Remarks of Cecil E. Roberts  
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Climate Change and the Future of Coal Miners, Their Families and Their Communities

Thank you all for coming today. I want to thank the National Press Club for inviting me here to make some comments regarding the views of the United Mine Workers of America with respect to climate change, the coal industry, and what the future may hold for coal workers, their families and their communities. I also want to thank all those who are watching online throughout the country.

I come here today not just speaking as Cecil Roberts, President of the United Mine Workers. I speak for those who have energized our nation for more than a century. I speak for those who have put their health, their limbs, their very lives on the line every single day so you and I could live in comfort with light, heat, air conditioning and modern communications.

I speak for the more than 100,000 who have died in this nation’s coal mines since the founding of our union in 1890, and the more than 100,000 who have died from Black Lung, an occupational disease caused by breathing too much dust in the mine atmosphere. 76,000 of them have died just since 1968. I speak for those who suffer from this insidious disease even today, decades after laws were passed that were supposed to prevent it.
I speak for those who work in the coal mines today, and who only seek to provide a decent, middle-class lifestyle for their families. They are the primary contributors to their local economies, and they are proud of what they do and proud of the generations of miners who came before them. They are tired of being cast as villains as the world confronts climate change, and are insulted by the condescension of so many who believe they know what is best for miners and their families.

And I speak for all of those who did the hard work — including many who made the ultimate sacrifice — to form our union and those who still do the hard work in local union halls across America to keep our union strong. The members of the United Mine Workers are the most patriotic people in America. And they are the most militant union members in America as well. They believe that keeping our union strong is a key part of keeping America strong.

Politicians have long associated themselves with coal miners, dating back to Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. It is smart politics to be photographed with those whose coal dust-blackened faces are the very symbol of hard work. Eleanor Roosevelt even went into a mine in Ohio in 1935, and when asked upon emerging what miners needed to make their jobs safer said, “Legislation and unionization.”

When he was running for President in 1960, John F. Kennedy came to West Virginia and spoke with coal miners all over the state, standing in the back of pickup trucks and on the steps of local union halls. After one such speech in Welch, West Virginia, he asked if anyone had any questions and a young Homer Hickham asked if he would support sending a man to the moon.
Kennedy and all the miners laughed at the thought, thinking it was foolish to think about such a technological feat. But as we all know, Kennedy changed his mind about that.

And at the outset of the 2008 presidential campaign, a young Senator from Illinois came to Lebanon, Virginia and said, “If we can put a man on the moon, we can figure out how to burn coal cleanly in the United States.” I agreed with Barack Obama then, and even though he later changed his position, I have not. I still agree with that statement. We can figure out how to burn coal cleanly in the United States. Indeed, we must.

And that’s really what I want to talk about today. It’s time we all understand what the facts are about the use of coal to generate electricity. It’s time we talk about how to address climate change in a way that will actually have a global effect, and not just serve to put American coal miners out of work while doing nothing to actually reduce greenhouse gas emissions worldwide. It’s time we talk about what it will actually cost not to just help miners who may lose their jobs, but to prevent entire regions of the country from economic collapse.

I believe that there can still be a productive dialogue here in Washington and throughout the coalfields about how we approach these issues and move forward in a way that accomplishes the dire need to restrict greenhouse gases yet still keeps our members working, their families’ intact, and their communities thriving.

Let me make something clear: The UMWA has never challenged the science regarding greenhouse gas emissions and man-made climate change. It is happening, and the world must
address it. We have long supported an economy-wide program to reduce CO2 emissions, covering all major sectors of emissions – transportation, utilities, and industrial. We support global efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and believe it is short-sighted for the United States to isolate itself from international climate negotiations.

Our stake in the climate debate is so great that we have invited all of the Democratic presidential candidates to meet our members on their own turf for an exchange of views. All of the candidates, to one degree or another, have advanced climate change plans that would be extremely harmful to our membership. Many of them will be discussing their plans tonight at the CNN town hall. I have no doubt they will be working hard to outdo each other as to how fast they would eliminate coal – and coal miners’ jobs – from our nation’s energy mix. But if they have any hope of winning the votes of those coal miners, their families and their communities they had better also make it clear that none of those miners, families or communities will see any negative effects from losing their coal jobs. And that’s a tall order.

It is important to have these conversations, because this is a critical juncture. Despite all the happy talk from some politicians about coal being “back,” coal-fired power plants continue to close at a rapid pace, many of them well before their scheduled lifetimes. Our members who work at the mines that feed those plants are losing their jobs right now, and nothing is being done to help.

We have lost about one-quarter of the coal generation fleet since 2012 due to plant retirements. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, FERC, projects that we will lose another 17,000 Megawatts of coal capacity in the next few years, equivalent to 17 large plants.
Since 2007, direct coal mining jobs in America have declined by 38 percent to about 52,000 jobs today. But that number is somewhat deceiving, as the number of jobs mining steam coal have dropped and the number of jobs mining metallurgical-grade coal, used to make steel, have increased.

The impact on communities where jobs have been lost is devastating. I can take you to places like McDowell County, West Virginia, where John F. Kennedy and the miners laughed at young Homer Hickham. There, the schools are crumbling, essential local services like police, fire and EMS are non-existent, and the only reason there are any health care facilities remaining is because of the pensions and health care benefits retired coal miners and their dependents get, which are keeping hospitals, clinics and pharmacies open.

Local governments have lost millions in taxes that coal companies paid, so they have cut their budgets to the bone. It is a downward economic and personal spiral that breeds drug addiction, alcoholism, suicide, and family separation.

In a few parts of the country, where metallurgical coal is mined, coal production has increased a bit and employment is up. But in many parts of the coalfields, coal has not come back. Mines are closing. People are losing their jobs.

There are a lot of things that keep me up at night. One of them is thinking about what will happen if, through the types of policies some are advocating, the coal industry goes away entirely. When people like Michael Bloomberg pledge hundreds of millions to kill off the coal industry but not one cent to help these people and their communities, that is unconscionable.
He is a billionaire and can spend it however he wants. But if he really wanted to do something to reduce greenhouse gas emissions he would invest it in developing and deploying technology like carbon capture and storage (CCS), which is the only real solution to seriously addressing global climate change.

In 2009, the UMWA supported the Waxman-Markey bill’s CCS technology provisions. The bill would have eventually provided nearly $150 billion in bonus emission allowances to incentivize carbon capture and storage retrofits on the coal fleet. Had that bill passed, we would be seeing this technology being deployed today, along with corresponding reductions in emissions. Any future climate legislation that seeks to minimize adverse impacts on workers must provide significant resources for the deployment of CCS technologies, including substantial upfront R&D funds for DOE to help reduce the costs of this technology.

That’s not just me saying that. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has determined that extensive global deployment of CCS across utility and industrial sources is essential to meeting global climate targets. That’s because regardless of what we do here in the United States, the developing world is not slowing down its use of coal to generate electricity. Indeed, it is speeding it up.

A 2017 study by Urgewald, a German environmental and human rights non-profit, said that there are a total of 1,600 new coal-fired plants and units either under construction or planned around the world, which will add 840,000 MW to the global coal plant fleet. Countries like Egypt, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and others in Asia and Africa are planning to dramatically ramp up their coal use for electricity generation.
And not a single one of these plants will have any type of carbon capture and storage technology applied to it. Not one.

That makes the likelihood of all nations meeting targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions difficult, at best. So while it is important to recognize the science of climate change, we also must be very hard-nosed and realistic about the prospects for eliminating the global use of fossil fuels, and the consequences to our industrial economy of a wholesale shift to renewable power. Unilateral actions to advance voluntary commitments should avoid self-inflicted wounds.

There are those who say the United States must lead in this regard. But if you think you are leading and turn around and see that no one is following, then you need to understand that you are just going for a walk. I agree the United States must lead – in the development and commercial application of CCS technology that can be applied to new and existing coal plants all over the world, and soon. Without it, we can shut down every coal-fired plant in the U.S. and throw every American coal miner out of work and will still see global greenhouse gas emissions rise.

Last year, the world consumed about 7.5 billion tons of coal. 691 million tons, or less than one-tenth of that, was used here in the United States to generate electricity. Less than one-tenth. We are already rapidly reducing coal use in this country, while the rest of the world is increasing its use.
There are about 52,000 people working in the coal industry today in the United States. But there are about 7 million coal miners throughout the world. Our miners in the U.S. are the best paid of any miners in the world. They have the best terms and conditions of work if they work in a union mine, and along with coal miners in Canada and Australia are the safest miners in the world. These are the middle-class blue collar workers the Democratic candidates for president are talking about putting out of work. Yet there will still be millions of miners working throughout the world after that happens, feeding coal-fired power plants that have no means of capturing and storing the carbon emissions coming from their smokestacks.

Eliminating coal jobs in America does not eliminate global coal use. All we are really doing is transferring more production overseas, which will be done by poorly paid workers with little or no safety protections. That sounds kind of familiar, actually. It’s what American companies have been doing for decades with manufacturing jobs. I guess I just never thought I would see those who consider themselves “progressives” favor such a policy as well.

We are deeply concerned about potential carbon tax legislation and its impacts on U.S. workers in all fossil energy sectors – oil, gas, and coal. The impact of a carbon tax is sudden death for coal. It means immediate job losses as utilities switch from coal to gas and renewables. Ultimately, the oil and gas sectors and other carbon-intensive industries stand to lose far more jobs than coal mining and coal-dependent utilities.

And then what happens to the workers? Some talk about a “just transition” for workers faced with job losses due to climate legislation. But it’s usually limited to retraining and community
development programs. These may be great ideas, but they simply don’t work in the economically depressed regions where most of our members work. We have experience in training dislocated coal miners in different skills through our UMWA Career Centers. We have trained more than 17,000 of them in the last 25 years. But the average pay of the jobs they are able to get after the training is $14.00 per hour – less than half of what they made as coal miners. There are simply no comparable high-wage union jobs in the coalfields, and new industries are not flocking in to create the green jobs we all hear about. It’s just not happening.

We hear about hundreds of thousands of jobs in solar energy, but nearly all of these are non-union, low wage contractor jobs as rooftop installers. There are only 2,000 solar manufacturing jobs in this country, and only a couple of thousand jobs in utility-scale solar. Most solar manufacturing jobs are in China, where the waste products of solar manufacturing can be disposed of more easily than here.

The job issue is far larger than just a coal miner problem. We estimate that some two million direct jobs in 14 energy-intensive industries would be at risk with a carbon tax or Green New Deal legislation, along with seven million indirect jobs in these industries. Our preliminary estimates of a fair level of compensation for displaced workers are on the order of $1 to $3 trillion dollars over the period from 2020 to 2040. The amount depends on the level of job displacement, and assumes a modest average $65,000 per year package of wages and benefits per displaced worker. I should make it clear that the average coal miner right now makes between $85,000 and $100,000 per year. And if they are in the union, they get high-quality health care and other benefits.
So, when a politician or a bureaucrat starts talking about “just transition,” let’s start with those facts about costs and available jobs. Actually, this would all sound a lot better to us if we did the “just transition” part first. I know that won’t happen, though, because the rush is on to pass climate legislation and the workers who are dislocated will, eventually, become no more than unfortunate casualties, no matter the current good intentions of those who are advocating this legislation.

That has been this country’s history from its founding. When, through technological change or political decision-making, workers lose their jobs, there has never been such a thing as a “just transition.” Never. Our members know that, because they see it. They drive through the Mahoning Valley in Ohio and the Beaver Valley in Pennsylvania and see still-empty storefronts thirty years after the steel industry collapsed. They see the brownfields where there used to be miles-long steel and aluminum plants. They know plenty of people who lost their good, well-paying union jobs and never recovered.

So when our members hear “just transition” applied to them, they are not impressed. They know that likely means “just no job.” It has come to the point where Democrats are saying we are going to eliminate the kind of union jobs that built the middle class — and that catapulted the Democratic Party to power for decades, by the way — and you have to just “trust us” that we will replace them with equivalent jobs. And oh, they will also be union jobs, we are told.
But how will they do that? You would have to repeal the Taft-Hartley act of 1947, which my predecessor John L. Lewis called, “The first ugly thrust of fascism in the United States.” I don’t hear any of the candidates calling for that, and even if they were the prospects of doing so in today’s political climate are nonexistent.

I also don’t hear any of the candidates talking about reforming America’s outrageous bankruptcy laws, either. We have had 57 bankruptcies in the coal industry since 2012, and almost every one of them has ended up with executives getting bonuses and workers getting the shaft. Their pay and benefits get cut. Retirees lose health care benefits entirely, unless they’ve got a union to fight for them. Companies are relieved of their obligations to contribute to pension funds. Indeed, bankrupt coal companies have been relieved of more than $4 billion in withdrawal liabilities to the UMWA pension fund. There are miners sitting on railroad tracks today in Kentucky who still haven’t been paid for the work they did more than a month ago. We must reform bankruptcy laws in this country if we are to make any progress to help workers, especially coal miners.

And where does all this leave retired coal miners? We have had to convince Congress to take repeated action to preserve the health care benefits of retirees whose companies have gone out of business over the last 25 years and are working to do so again this year for a small group of retirees from companies that went bankrupt in 2018. The pension plan was 93 percent funded before the 2008-09 recession but, like nearly every other pension plan, took a huge loss in that recession. That, coupled with a stream of coal industry bankruptcies, which drastically reduced the contributions into the plan, has made it impossible for the pension plan to avoid insolvency, which is projected to come in 2022.
These are not huge pensions. They average $596 per month. That may not sound like a lot in Washington, D.C., but for these retirees in the coalfields it is critical. This money pays for their medical out-of-pocket expenses, groceries, fuel, utilities and more. Losing it, or even a cut to it, will be devastating. As we consider what is to be done with any climate legislation, preserving hard-earned pensions and health care must be front and center. It’s not just the retirees themselves who will be impacted if their health care and pensions go away; this will reverberate throughout the nation and especially in rural, coal-producing areas. There are nearly 2 billion dollars that flow into these communities from retiree health care and pension benefits. Losing that would drive hundreds more communities to the level of McDowell County, increasing the social costs American taxpayers will eventually be responsible for.

We strongly believe that there must be a way to find a middle ground in the climate discussions. The proponents of climate action who have taken extreme positions such as the elimination of all fossil fuel use within a decade, or even two decades, either ignore or do not understand the severe level of dislocation in the economy that would result. Picture every residential gas furnace, every gas water heater and home heating oil boiler ripped out of homes across the nation and replaced with renewable-based electric appliances. Nearly all auto assembly plants will be rendered obsolete overnight. Energy-intensive industries from steel mills to refineries to cement kilns and pulp and paper mills would face immediate shutdown. That is not a way forward that maintains a robust economy and a robust society.
As Congress moves forward in developing climate legislation, we should recognize that changes in the utility industry – principally lower natural gas prices and EPA regulations - have already led to the loss of some 80,000 Megawatts of coal generating capacity, along with tens of thousands of jobs in mining, rail transport, and the utility sector. Utilities are on track to meet or exceed their 2025 Paris targets. Application of commercial-grade CCS on new coal plants will drive down the fleet’s remaining emissions even faster. More attention needs to be given to emission mitigation options for the transport sector. The industrial sector also must have access to affordable CCS technologies.

The UMWA stands ready to assist in the development of climate legislation that advances technology, protects workers and their communities, and moves the nation forward on an aggressive course of carbon mitigation while ensuring electric reliability. We have advanced a proposal, along with several other energy unions, to all the presidential candidates that would do just that.

But we will not sit quietly and watch our members, their families and their communities be destroyed in the process. There is a way forward here that can accomplish the twin goals of maintaining good jobs for our members and their families and getting the reductions in greenhouse gas emissions the world needs. The question is, will policy-makers do the hard work of meeting both those goals, or will they only be willing to do one, but not the other? Now is the time of choosing.