Meek Mill was framed up, Common Pleas Court Judge Genece Brinkley has set an April 16 hearing that could overturn his 2008 conviction for drug and gun possession and assault. Brinkley threw Mill, who was on parole,

back in prison last November over the objection of both the city prosecutor and his parole officer.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* revealed Feb. 13 that the District Attorney’s office kept a confidential list of some two dozen cops “with a history of lying, racial bias, or brutality,” to “guide” prosecutors on whether or not their testimony should be allowed in court. Reginald Graham, the cop who arrested Mill and was the sole witness against him in his 2008 trial, is on that list.

Former cop Jerold Gibson, who was with Graham the night Mill was arrested, swore in an affidavit released last November that Graham lied when he said that Mill pointed a gun at him during his arrest.

“The guilty verdicts were expressly based on the court crediting Officer

Graham’s testimony,” Mill’s lawyer Peter Goldberger said in requesting a hearing after the list was revealed.

Mill, an internationally known African-American performer, was arrested in 2007 when cops assaulted him and charged him with possession of drugs and a gun. He served eight months in prison and was put on probation for five years.

Judge Brinkley, who presided over that trial, has repeatedly extended Mill’s parole for alleged misbehavior since his release from prison, including one for being videoed doing wheelies on a motorbike when he was in New York promoting his latest CD.

A month later, Judge Brinkley denied a motion for bail while his lawyers appealed the prison sentence, claiming Mill is “a flight risk” and

**Continued on page 3**

## THE MILITANT

### Amnesty for immigrant workers!

*Support to the fight against deportations and for amnesty for all immigrant workers living in the U.S. is vital for unifying the entire working class. Only by rejecting the bosses’ divide-and-rule scapegoating of undocumented workers can a fighting union movement be built.*



Omaha World-Herald/Kent Sievers via AP  
Omaha, Nebraska, protest Sept. 10 against threatened deportations of “dreamers.”

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# ‘We can build unions that inspire workers to fight’

BY SETH GALINSKY

NEW YORK — Some 4,000 union members rallied here Feb. 24 — and many more in actions in 27 other cities — two days before a U.S. Supreme Court hearing on whether government workers can opt out of paying union dues.

The protests were billed as a “Working People’s Day of Action” and called

## AS I SEE IT

for “an end to a system that’s rigged against us.” Publicity mentioned little or nothing about the dues matter.

Illinois state worker Mark Janus, backed by myriad opponents of workers unionization, seeks to overturn a state law that imposes union dues on government workers, who benefit from wages, benefits, seniority protection and other gains won by the union. Janus says, “The union’s fight is not my fight.”

The New York rally program featured Democratic Party politicians, including Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio. While “you see labor going backwards all across this country, in New York it’s a different story,” Cuomo claimed. “In New York you see labor going forward.”

Despite the governor’s demagoguery, there’s no different story here and rally participants know it. Union membership in New York has been declining like in the rest of the country, while the bosses — with the help of Democratic and Republican politicians alike — impose speedup, push down wages, slash benefits and disregard basic safe-

ty measures. And it’s not because of changes around dues checkoff.

That’s why workers milling around the edges of the action I spoke with weren’t much interested in the speeches from the stage. Instead, they spent most of the rally talking to each other, trading stories about conditions on the job and worries about whether or not they’ll have a pension when they retire.

“The politicians always say, I’m with you, I’m with you,” Dabreo Dottin, a union painter, told the *Militant*. “But they’re never with us.”

The decline in construction union membership has Dottin concerned.

Top union officials like mandatory dues checkoff, because it allows them to keep getting paid — and paid handsomely — while the rank and file faces attacks on jobs, safety, health care and more. They use some of what they collect to tie the fate of the workers to electing so-called friends of labor, mostly Democratic Party politicians.

### Union membership at all-time low

Meanwhile, U.S. union membership has sunk to an all-time low. In privately owned factories, mines, transportation and retail it peaked at 35 percent in the 1950s. Today just 6.5 percent of workers at these companies are organized in a union.

In New York City some 90 percent of construction workers were union members in the 1970s. Today it is less than 40 percent.

For decades the union officialdom has failed to organize a fight to take on the bosses’ attacks.

The only power that workers have



AFSCME District 37

“Working People’s Day of Action” in New York Feb. 24. Union members came looking to discuss what to do in face of deepening capitalist economic crisis, its impact on working class and shrinking union membership. Officials called event to protect mandatory union dues checkoff.

is the force of our numbers, but this is constantly undermined under capitalism by competition among us for jobs. The bosses take advantage of this to weaken our unions.

No perspective was presented to fight to unite our class and overcome the divisions fostered by the bosses between employed and unemployed; immigrant and native-born; Black, Latino and Caucasian; women and men. Taking on these social questions are key to our ability to use our unions to stand up to the attacks by the bosses and their government today.

### Need for a fighting union movement

Most workers alive today have never seen a real fighting union, one run by the rank and file, that fights for the entire working class, that sees the bosses’ political parties as part of the enemy, not our “friend.” But there is a powerful example — the Teamsters union in Minneapolis in the 1930s and its revolutionary leadership.

The story of the organizing drives and strikes that built Teamsters Local 574, turning Minneapolis into a union town, and making the union a tribune for the interests of working people nationally and around the world, is told in a four-volume series by Socialist Workers Party leader Farrell Dobbs: *Teamster Rebellion*, *Teamster Power*, *Teamster Politics* and *Teamster Bureaucracy*, available from distributors on page 8 or from [www.pathfinderpress.com](http://www.pathfinderpress.com).

Dobbs, a coal yard worker, emerged as a leader of the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters strikes and of the subsequent 11-state organizing drive.

The bureaucratic view of mandatory dues “sees the closed shop as a liberating instrument — for the bureaucrats, that is, not the workers. It enables officials sitting on top of a union to more or less freely ignore or go against the wishes of the rank and file,” Dobbs wrote in *Teamster Power*.

“A different view on the same question arises when workers are inspired by the union. They develop a healthy resentment against freeloaders on the job and look for ways of forcing them at least to contribute financially to the cause. This leads them to favor putting a clause in the agreement with the employer making payment of union dues compulsory,” Dobbs says.

When the Minneapolis Teamsters had beaten the bosses “and the local was firmly rooted in the trucking industry, the rank and file strongly favored compulsory union membership and dues payments,” Dobbs says.

The challenge today is for us to build a union movement that inspires working people to stand up and fight

## Evidence shows Meek Mill framed

Continued from page 2

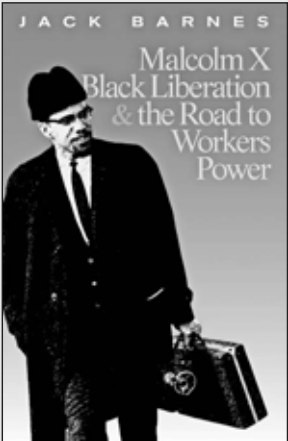
a “danger to the community.” Mill’s lawyers appealed the denial and filed a motion that Brinkley recuse herself from the case because she is prejudiced against him. *Newsweek* reported in December that the FBI is investigating Brinkley for her biased treatment of Mill.

Opposition to the criminal “jus-

tice” system’s treatment of Mill is widespread here, where signs in storefront windows, on newsstands and T-shirts proclaim, “Stand with Meek Mill.” He is seen as a symbol of the racist and anti-worker functioning of the “justice” system. Jay-Z, Kevin Hart, Colin Kaepernick and other celebrities have spoken out in his defense.

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# US rulers' Afghan war drags on amid 'great power competition'

BY TERRY EVANS

Determined to advance their political and military interests in Asia, the U.S. rulers are increasing airstrikes in Afghanistan. Washington hopes to preserve the weak Afghan government and both contain recent gains by the Taliban and force negotiations with them.

Begun on the heels of al-Qaeda's terror attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in 2001, the U.S. rulers' Afghan war drove the Taliban from power. The assault complemented Washington's war in Iraq. In both theaters, Washington sought to re-establish control and stability to defend U.S. imperialism's reach in Asia and the Middle East.

After 17 years of war — the longest in U.S. history — the U.S. rulers have not succeeded in forcing an end to the fighting or establishing a stable and authoritative government in Afghanistan. Today the Taliban has a presence in two-thirds of the country. Three suicide bombings by Islamist terrorists in Kabul, the capital, took the lives of 130 people over 10 days in January.

Since the war began, the challenges confronting Washington have grown substantially. Capitalist nations across Asia have become more reliant on economic relations with Beijing, in a region the U.S. rulers considered the chief spoil of their bloody victory in the second imperialist world war.

Presenting the U.S. government's new National Defense Strategy Jan. 19, Defense Secretary James Mattis highlighted Washington's rivalry with its capitalist competitors in Moscow and Beijing. Mattis announced "great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of U.S. national security."

"China is a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors while militarizing features in the South China Sea," he says. Mattis points to the rulers in Moscow, Iran and North Korea as additional big problems.

Speaking for the U.S. propertied owners, Mattis says they face a future of "reduced access to markets that will contribute to a decline in our prosperity," unless they mount a robust response.

"For decades the United States has enjoyed uncontested or dominant superiority in every operating domain," Mattis says. This is being challenged today, he laments.

The rulers' conclusion? "Long-term strategic competitions with China and Russia" and "Build a more lethal force."

In early January Washington suspended military aid to Pakistan, saying

its government allowed the Taliban to launch attacks on Afghanistan. Pakistan Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif replied that his government no longer was allied with Washington.

At the beginning of the Afghan war the Pervez Musharraf regime in Pakistan was transformed from a protector of the Taliban into an unstable ally of the U.S. government. Islamabad provided Washington with airbases for its bombing assaults. In 2009 the Pakistani rulers waged brutal attacks on people in areas of Pakistan controlled by the Taliban, aided by U.S. special forces and drone strikes.

But today Beijing has overtaken the U.S. capitalists as the biggest investor in Pakistan, building massive infrastructure projects there that facilitate the export of Chinese-made goods to capture markets in Europe and Africa. At the same time Beijing has made investments in the Pakistani military.

## Ruinous impact on working people

Sometime ago Washington abandoned any notion that it could win the Afghanistan war. Today it seeks to use stepped-up airstrikes on Taliban positions to force them to talk. The Pentagon announced deployment of 300 more Marines to the country's Helmand province Jan. 8. Tens of thousands of Marines fought bloody battles there until President Barack Obama ordered a withdrawal from the area in 2014, declaring the U.S. combat mission was over. The Taliban moved back in and took control of parts of the province.

For more than a decade the Pentagon has said it was getting closer to turning the war over to the Afghan military.

With a further 1,000 troops due in April, total U.S. troop deployment will rise to 15,000. While this stands in contrast to the 100,000 U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan in 2010, it shows Washington's inability to extricate itself from the war. U.S. forces increased the number of airstrikes last year, pushing the Taliban back from several districts. But the cost was a rash of civilian deaths. The Pentagon announced Feb. 1 it was taking steps to once again expand training of Afghan forces.

Concerned that they won't be able to recruit sufficient cannon fodder from among the Afghan toilers as Kabul's soldiers death toll mounts, Washington and the Afghan government decided last October they would withhold information on the number of Afghan soldiers killed.

## Tel Aviv protest: Stop deportation of African refugees



Some 20,000 people took to the streets in south Tel Aviv Feb. 24 to protest against plans to arrest and deport thousands of Sudanese and Eritrean refugees. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has sought to pit Israeli workers against the asylum-seekers, calling them "infiltrators" and charging that refugees are the cause of high crime, drug addiction and prostitution in the working-class neighborhood.

There is growing support for the fight against the deportations. El Al pilots have campaigned for airline personnel to refuse to fly any plane used in the operation.

"We did not choose to come to south Tel Aviv," Sudanese refugee Tugud Omer Adama told the protesters. "When we arrived in Israel, we were handed a one-way ticket" here.

"We are all victims in this story — the older Israeli residents and the asylum-seekers," he said. "We all live here and for so long they have tried to make us fear one another."

The demonstration was organized by Shula Keshet, a south Tel Aviv resident and leader of Residents of South Tel Aviv Against Deportation.

"South Tel Aviv is for renewal, for public housing, for spreading the refugees throughout the country and for a dignified life for all," Keshet said. "Does anybody hear us? Does anybody see?"

"They say your city's impoverished take precedence over the foreigner, and I say what is actually happening is that the wealthy take precedence over the poor and the asylum-seekers," she added.

"Our daily difficulties did not begin with the arrival of the asylum-seekers," Zehava Vaknin, another local resident, said. The government is "building towers for the wealthy. Why jail people who have fled war?"

Some 38,000 Sudanese and Eritrean refugees are in Israel today. They arrived between 2006 and 2013, until the Israeli government completed a wall along the Egypt-Israel border.

— SETH GALINSKY

The U.S. rulers' war has worsened the ruinous conditions faced by working people. Over 400,000 were forced to flee their homes last year alone, and in the course of the conflict millions have become refugees, fleeing to Pakistan and Iran. According to the U.N., 3,438 Afghan civilians were killed last year.

Seventeen years of U.S.-led "reconstruction" has done nothing to address the abysmal conditions working people there face. Half the population of Afghanistan has no access to electricity, 60 percent are illiterate and average life expectancy is 51 years. Tens of thousands of farmers see growing poppies for the drug trade as the only way to survive.

The cleric-led capitalist regime in Iran initially opposed the Taliban, which is based among Sunni Muslims, and backed Washington's efforts to oust them from power. But as the U.S.-led intervention expanded, the Iranian rulers decided they could expand their counterrevolutionary clout more effectively by turning against Washington. They began providing money, training and weapons to the Taliban.

## Roots of Afghanistan war

The Taliban has its origins among Islamist groups cobbled together by the U.S. rulers to fight the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. A popular revolution had opened space for working people there in 1978, but in the absence of a revolutionary work-

ing-class leadership, the Stalinist-led People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan came to power. This government became increasingly isolated, refusing to respond to the needs of the toilers or mobilize peasants and other working people to advance their interests against the landlords and capitalists.

Moscow intervened militarily in 1979 to back one faction within the PDPA that was engaged in a murderous struggle against opponents in the party.

In the course of a 10-year war with U.S.-backed Islamist forces, which included Osama bin Laden and others who became the leaders of al-Qaeda, some 15,000 Soviet workers in uniform were killed. The war became increasingly unpopular at home. Moscow withdrew its troops in 1989. The anti-war discontent and military defeat were among the causes of the Soviet Union's implosion.

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# Ukraine miners fight bosses, government over back pay

BY EMMA JOHNSON

Coal miners and their families in Novogrodivka, in part of Donetsk province outside Moscow-backed separatist control, rallied outside the bosses’ office there Feb. 14, blocking entrance to the building. The workers demanded payment of wages owed to them. When they didn’t get a response, they cut off roads into and out of the city

Their fight is part of broader efforts by miners in Ukraine to push for payment of outstanding wages, for raises, and for safer working conditions. Some 18 miners have been killed on the job over the past year. Victories won in some recent fights have strengthened their union, the Independent Trade Union of Miners of Ukraine (NPGU).

After deciding to put up round-the-clock picketing, the Novogrodivka miners built a tent camp and installed heating. The mine is part of the state-owned company Selydivvuhillia, which also runs the Kotlyarevskoho, Kurakhivka and Ukraina mines. Workers in those mines joined the protest.

Miners from all four units held a joint rally in Novogrodivka Feb. 15

and announced they had formed a joint strike committee. They said they were going to Kiev, the capital, to demand a meeting with Prime Minister Vladimir Groisman.

The next day, Deputy Prime Minister Volodymyr Kistion announced the government had transferred 365 million hryvnia (\$13.6 million) to the state coal enterprises, earmarked for paying back wages to workers. This falls far short of the overall pay arrears of 945 million hryvnia owed coal miners. And the 90 million hryvnia allocated to the Selydivvuhillia-owned mines doesn’t even cover half of wages owed to workers there.

Miners and leaders of the NPGU left for Kiev and met Feb. 21 with Igor Nasalik, minister of the Energy and Coal Industry. The meeting produced “zero results,” the union reported.

“There will be no pay if there is no work,” Nasalik declared. “And first of all, pass the word to the miners’ wives so they know.”

The nine-member workers’ delegation responded by sitting in at the ministry, announcing an indefinite hunger strike until all arrears are paid.

# Bosses ‘retail wars’ target workers’ jobs, conditions

Continued from front page just for Walmart.com orders.

Other competitors are left behind, closing stores and vacating malls all across the country. The nearly 16 million retail workers in stores nationwide are being hit with layoffs, increased speedup and cuts in hours, pay and benefits.

The crisis in retail is part of a broader crisis of production, trade, profits and jobs besetting U.S. and world capitalism. There were nearly 7,000 store closures announced in 2017, double the number in 2016. Thousands more are projected this year.

Like the other storeowners, Walmart bosses are “streamlining,” closing stores and combining jobs. In January, the company shut more than 60 Sam’s Club locations, 10 percent of these stores nationwide. The previous year Walmart closed more than 150 stores and scaled back plans to open new ones.

Walmart still lags behind Amazon’s e-commerce operation, accounting for some 4 percent of the U.S. market last year, compared to Amazon’s 43.5 percent. Amazon — which was known for years for no profits as bosses plowed income into cost-cutting and expansion — made money this year, raking in \$1.9 billion in profit over the Christmas season. Amazon’s workforce has grown, now over half a million.

But Walmart is the largest employer in the U.S. with 1.5 million workers, and another 800,000 in the rest of the world. A study done a couple years ago said that if Walmart were a country, its sales would rank it 28th in the world in gross domestic product, right behind Norway and ahead of Austria.

Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and his brethren’s efforts to challenge Walmart’s dominance in physical stores have failed to make much of a dent. Last August Amazon purchased Whole Foods Market, specialty niche food stores that come nowhere near

competing with Walmart — the largest purveyor of groceries in the country.

Amazon’s owners are experimenting with stores that are “cashierless.”

“To enter the Amazon Go store, customers download a smartphone app,” Bloomberg News reported Feb. 22, “that opens a glass turnstile. ... From there, machines take over, watching the items plucked from shelves and adding them to a shopping cart. Shoppers are billed once they leave.”

The Waltons see no reason to be concerned.

The “retail wars” between Walmart and Amazon have left lots of collateral damage as competitors have been forced to retrench. The scorecard of

CP.  
ЛЮТ. 7

«The Militant» розповів про боротьбу  
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ДрукEmail

Ukraine miners’ union leads  
fight for pay rise, faces attacks

BY JOHN STUTHER  
Ten of thousands of iron ore miners and steelworkers led in the industrial city of Kryvyi Rih in the center of Ukraine, working for Arselohidmet, Evraz and other companies. For years they have fought to build and strengthen independent unions that can take on the bosses and their backers in the government.  
Over the past year there have been a series of mine occupations and other protests, demanding payment of wage arrears, raises and safer working conditions. Last May members of the Independent Trade Union of Miners of Ukraine (NPGU) at three of the main mines in Kryvyi Rih — Evraz Sukha Balka, Arselohidmet and the Kryvyi Rih Iron Ore Combine — staged an occupation and called in the miners; the days said they won a 30 percent wage increase.  
In an interview, Dec. 31, Yuri Semchenko, head of the union in Kryvyi Rih, and Sergei Barabashuk, leader of the Arselohidmet union, said:  
“The company put a camera up outside the union office in the mine,” he said. “They told us it was for any protection. But the fact is it was to get every miner who comes to talk to us, to discuss issues against workers by management. We demand they take it away!”  
“Other workers report they have been searched and interrogated by bosses asking them about strike activities and about Barabashuk. “We want to be workers around the world know about this, so we see as a better position to defend ourselves,” he said.  
There is still a sizable miners’ union in Ukraine that was the official government union before the violence began in the country collapsed in 1995. “It tries to make things go smoothly for the bosses at Evraz and has made it harder for workers to fight,” Barabashuk said.  
“There are 3,000 workers in the mine,” he said.  
“We send our greetings to workers in the U.S.” he said.



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Independent miners’ union in Ukraine posted *Militant* article, interviewing Sergei Barabashuk, union leader at Evraz mine, on its website. Barabashuk said international solidarity is critical.

On Feb. 25, the chairman of the Free Trade Union of Medical Workers, Oleg Panasenکو, came to the ministry to provide the strikers with medical assistance. Meanwhile, the workers at the four mines have ended their walkouts.

“Wages must be paid on time,” Valery Mamchenko, deputy chair of the former state-sponsored Trade Union of Coal Industry Workers of Ukraine, said in a statement supporting the miners. “Last year 2.8 billion hryvnia was allocated for the development of the coal industry, including the wage fund, but this year the amount is

less than half.”

Both federations are affiliated to the IndustriAll Global Union, whose general secretary, Valter Sanches, demanded Ukraine’s prime minister back the miners’ “legitimate demands.”

The *Militant* has reported on the recent round of battles by Ukrainian workers, particularly in underground mines, fighting for back wages and workers’ rights. The mine bosses at the Ingulskaya uranium mine took 94 miners to court for “illegal striking” in November, after workers staged an underground protest demanding a 50 percent wage increase and improved working conditions. After the union mobilized supporters from mines across the region to join them in court, the judge threw the case out Feb. 9.

“The union has been involved in a growing number of strikes and court cases,” Sergei Barabashuk, union leader at the Evraz iron ore mine in Kryvyi Rih, told the *Militant* in January. “We’re winning many of these fights.”

The union federation put a picture of the *Militant* with its article on the union’s fight in Kryvyi Rih and Ingulskaya on its website, translating extensive quotes from its coverage. With the growing combativity and strength of the union, Barabashuk reported company harassment has increased. “We want to let workers around the world know about this, so we are in a better position to defend ourselves,” he said.

## 25, 50, AND 75 YEARS AGO

March 12, 1993

BOONVILLE, Indiana — The strike by the United Mine Workers of America against Peabody Coal entered its fourth week with the company bringing busloads of scabs across UMWA picket lines at the Lynnville and Squaw Creek mines here February 22. This action escalated the stakes in an already important strike.

“This is a bitter pill for union members to swallow,” striker Dave Hadley from Squaw Creek said. But the well-publicized company attack on the strike has increased support for the miners.

UMWA members delivering a trainload of coal to a power plant here were ordered to bring empty Squaw Creek railcars back to the struck mine. However, they refused to cross the UMWA picket lines and left the train outside the mine. Local carpenters union members have built picket shacks. Peabody with 7,000 UMWA miners, is the largest coal company in the United States.

March 11, 1968

The last few weeks have seen a sharp intensification of the struggle taking place in the Soviet Union between dissident intellectuals and the Soviet bureaucracy.

Twelve leading Soviet intellectuals took the very courageous action of air-mailing a document to the conference of Communist parties in Budapest. The document appealed to the conference “to consider the peril caused by the trampling on man in our country.”

The document was sent in defiance of heavy pressure from the KGB (secret political police), which has threatened the intellectuals with imprisonment if they persist in criticizing violations of Soviet law in trying and condemning citizens for holding views that do not meet with official approval.

The document protested the “series of political trials” in recent years and the imprisonment of individuals solely “for their beliefs.”

March 13, 1943

Immediately after learning of Postmaster General Walker’s order revoking the second-class mailing privileges of the *Militant*, we issued a statement to the press announcing our intention of contesting the order in the courts.

We take this step because we know that the only “crime” which our paper has committed is to tell the truth, soberly and consistently, about the great social, political and economic questions that concern the working people. There are powerful forces in the ruling circles of this country who consider it “seditious” to speak the truth about their activities, and there are bureaucrats in the administration who want to use the war for the purpose of stifling all criticism of their policies. Against them and all their weapons of persecution, we are prepared to fight to the very end to prevent the truth from being suppressed.

The Militant March 12, 2018 5



# School workers strike in W.Va.

**Continued from front page**  
above their heads on the steps of the state Capitol here Feb. 26. All the state's school workers — teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, custodians and others — walked out four days earlier, closing all the schools in West Virginia's 55 counties.

For every school day of the walk-out they rallied outside and inside the Capitol and at schools across the state. This is the first teachers strike in West Virginia since 1990.

"This all started with the health premiums," Maria McCoy Hanna, a middle-school teacher in Greenbrier County, told the *Militant*. "Premiums are going up and I pay that out of pocket. The pay raise won't even cover that."

In West Virginia the state legislature decides on the wages and benefits for all workers in the public school system. Arguing that the state lacks the funds for health coverage, government officials voted to put this on the backs of workers. Legislators voted to increase the premiums and limit wage raises to 1 percent for each of the coming five years, outraging the workers.

Union locals in each of the 55 counties then met and members voted in all of them to authorize a statewide walk-out before the end of the legislative session March 10.

On Feb. 17 thousands of teachers and school service workers, joined by coal miners, students and other allies of their fight, gathered outside the Capitol Feb. 17, chanting "Fed up, fired up!" and "Enough is enough!"

The legislature responded three days later by freezing imposition of the new premiums for 16 months and raising wages 2 percent in the first year.

West Virginia ranks 48th out of the 50 states in teachers' wages. There are hundreds of vacancies across the state with neighboring states offering substantially higher pay.

"I took a \$16,000 pay cut when I moved here from Kentucky," McCoy Hanna said. "I work two jobs. I have to. I have student loans."

The workers originally announced a two-day strike. "It is clear that education employees are not satisfied with the inaction of the legislative leadership or the governor to date," the American Federation of Teachers,

West Virginia Education Association and West Virginia School Service Personnel Association — the unions that represent the workers in the school system — said in a joint statement Feb. 23, extending the strike.

"We've got to stay out, and stay out together," Scott Whitt, a Raleigh County school bus driver, told the *Militant* at the Feb. 26 rally. "A 'rolling strike' where only four or five counties at a time are out would be bad. That would be like the 'selected strikes' they started in the mines. It weakens us."

State officials declared the work stoppage illegal, as they did in 1990. But so far they haven't attempted to enforce the order.

"An injunction is not going to change anything," Whitt said. "My grandfather was a UMW miner. Back then, coal barons would have your house burned down if they wanted to. This is labor's last chance. We have nowhere to go if we don't fight now. Look at the nonunion workers at Walmart. They have no leg to stand on."

## Widespread support across the state

United Mine Workers President Cecil Roberts spoke at the Feb. 26 rally, calling on "every union member in the state of West Virginia — coal miners, steelworkers, rubber workers, electri-



AFT-West Virginia Facebook

**Members, retirees of United Mine Workers union join picket line of striking teachers and school workers in Kanawha County, West Virginia, Feb. 22. Strikers are fighting for all workers.**

cal workers, everybody — to stand around these workers."

Students in 12 counties released a joint open letter backing their teachers.

The workers have taken steps to minimize the impact of the walkout on other workers, aided by a broad social movement in their support. Churches, community centers, recreation centers and other groups have opened their doors to give children a place to go during school hours, which means their parents don't have to miss work to care for them. Food drives and soup kitchens have been organized to make sure children who

rely on schools for their lunch won't go hungry.

Workers in West Virginia have faced an economic and social crisis for years. International competition and government regulations have caused a drop in demand for area coal, a key industry in the state. And coal bosses closed down or shifted production elsewhere to escape the United Mine Workers union. Coal mining jobs have plummeted in the state by 40 percent over the last five years. Today West Virginia has one of the highest rates of deaths from opioid overdoses in the country.

"In these circumstances, there is a lot of social tension building up here," Thorn Roberts, who works in his family's oil and gas business in Elizabeth, West Virginia, told the *Militant* Feb. 24. Pointing to miners' labor battles 100 years ago, he said, "A lot has gone wrong since then. But the teachers strike may be an advance rumbling of something, like a preliminary seismic shock."

Emma Johnson contributed to this article.

## Teachers, school workers end strike, pending gov't action

After meeting with representatives of teachers and other school workers unions Feb. 27, West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice said he had a "change of heart" and would propose the state legislature raise workers' pay by 5 percent for the first year of the new contract. Union officials said teachers and other workers would go back to work March 1, pending the legislature's agreement to the deal and progress on reversing increases in health care premiums.

The workers are watching closely. "Out of everyone that I spoke to, only one person in Raleigh County is satisfied with what transpired yesterday," school bus driver Scott Whitt told the *Militant* Feb. 28.

— EMMA JOHNSON

# 'I'm going to see Cuba because system here isn't working'

BY BRIAN WILLIAMS

I want to go to Cuba "to see another model for doing things as this system here is not working," Lou Murrey, 27, told the *Militant* Feb. 19. She decided to go on this year's April 22-May 6 May Day Brigade to Cuba after hearing

about it during the recent East Coast tour of Griselda Aguilera, a veteran of Cuba's 1961 literacy campaign. Murrey works with the Stay Together Appalachian Youth project in Tennessee.

Aguilera's tour in the Midwest and the East Coast inspired a number of young people to join in the brigade.

Organized by the Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP), the brigade will provide participants with an opportunity to see the Cuban Revolution firsthand, how workers and farmers made their revolution in 1959 and the example it provides for working people throughout the world today. The National Network on Cuba is coordinating efforts to sign up people in the U.S.

Participants will join Cuban farmers in agricultural work; meet with representatives of student, trade union, women's and other mass organizations; visit factories and speak with veterans of some of the historic battles of the revolution. They will join with hundreds of thousands in the May Day march in Havana and participate in an international conference of solidarity with the socialist revolution the next day.

The three-day Tennessee leg of

Aguilera's tour "helped arouse curiosity about the Cuban Revolution," Samir Hazboun from Knoxville, Tennessee, told the *Militant* Feb. 26 by phone. "We have six people committed to go and another three to four working out job and financial challenges to make it." Hazboun said plans are in the works for a fundraising party March 3 "with bands and political education to help pull money together for the trip."

"I was so inspired by her life," said Raven Powell, 20, after hearing Aguilera speak Feb. 21 at Pellissippi State Community College. "That's what I want to do too!" She signed up to find out more about the May Day Brigade.

The cost of the brigade, including meals and lodging in Cuba, is \$675. Air travel, which costs extra, is being coordinated with the Marazul Travel Agency.

The deadline for getting in applications and initial payments is March 16, with full payments due a week later. Applications and the full schedule can be downloaded at [www.NNOC.info](http://www.NNOC.info). Email: [ICanGoToCuba@nnoc.info](mailto:ICanGoToCuba@nnoc.info).

Janice Lynn from Atlanta contributed to this article.

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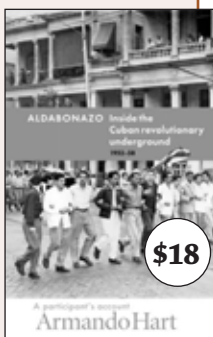
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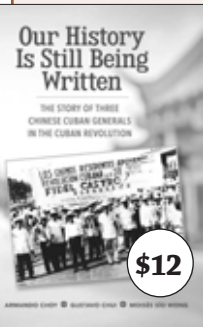
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# René González's diary of Cuban 5 trial presented in Havana

## Book shows face of US capitalist 'justice' system, caliber of Cuban revolutionaries

BY MARTÍN KOPPEL

HAVANA — One of the events that drew the most interest at this year's Havana International Book Fair was the presentation of a book by René González, one of the five Cuban revolutionaries who spent up to 16 years in U.S. prisons, framed up for their actions in defense of the Cuban Revolution.

He was introducing *Escrito desde el banquillo: El diario de René* (Written from the dock: René's diary), the journal González kept during their seven-month-long trial in a U.S. federal court in Miami. It was published in three volumes by Editora Capitán San Luis, publishing house of Cuba's Ministry of Interior.

Joining González at the Feb. 9 book presentation was Ricardo Alarcón, former president of Cuba's National Assembly, who was a prominent voice in the Cuban government's tireless efforts to win the release of the Five.

Some 200 people attended the book launch, including many who were involved in the campaign for the release of Gerardo Hernández, Antonio Guerrero, Ramón Labañino, Fernando González, and René González — the Five Heroes, as they are known here. In the front row were Hernández, Guerrero, and numerous family members of the Five, including Olga Salanueva, René's wife.

While living in south Florida during the 1990s, the five gathered information for the Cuban government on the actions and plans of counterrevolutionary Cuban American groups with a long history of bombings and other murderous attacks in Cuba, the U.S., and elsewhere in the Americas.

Arrested by the FBI in September 1998, they were initially locked up for 17 months in the "hole" at Miami's Federal Detention Center in an unsuccessful effort to break them. González's diary spans the period from November 2000, when their trial began, to March 2002 when the five were shipped off to different prisons across the United States to begin serving their sentences.

### Dignity and confidence

González's day-by-day account details how the five revolutionaries conducted themselves with dignity and confidence in face of brutal prison conditions and the government's frame-up operation in the courtroom. It paints a vivid picture of the capitalist "justice" system that millions of working people in the United States are familiar with from personal experience.

René's diary contains dozens of pages of related photos and illustrations. They include prison paintings by Guerrero and cartoons — many published for the first time — that Hernández drew during the trial, skewering with humor the pretenses of the U.S. judge and prosecutors that they were conducting a "fair trial."

Hernández, Labañino, and Guerrero were sentenced to life without parole on charges of "conspiracy to commit espionage," and Hernández was given an additional life sentence for "conspiracy to commit murder." Fernando González and René González were sentenced to 19 years and 15 years, respectively.

At the book fair presentation, Alarcón paid homage to the courage and



Above, top right, Militant photos by Carole Lesnick

René González, one of five Cuban revolutionaries framed by U.S. rulers for their actions in defense of the Cuban Revolution, signs copies of his diary of their trial, top right, at Havana Book Fair presentation, above. Others in front row: Gerardo Hernández, at center, Antonio Guerrero, far right, and family members, including González's wife Olga Salanueva.



integrity of each of the Five. He noted that René could have pled guilty to the charge against him: acting as an unregistered agent of the Cuban government. But he refused to do so and "decided to go to trial in solidarity with his four brothers."

González explained that immigration cops arrested his wife Olga Salanueva, then living in Miami, in an attempt to pressure him to testify against the other four. Prosecutors asked him to plead guilty in exchange for a lesser sentence and warned that if he didn't, his wife would be deported. They handed him a plea-bargain form.

"I took the form," González said. "Then I asked Gerardo, who was the artist in our group of five, to paint a middle finger in the blank space where

my signature was supposed to go, and I returned the form."

On the eve of the trial Salanueva was deported to Cuba. "I kept a diary so that my wife, my family, and the Cuban people would know what was happening in the trial," González said. His first entry began, "November 21, 2000. My love, Today I'm starting the longest letter I've written or will ever write." The last entry was written 16 months later.

Just before U.S. authorities carried out their threat and deported Salanueva, "my lawyer went to see Olga to see how she was doing. He told me, 'Your wife says: if they didn't break you before, she expects nothing less of you now.'"

González told the audience that *Written from the Dock* will "help the reader get a clear idea about who we were deal-

ing with in this case" — the U.S. imperialist rulers. The enemy facing the Cuban Revolution "is the same enemy as 50 years ago. They might change their methods, but the system is the same.

"We're not dealing with Obama or Trump, or Kennedy or Nixon. We're dealing with an empire. It has sought to swallow us up for more than 200 years. And it will continue trying to do so."

Even more importantly, the book is about the caliber of the leadership of Cuba's socialist revolution and the men and women who have been transformed by it.

"The five of us did what we had to do," González said. "But let's be clear — if we hadn't been children of the Cuban Revolution, we wouldn't have been the Five."

## Literacy drive 'changed society, made revolutionaries'

### Continued from front page

It was sponsored by the D.C. Metro Coalition in Solidarity with the Cuban Revolution and endorsed by more than a dozen area groups.

Catherine Murphy, director of the documentary "Maestra" (teacher) — about the 1961 literacy drive — showed the film at the meeting. Murphy helped organize the D.C. leg of the tour. The documentary describes how a quarter of a million volunteers worked with more than 700,000 fellow Cubans, wiping out illiteracy in less than a year. Some 100,000 of these volunteers were under 18, the majority female. At age 7, Aguilera was the youngest volunteer.

"In the coming year, our country intends to wage its great battle against illiteracy, with the ambitious goal of teaching every single illiterate person in the country to read and write," Fidel Castro told the U.N. General Assembly in September 1960.

"That's exactly what we did. This immeasurable project, one of the first campaigns of the revolution, succeeded because it was a movement," Aguilera said. "It was planned, organized. Teacher's Day, Dec. 22, is celebrated in Cuba."

"We challenged the past. In towns where the custom was to have blacks on one side, and whites on the other, where no one asked why, people began to work

together," she said. "Women began to feel a sense of freedom for the first time in their lives. It was a rupture from that archaic way of raising young women. It was a revolution inside the revolution."

"What can you tell me about why Cuba nationalized industries?" asked Nubia Kai, a leader of the D.C. Metro Coalition.

"The revolutionary government put the electrical companies, the telephone company, the nickel mines, the hospitals, the private schools, into the hands of the people and the nation to run them," Aguilera answered.

"But I want to give you an accurate picture. Cuba is not perfect," she said. "The young generation lives in a different world today. We are too poor to have many 'things,' but those things that we hear about from tourists and the internet pull on young people.

"We explain the history of our struggle. We explain where the respect for our revolution around the world comes from," she said. "They don't come from things, but from struggles and sacrifices."

Jennifer Ubiera, a participant in last fall's "In the Footsteps of Che" International Brigade to Cuba, urged those at the meeting to sign up for the May Day Brigade. The meeting ended with greetings from Miguel Fraga,

first secretary of the Cuban Embassy.

Aguilera spoke to 60 workers and staff members Feb. 14 at Casa de Maryland's Prince George's Workers Center in Hyattsville, Maryland. Participants included immigrants from Africa and Latin America. The meeting, conducted in Spanish, was translated into both French and English. After the gathering she toured the center, which trains workers in construction trades and safety. Aguilera worked advancing education and safety for construction workers in Cuba.

"Since the compañera's visit, many students have asked me, did you hear the part where Griselda said that illiteracy was stamped out in a year, not hundreds of years?" Lindolfo Carballo, a former construction worker and director of Casa's Community Economic Development Department, told the *Militant*. "Imperialism will never succeed in teaching people to read."

Aguilera spent the next day in Richmond, Virginia, where she spoke to some 250 students at Huguenot High School. The African Awareness Association hosted a citywide meeting of 45 that evening at the Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church. She also spoke to students at the Nyum-buru Cultural Center at the University of Maryland.







# Organize! Build fighting unions!

Continued from front page

“We’re not fighting just for teachers,” said one picket sign held by striking West Virginia teachers. “We’re fighting for all workers in West Virginia.” Their fight for better wages and health care is an example for workers everywhere. The struggle has aspects of a broader social movement. Teachers worked with parents and others in advance to make sure the walkout would not harm those most in need. Day care centers and meals were organized for the children.

The spirit of the teachers and school workers has made it possible to win broad solidarity and gives a glimmer of how a fighting union movement can unite working people against boss and government attacks.

It’s in the towns and mountains of West Virginia that a revolution began in the United Mine Workers union in the late 1960s and ’70s, wresting control of the union from the corrupt Tony Boyle machine. Mineworkers won the right to read, discuss and vote on their contract. They set up union safety committees with the power to shut down unsafe conditions. The union led a social movement that fought for retirees, demanded and won health care for those afflicted with black lung and joined broader social protests.

But over time, union officials have retreated, like the leadership of the rest of the labor movement, looking increasingly to their own welfare and to deals with various capitalist politicians, not the fighting capacity of the workers themselves. The unions have gotten weaker as the crisis of the capitalist system has driven

the bosses to sharper attacks on our class. Today only 6 percent of private industry workers are in the union.

More than 100 years ago, Karl Marx wrote that the unions must “act deliberately as organizing centers of the working class in the broad interest of its *complete emancipation*. They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction” and act “as the champions and representatives of the whole working class.”

This is true more than ever today as the bosses make working people pay for the crisis of capitalism and where workers in uniform are being sent off as cannon fodder to die in their wars in Afghanistan, Syria and others sure to come.

Socialist Workers Party members knocking on doors in working-class neighborhoods find there is a serious discussion going on about what our class needs to do to effectively challenge the employers’ assaults. We need to learn to think socially and act politically to unite the working class. We have to organize and strengthen unions that can speak for all the oppressed and exploited. And we need to organize independently of the two capitalist parties, with an eye to overthrowing capitalist rule and take political power ourselves, as Cuban workers and farmers did in 1959.

The strike by teachers and other school workers in West Virginia is a harbinger of bigger battles to come. We need to join in, build solidarity with all of these fights, and deepen the discussion among working people on the road forward.

# Bosses attacks unravel gains against black lung

Continued from front page

clinics in southwestern Virginia reports that more than 400 miners were diagnosed with progressive massive fibrosis there over the past four years. This is “the largest cluster of advanced black lung disease ever reported,” National Public Radio reported Feb. 6. In a follow-up study of additional clinics NPR reported nearly 2,000 cases over a similar period.

Nearly a quarter of the miners affected are younger and had been on the job fewer than 20 years. The disease they’ve got is a particularly virulent form.

“We’re seeing things we didn’t see in the 1990s,” Ron Carson, black lung director at Stone Mountain Health Services in southwestern Virginia, told the *Militant* Feb. 26. “Miners are getting sicker, disabled and their lung volume is decreasing.

“Miners are saying that the easy coal is gone, that we’ve got to drill through so much rock and silica now to get to good coal,” Carson said. “Machinery chops the rock and dust so fine the respirators don’t capture the real fine dust.” Companies are trying to extract more coal “with fewer miners working longer hours.”

In the late 1960s and ’70s, coal miners organized a revolution in their union — the United Mine Workers — to fight against mounting cases of black lung, for safety on the job and to retake control of their union. They faced not just coal bosses who put profits over miners’ lives, and a government that stood with the bosses, but also a corrupt, thug misleadership on top of the United Mine Workers. They set up the Black Lung Association and Miners for Democracy and fought.

## Revolution in the union

Many of the fighters were so-called “discards of the industry” — the disabled, the widows, victims of black lung. At the time, a number of the miners in southern West Virginia were Black, including Robert Payne, president of the Disabled Miners and Widows.

They fought with determination and discipline. “We were after something and we got it,” Raymond Wright, a miner and one of the rank-and-file leaders, told the *UMW Journal* in 2001. “Everyone was sober,

everybody was serious. We were so orderly and respectable, we came out on top.”

Miners came behind Jock Yablonski, who ran for president of the union in 1969 in an effort to oust the corrupt Tony Boyle machine. Boyle hired thugs who shot and killed Yablonski, his wife and daughter.

Miners redoubled their fight, forced passage of black lung health care laws, got Boyle jailed and took back their union.

Miners set up union safety committees with the power to shut production — power they used — to enforce safety. Incidents of black lung declined more than 90 percent from the 1970s to the mid-1990s.

## Bosses’ counterrevolution

But the bosses pushed back through layoffs and the closure of many union mines. Twenty years ago the union had 240,000 members. In 2015 there were about 10,000 working UMWA members — 21 percent of U.S. coal miners.

Instances of black lung began to rise dramatically. In 2014, a year before his death, Donald Rasmussen, a well-known doctor from southern West Virginia who spent decades helping miners and their union fight black lung, told the *Militant*, “We’re seeing a very distinct increase in advanced cases that we hadn’t seen in quite a long time. Mining machines have become more powerful. They can cut through rock and this creates silica dust, which is more toxic than coal dust.”

For many diagnosed with black lung, companies put all kinds of roadblocks in the way of miners getting benefits. “Lawyers fight and they fight, companies fight and they fight, they fight so long they hope someone dies,” Steve White, black lung counselor at the Tug River Health Association in Gary, West Virginia, and a former UMWA miner, told the *Militant* Feb. 26. “I don’t know how many coal miners died before receiving benefits. My dad fought for 15 years and never got it. His check came three days after he was buried.”

“I got breathing problems that doctors say is not caused by black lung,” Randy Hall, a retired miner who worked 21 years at the Jim Walter no. 5 Mine in Brookwood, Alabama, told the *Militant*. “But they don’t know what’s causing it.”

“I would never work in a nonunion mine because of just safety alone. In union mines, you get backing, strong backing,” he said. “When I was in the mine if I said it was unsafe, I would make it safe, or figure I didn’t have to do it.”

# Syrian war on Ghouta

Continued from front page

Security Council secured Moscow’s backing for a cease-fire resolution over Ghouta by leaving the door open for continued assaults against “terrorists.” Bombing continued after the motion was adopted Feb. 24. Syria and its allied militias have massed troops for an assault.

This conflict is unfolding as opposing imperialist and capitalist powers position themselves to defend their interests in the region. The U.S. rulers and the Syrian Democratic Forces — the Kurdish-led force that is Washington’s “ally of convenience” — hold sway over 25 percent of Syria, including a large chunk of its oil resources.

## Tehran’s counterrevolution

To maintain their counterrevolutionary course against working people at home, Iran’s capitalist rulers are driven to extend their influence across the region. In combination with its ally Hezbollah based in Lebanon, they have established military bases and weapons factories in Syria. The effects on working people in Iran from Tehran’s military intervention in Syria, Iraq and other parts of the Mideast provoked widespread working-class unrest in December and January.

Tel Aviv seeks to prevent Tehran from establishing a permanent Syrian presence, which it sees as an existential threat. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has met several times with Russian President Vladimir Putin to press Moscow to limit the presence of Iranian and Hezbollah forces near Israel’s borders. The Russian rulers want to preserve their growing influence in Syria, and maintain relations with Tel Aviv.

Moscow and Damascus both say the areas under control of the Syrian Democratic Forces should be returned to Assad’s control. This includes areas where Washington has bases and at least 2,000 troops.

The U.S. rulers are the dominant military power in the region, with tens of thousands of troops and massive air and naval power. They have no intention of relinquishing any part of Syria they control. Washington responded with massive firepower against an armed challenge by pro-Assad forces at Deir el-Zour Feb. 7. U.S. air and artillery strikes killed over 200 attackers and prevented them from retaking oil fields in the area.

Among the dead were Russian mercenaries. Moscow refuses to say how many were killed and sought to deny any government links, though they were trained on Moscow’s bases in Syria and survivors were airlifted to Moscow for medical care.

*Deutsche Welle* said the mercenaries were part of the Wagner group that fought alongside Russian-backed separatists who seized parts of eastern Ukraine after the popular Maidan uprising overthrew the Russian-backed regime of Viktor Yanukovich there.

Putin is wary that his government’s wars could become increasingly unpopular at home. Protests against Moscow’s assault on Ukrainian sovereignty took place in several Russian cities in 2014.

## Ankara invades Afrin

The Turkish rulers have vowed to remove the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) from Afrin, a majority Kurdish canton separated from the larger Kurdish provinces to the east. They’ve threatened to extend their invasion to sweep Kurdish forces from the entire border with Turkey. Both Washington and Moscow acquiesced to Ankara’s assault on Afrin. Turkish army units and its allied Free Syrian Army forces, backed by Turkish warplanes, have made relatively slow progress since the invasion Jan. 20.

The YPG asked the Assad government to send its forces to Afrin. Assad sent militia forces, trained by Tehran to the province.

Ankara seeks to weaken the YPG in Syria as it also drives to deal blows to the Kurdish national struggle in Turkey. Backed by Washington, the rulers of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey have denied the Kurdish people a homeland for decades. Kurds resist these assaults on their national rights.

But without a rise in broader struggles by working people Kurds have limited allies as they face the region’s rulers, who remain determined to push back the autonomous area that Kurds have carved out.

The YPG has begun transferring SDF combatants from Aleppo, Deir el-Zour and elsewhere to buttress its forces in Afrin. It has ceded control of Kurdish neighborhoods of Aleppo to the Assad regime.

### ‘Militant’ Prisoners’ Fund

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