

IN SUPPORT OF THE UNITED MINE WORKERS OF AMERICA
A resolution approved by General Synod XIX (1993)

Background

The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) represents approximately 60,000 working coal miners and 120,000 retirees who are covered by the 1988 National Bituminous Coal Wage Agreement (NBCWA), a contract that is negotiated between the UMWA and the Bituminous Coal Operators Association (BCOA).

The average age of the UMWA member is 44 years old and the average life of a mine owned by the companies belonging to the BCOA is seven years. That means, on average, many UMWA miners will be in their late 40s or early 50s when their mines run out of coal and shut down. At that age, they will be too old to retrain and too young to retire.

Over the last decade, BCOA-member companies have developed complex corporate structures designed to avoid the UMWA contract and to deny their loyal, unionized workers job opportunities at newly-opened or purchased mining operations. Many companies have also avoided hiring the many thousands of laid-off union miners by bringing in non-union subcontractors to mine their coal properties.

Resolution

WHEREAS, the Second General Synod of the United Church of Christ affirmed the “role, rights, and responsibilities of both organized labor and management in the democratic functioning of an industrial society;”

WHEREAS, subsequent General Synods and UCC instrumentalities have reaffirmed support by the United Church of Christ for collective bargaining and fair labor practices;

WHEREAS, the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries has a long record of participation in key labor-management disputes, including those involving the United Mine Workers of America;

WHEREAS, the collective bargaining agreement of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) with the Bituminous Coal Operators Association (BCOA) has expired;

WHEREAS, the democratic institution of collective bargaining appears to be under attack both by the BCOA and by other employers who have permanently replaced striking workers;

WHEREAS, the UMWA struggle could have serious implications for the rights of all union workers in the United States, their families, and the communities in which they live;

WHEREAS, the United Mine Workers of America has called a selective strike for unfair labor practices against members of the BCOA to protest the practices of members of the BCOA and to seek to enter into a new collective bargaining agreement;

WHEREAS, the Commission on Religion in Appalachia (CORA) reaffirmed its solidarity with UMWA, its striking miners, its 120,000 retirees and widows, and all the coal field communities for which the UMWA has played such an important historical role;

WHEREAS, the UCBHM is a covenantal partner with the CORA; and

WHEREAS, over 600 religious leaders have already endorsed the statement entitled “A Call for Justice in the Coal Fields [*see this document below*];”

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Nineteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ joins in solidarity with the UMWA and endorses “A Call to Justice In the Coal Fields;”

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Nineteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ expresses its support for public policies that restore the rights of working people to engage in collective bargaining without fear of reprisal;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the President of the United Church of Christ communicate this resolution to the members of the Bituminous Coal Operators Association;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we call on the BCOA and the UMWA to negotiate a contract settlement which will bring true justice to the coalfields.

A CALL FOR JUSTICE IN THE COALFIELDS

We speak as religious leaders from many faith traditions who affirm the collective bargaining process and the moral right of workers to form and maintain effective unions in the coal industry.

The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and the members of the Bituminous Coal Operators Association (BCOA) are presently in negotiations for a new labor agreement where issues of great importance to the welfare of the miners, their families and communities are being decided. We call on the coal operators to approach this bargaining in good faith.

We profess that coal is a natural resource given by God to humanity as a gift. Those corporations who profit directly from extracting this resource from the earth are called to be responsible stewards of that resource.

We urge the BCOA to bargain for a just and fair agreement that will benefit not only the corporate owners and executives but also the miners, their families and communities.

The issue of job security is of paramount concern in these negotiations. As union mines are worked out, and the coal companies open new mines, union miners should have right to a job in these newly opened facilities. Currently, union representation should not be abrogated.

As religious leaders we remind the coal operators that the miners should not be treated as disposable property but rather they should be treated with dignity and respect. Too often the history of the coal industry in the United States has rejected this idea.

In the event of a coal strike, we call on both the coal companies and the miners to refrain from violence. If the coal companies replace striking workers, this will only prolong the strike and evade the purpose of the bargaining process: a collective agreement. From a moral and ethical perspective we condemn the use of striker replacements and we strongly urge the coal operators to refrain from this practice.

Finally, we call on the BCOA and UMWA to negotiate a contract settlement which will bring true justice to the coalfields.