

UMW was an unprecedented attempt to smash a strong and militant union. They saw that the giant oil, steel and auto monopolies were in a conspiracy with the federal government to try to break the back of the United Mine Workers Union. Inspired by the miners' resistance, they came to their aid, and pushed their union leaders to help. First credit goes to the rank and file UMW membership that it was strong enough and saw the danger they and all workers were facing, that this attack was stopped cold. The general strike of 1977-78 was won by the courage and resoluteness of the rank and file, even though there were some economic setbacks.

Leadership in a struggle such as this is of supreme importance, and thanks goes out to all those thousands of rank and file leaders from one end of the coal fields to the other. The miners had no national leadership in this crucial struggle for the very existence of their union. All they had on top was a bunch of small scared men who had not worked in a coal mine in years.

President Arnold Miller who came from the ranks, was a leader dating back to the '60s. He has black lung and arthritis from working 30-inch coal on his hands and knees. In the 1977-78 strike, he was awed by rubbing shoulders with the rich and powerful, and intimidated by the coal bosses and the Carter administration. In the end he agreed to a contract that denied the miners the right to strike and to picket mines that were unsafe—a life-and-death issue that had united the entire membership.

Sam Church, now UMW president, was then the vice president. He, too, went along with the Bituminous Coal Operators Association (BCOA) proposals. He was of the more experienced bureaucrat stripe, and had been president of UMW District 28 under the Tony Boyle leadership. While the rank and file stood shoulder to shoulder for 111 days and fought back against the BOCA contract proposal, Church lined up with the most conservative section of the

union bureaucracy to undermine this strong and united opposition. It was the opposition of the rank and file that saved the United Mine Workers and that alone. If these miners had not fought so hard and so well, the UMW would be completely at the mercy of the BCOA.

To hear the big business media tell it, the battle is over for the mineworkers. the UMW has "learned its lesson" once and for all. Sam Church is being lauded in the big business press as a "reasonable man." He is a "real leader," they say. He is showing them that he can "control" the membership.

But it's not the final battle—that is for sure. The rank and file will be heard, just as they were at Brookside and those huge wildcats of the '70s, and during that 111-day strike. The final struggle is yet to come. No "leader" can contain, blunt, abandon, or police the struggle of the coal miner. The miners will never follow such a leader for long.

You ask, why?

Because, brothers and sisters, the struggle of the coal miners is a struggle for their very lives in the death pits—commonly called coal mines!

—John Lewis
December, 1980