Harlan, Kentucky coal truck drivers take independent strike action

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Coal truck drivers at two Harlan, Kentucky mines initiated a strike over non-payment of wages. The truckers, non-unionized and employed by independent local firms, accuse coal mine operator Liggett Mining LLC of refusing to pay wages.

While small, the action is indicative of the social anger among working people in the Appalachian coalfields after decades of poverty wages, mass unemployment and exploitation.

The drivers have blockaded the Liggett No. 8 and 9 underground mines, locally called Justice No. 8 and No. 9. “Justice Coal Company is not paying the truckers,” trucker Brian Hall told the *Harlan Daily Enterprise*.

“The deal is we’re parking the trucks until we get paid. This goes back several months and I’m talking several thousands of dollars they owe us.”

Hall said that the coal operator had recently purchased as many as eight coal trucks to use instead of the contractor trucks, but that the company drivers voluntarily stopped their hauls to honor the picket line.

“We ain’t letting nobody up in this holler to haul coal out,” he told the paper.

Occupying the mine access roads in bitter winter weather, the truckers contrasted the dire economic situation across the region and the high production rates at the mines. Hall explained that Jim Roddy Trucking, the company he was driving for, had been running three to four trucks per day to the Liggett mines, hauling approximately 1,000 tons of coal per day.

“We just want our money,” Hall said. “Roddy Trucking has to pay for diesel, employees, down costs and it’s hard to operate when you’re not getting paid. Truckers have bills to pay too. We have to provide for our families and eat. You can’t do that if you’re not getting paid.”

Sayco Trucking driver Darrel Saylor said six Sayco trucks were also transporting several thousand tons of coal per day. “We need our money and we’re not going to haul any coal until we get it no matter how long it takes,” he told the *Daily Enterprise*. “We’ve got fuel bills and insurance we can’t pay. If we don’t get paid we can’t pay our bills. These truckers can’t make it without getting paid.

“Justice knows this ain’t right,” Saylor added. “They know we can’t operate without money—nobody can. I don’t know why they are doing this.”

“This is hurting everybody—their families, everybody involved in this,” said Tommy Williams, a truck driver for SAD Trucking. “Work is hard to get anyway and this is making it really hard. C&R Trucking, of Salyersville, also has three trucks hauling out of here. Until our companies get paid, we don’t work. We have families too.”

Harlan County is a historically significant site for the re-emergence of a labor struggle in the coal industry. The area was the center for strikes and open battles against the coal operators and state authorities, earning the name “Bloody Harlan” in the 1930s during the bitter effort to organize the United Mine Workers of America.

In 1973-74, Harlan erupted again in a strike against Duke Energy’s Brookside Mine in order to unionize under the UMWA and secure decent pay and safety standards. In the decades that followed, however, the UMWA abandoned these traditions of militancy and deliberately isolated and betrayed strike after strike.

Today, not a single Eastern Kentucky mine is unionized. As throughout Appalachia, mines in Harlan employ fewer workers, with less training and experience, to extract coal at breakneck rates. With few employment options and one of the most crushing poverty rates in the industrialized world, residents are a captive workforce for the coal operators.

As a result, miners and truckers are subjected to perilous conditions on a daily basis. Accidents are a regular occurrence. Fines levied against companies by the federal

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Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) are considered part of the cost of doing business, and frequently go unpaid. In its database, MSHA lists dozens of recent violations for poorly maintained trucks and other dangers at the Liggett mines that the Harlan truckers are striking.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has reported the continual stream of mining deaths in Harlan County over the past few years, including an explosion that claimed the lives of five miners in 2006; the 2010 death of a miner in a " retreat mine ;" a rash of accidents that killed one trucker and injured three mine workers in 2010; a deadly 2011 roof collapse; a fatal rollover accident at a Harlan surface mine in 2011; and others. MSHA had extensive records of violations and accidents on record for all of these mines.

The Liggett mines are owned by Appalachian coal baron James C. Justice II. Justice's Southern Coal Corporation produces coal for American Electric Power and other power companies in the US. According to *Forbes* magazine, Justice has a net worth of $1.6 billion, placing him among the richest individuals in the world.

The family's fortunes and coal holdings have been expanding wildly since the finalization of a 2009 deal with Russian energy giant Mechel OAO. Justice sold the coal seams of West Virginia-based Bluestone Coal Group to Mechel, then reportedly went on a spree of buyouts, paying millions of dollars in upfront cash, for mines and preparation plants across Appalachia.

In 2012, the operations controlled by Justice produced about 4.6 million tons of coal, according to MSHA. Over the year, Southern Coal laid off some 750 miners and closed more than two dozen mines as part of a massive downsizing in the coal industry. Late last year, the company announced it would expand and undertake a "massive call back" of miners. This "call back," however, is predicated on driving down labor costs.

The hills around Harlan are riddled with more than 100 mines, most operated by limited liability companies and independent firms. These companies are often subcontractors for major energy conglomerates, bought and sold by financial investors.

The relations of these companies reveal the rapacious character of an industry under pressure of the global economic crisis. The price of coal has fallen considerably since 2008, due to declining demand as well as the boom in natural gas extraction in the US. Easier to reach bituminous coal has been mined out of many of the smaller underground mines, making further extraction more labor intensive. This process plays out in the day-to-day lives of workers, who are fired without warning and subjected to deeply exploitative and dangerous conditions.

The drive to extract profit finds expression in the broader social conditions as well. More than one in three Harlan residents subsist below the official poverty line. Per capita income is just $15,100.

A large charity event held for Christmas saw a line-up of laid-off coal miners at the local supermarket parking lot. The Harlan County Bass Anglers handed out 120 turkeys to destitute miners. "There are a lot of people in Harlan County who really need help right now," Johnny Ray, one of the organizers, told the *Harlan Daily Enterprise*.

"When we handed these coal miners a turkey and saw the looks on their faces, and heard their words of gratitude it made it all worthwhile," Ray said. "During the event, we heard so many say their unemployment checks are fixing to get cut off and it just breaks your heart. We just want to help in any way we can."

The physical infrastructure of the region is also strained to the breaking point. In a recent meeting of Harlan County magistrates, officials complained about the state of disrepair caused by overloaded coal trucks. "I'm getting a lot of calls about the log and coal trucks on our roads, which are overweight and destroying our county roads," magistrate Bill Moore said.

Another official commented that other roads had been "destroyed" by trucks and said citizens were "put in the ditch." The companies were refusing to cooperate in the protection of local drivers or in adhering to weight limits. "The coal company agreed to it, but it was never done," he added.

"In District 5, I put five slabs on a bridge because a 992 end loader was taken across it and broke them," Harlan County road supervisor Marvin Goins stated. "Now that they are finished up there I'm going to have to put five more slabs in there and you guys are paying for them."

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