

Unpaid Kentucky Blackjewel miners block coal train to demand wages

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After a month without work and pay, coal miners at a Blackjewel mine in eastern Kentucky blocked a loaded train Monday, July 29, as it attempted to haul coal out of the Harlan County mine.

Blackjewel, LLC abruptly declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy on July 1, threatening the jobs of 1,700 workers at 32 of the company's operations in Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia and Wyoming. At mine sites run by Blackjewel subsidiaries, miners were escorted off the premises and provided neither information nor pay. In the weeks since, it refused to pay miners for the work they did in the run-up to bankruptcy filing.

In Harlan County, a group of miners assembled Monday morning at the Cloverlick Mine 1, operated by Blackjewel subsidiary Revelation Energy LLC. Local TV station WYMT reported that miners called to a crew working on the other side of a fence, "asking what is happening to the coal" and when they would be paid.

Around 4 p.m., a group of five miners stepped up onto the tracks in front of a CSX train being loaded with coal. Two more joined after a few minutes. The presence of the men has prevented the train from moving.

"Pay us," former miner Chris Lewis told WYMT. "That's all we want, our money, what we worked for. Pay us. Regardless of if the company starts back up or not, they need to pay the men, because we went in there and did do the job for them." Lewis said he was owed around \$4,000 in pay.

As of the time of this writing, the situation was still unfolding, with miners declaring that the standoff will continue indefinitely until their demands are met.

The Cloverlick Mine 1 is located in a remote wooded area in the county. Viewer-submitted photos of the standoff posted on the WYMT website show the men standing on the tracks at a narrow pass. WYMT reported that police had arrived at the scene but had not yet taken any action against the miners.

The action has won resounding support, with hundreds on social media cheering them on to "hold the line." It is clear that the action of the miners is symbolic of a desire to fight against the criminality and exploitative conditions imposed on the entire working class. The coal companies have long used the bankruptcy courts to loot the pensions, health benefits and pay of miners.

"Other miners should join in and take those boys some chairs, food and drinks!" declared one former Kentucky coal miner. "These men are coming to a breaking point, and who can blame them!" declared another resident.

A school teacher declared: "Go out and support them!! Wish I was closer I sure would take them water, food or join in for the support. It doesn't matter who you are," she added, "it all trickles down and will affect you all so stand up and show them they have support."

Another pointed to the treachery of the United Mine Workers (UMW) union for the desperate conditions facing miners. The area became known as "Bloody Harlan" for the fierce class battles in the 1930s fought by miners against the coal companies, their hired gun thugs and the police. But the UMW has virtually disappeared from the former union stronghold after betraying one struggle after another, including the Brookside strike in 1973-1974, AT Massey in 1984-1985 and the Pittston strike exactly 30 years ago.

"Once upon a time there was this thing called 'a union,'" said one eastern Kentucky resident. Another added, "Sad that strikes still have to happen to make sure people are fairly compensated for their labor."

Some 1,700 families across the US were devastated by the Blackjewel bankruptcy. The company owes around \$6 million in unpaid wages to its workforce. Paychecks issued in late June bounced at the banks when miners tried to cash them. As a result, many miners and their families were hit with overdraft fees or had their bank accounts frozen, leaving them unable to pay utility bills,

medical expenses and other living costs.

Melissa Cole, the wife of a Harlan County Blackjewel miner, told the *Lexington Herald-Leader* that some miners were using a check-cashing business and they were threatened with criminal charges for what turned out to be bad checks. Court filings revealed that the coal company's executives were well aware that there was no money to cover June 28 paychecks issued to its Kentucky employees.

Although the Blackjewel miners in Harlan County were left high and dry after the company filed bankruptcy, almost immediately other workers in the impoverished community started holding fundraisers and making donations to try to tide over the families put out of work.

Many mining families are hastily selling off boats or vehicles, hoping to raise a little money and stave off bank overdraft fees. For most, the situation is dire. Harlan County is one of the poorest counties in the United States. More than a third of the population live below the poverty line, and median household income is little more than \$24,000 a year. Harlan, and most of eastern Kentucky, continues to struggle in long-term economic distress.

At a private meeting July 25 with Kentucky Attorney General Andy Beshear, the Harlan County Blackjewel miners expressed anger over the situation. Many miners said they discovered that for months they were missing child support payments—another criminal offense—that were supposed to have been set aside automatically from their checks.

“Back in January, February timeframe I actually had child support deducted from my account,” said miner Quincy Adams, “and my ex-wife called me and told me she hadn’t been receiving child support.”

“Somebody’s got the money,” said miner Jeffery Hudson. “I don’t know who’s got it but somebody’s got it. My children are not getting to experience having that money. I pay \$1,000 a month. Coal miners pay a lot of child support.”

The same situation is being played out in other states. Nearly 600 workers at Blackjewel mines in Campbell County, Wyoming, are out of jobs after the closing of the Eagle Butte and Belle Ayr mines on July 1. “I got a call from my boss and he told me not to come in,” a miner told the *Northern Wyoming News*. Instead of going to work, he said, he spent his time calling creditors in an effort to stay afloat.

Like workers across the US and internationally, there is a growing sense among the working class across the coalfields that the endless attacks on their jobs and living

standards must be stopped. Workers are beginning to fight back, as the heroic struggles of teachers in West Virginia and Kentucky the past two years have shown.

President Trump’s efforts to pass himself off as a champion of coal miners has always been a fraud. Trump’s billionaire commerce secretary, Wilbur Ross, known as the “King of Bankruptcy,” made a fortune from buying up coal, steel and auto parts companies, stripping them of assets and “flipping” them for huge profits. Twelve miners lost their lives at one of Ross’s operations, the Sago Mine in West Virginia, after a 2006 explosion caused by gross disregard for safety and relentless speedup.

The Democrats are no different, having overseen the decades-long attack on miners, with the collusion of the UMW. West Virginia’s governor and billionaire coal boss, Jim Justice, who has spearheaded the attack on teachers and public employee health care, ran as a Democrat before switching parties.

Coal mining areas have been devastated by economic collapse, exploitation and the deliberate dumping of opioid pills onto the population.

Anger and frustration are rising. At a public meeting July 8, several hundred miners and their families laid out their problems. Gregory Joesseals, Jr. said, “It’s affected everything, everything I’ve got. I mean my bank account is in the negative \$2,000 now because of all this over one person,” he said, referring to Blackjewel and Revelation founder and CEO Jeff Hoops.

While miners and their families are suffering, Hoops will continue his other business ventures, including developing a \$30 million resort just west of Charleston, West Virginia, called The Grand Patrician, complete with a 500-person convention center, a nine-hole golf course, and a 3,500-seat replica of the Roman Colosseum.

The Blackjewel bankruptcy proceedings continue in court July 31.



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