

The Future of Coal: Union Boss Keeps Up the Fight

As Industry Shifts West, Less Labor Is Needed

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By **KRIS MAHER** [CONNECT](#)

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A shrinking coal industry is threatening the future of the United Mine Workers of America, a storied labor union that has represented coal miners since 1890.

In the 1930s, when vast numbers of miners were needed to load coal by hand, the Mine Workers was the nation's biggest and most powerful union, with about 800,000 members. Today, the union has about 35,000 active members, 20,000 of whom are coal miners.

But it also represents roughly 40,000 retired miners who, along with another 50,000 spouses and dependents, still receive union-negotiated retirement benefits. That means that decades after fighting armed battles to unionize mines, the former labor giant is spending much of its energy trying to preserve the economic security of miners from another era.

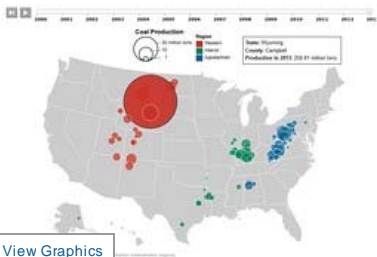
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Andrew Hancock for The Wall Street Journal

Sector Survives the Doubters

Coal remains the biggest source of fuel for generating electricity in the U.S. Even as coal production has dropped in Appalachia, it has climbed in Wyoming and in the country's midsection.


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Last year, for example, the Mine Workers spent \$7 million organizing protests and fighting to maintain benefits for retirees at Patriot Coal Corp., which emerged from bankruptcy protection last month.

The union now is lobbying Congress to pass a bill that would enable some Patriot retirees to join a larger group of coal retirees who already have their benefits guaranteed by federal law. The union and company reached an agreement that includes a trust to provide some benefits to retirees.

"In our case, the real tragedy here happens to be those people that have already given their lives to energize the nation," says Cecil Roberts, the United Mine Workers of America's longtime president.

"People have a tendency to say there aren't that many people employed in the coal industry," Mr. Roberts says. "But they should have my job, where 94,000 people have a check they depend on from the UMWA."

One of the union's primary concerns is a future where fewer coal companies are contributing to multiemployer benefit plans.

"We negotiate contracts with the industry. If

the industry is gone, bankrupt and no longer in existence, it's kind of like a person dancing with themselves," Mr. Roberts says.



Union President Cecil Roberts, left, led in July a UMWA protest against Patriot Coal in Fairmont, W.Va
Associated Press

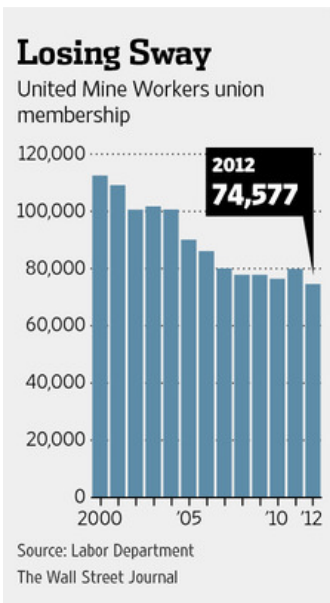
It also is hard to see how the union can increase its membership as the coal industry [shifts production](#) from Appalachia, with its labor-intensive underground mines, to surface mines in Wyoming and Montana that employ far fewer workers.

Today, the union represents about a third of the 60,000 hourly coal miners nationwide. But the Mine Workers estimates that if it were to organize all coal miners in Wyoming, where companies produce more than half the country's coal, the union would

gain only 3,000 new members.

Mr. Roberts blames the coal industry's woes on inexpensive natural gas, which is gaining favor as a fuel source for electric utilities, and government policies, such as proposed rules about power-plant emissions, that are making it less profitable to burn coal in the U.S.

The Obama administration says coal will remain the nation's biggest source of electricity for the next several decades.



"If we're going to have this policy, we ought to take care of the people that get left behind," says Mr. Roberts, a sixth-generation coal miner from Cabin Creek, W.Va., who became a union officer in the 1970s.

The loss of coal-mining jobs that pay \$75,000 or more and include health and pension benefits will further depress local economies across Appalachia, he says.

The union plans to continue its fight and has one important resource to keep it going: about \$180 million in cash and investments, far more than other unions on a per capita basis.

"Most unions, when they see the struggles that we are [seeing], have very little money to fight," Mr. Roberts says. "That's not true for us."

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