

Harlan County, Kentucky workers support coal miners' blockade

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Harlan County coal miners are now in the fourth week of their blockade of railroad tracks outside the coal mine where they had worked, preventing the bankrupt company from moving coal the workers mined, demanding that they receive the pay they are owed.

The blockade was begun July 29 by five miners, halting a coal train with more than \$1 million worth of coal that Blackjewel LLC was attempting to remove from the Cloverlick No. 3 in Cumberland, Kentucky. Word of their actions quickly spread and they were joined by other miners, family, neighbors and supporters. Workers have set up a camp on the tracks, worked out a rotation and phone tree.

Both Democratic and Republican politicians have made perfunctory statements in support of the miners. On Friday, US Senator and Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders had pizzas sent to the miners, but did not visit the encampment himself.

Previously, Kentucky Governor Matt Bevin, an ultra-right Republican, and Democratic Senate candidate Amy McGrath issued statements of support for the miners. In fact, both Democrats and Republicans represent the interests of the rich, coal operators and their Wall Street investors and are responsible for years of attacks on coal miners.

While miners have received lip service from politicians in Kentucky and Washington, they have received strong support from workers from throughout the area and across the country.

The miners' struggle has touched a nerve among workers who have seen their living standards fall while the mine operators have reaped larger and larger profits. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers in Harlan County about their struggle.

Tina Hall, a fast food worker, said, "This is very wrong what they have done to those men. My brother-in-law worked there and he and my sister had to move [300

miles] to Owensboro, Kentucky for another job.

"My sister has a boy, he's 18 and she had to leave him here. He is working and going to college. He couldn't leave. She is very worried about him. He is only 18 and he is on his own. I help when I can. They tried not to move, but there are no jobs around here.

"She is worried about him. She wants to be with him to help him, but she can't.

"I think it is wrong what the company did to the miners. These men worked there, they did their jobs and now they are not even getting paid. This is also hurting a lot of people, not just the miners but everyone. A lot of people depend upon these miners having jobs."

Tina pointed out that there are very few decent paying jobs in Harlan County and the surrounding area. "There are no jobs around here that pay like the mines," she said. "There are only fast food, retail or grocery stores and you don't make money like you do in the mines. You start out at minimum wage and it is hard to live on that.

"There is the hospital and there is one small factory, but you don't earn that much and these places can't hire all those people who are out of work.

"My son is a miner. He's been working now for one year. He was working before, but when the mines went bust he lost his job. He got called back a year ago when jobs started picking back up and has been working since. I worry about him all the time. You never know when you go in if you are going to come out.

"People everywhere have to unite together and fight for our rights."

Gene Marlow worked as a miner for 10 years. He now has black lung but doesn't qualify for benefits. In order to receive black-lung benefits a miner must have worked underground for 20 years or more.

"I hate to see them not get paid," he said. "They worked it, they should get paid for it. I fully support what they are doing and I think that everyone needs to stand up against

these companies.

“It has hurt a lot of people. People can’t make their car payments, their house payments. They are getting their utilities shut off. There were people on vacation and they find they don’t have any money in the bank.

“I was a miner for 10 years. I needed the money for my family. I prayed to God every day that I would get out and I did. I didn’t want to work there, but there are no other jobs and I had to.

“I was a scab miner. That’s what it was called. The mine was nonunion. My father-in-law was in a union mine. If the roof was bad, you didn’t have to work it. You work eight hours and you would come home.

“I have black lung. I went to my doctor and he says that you have to work 20 or 30 years to before you can sign up. I don’t get any benefits. I don’t think that is fair. I think if you work one year, one day in the mine and you get black lung, you should get benefits.

“I was working next to the [mining machine], setting braces. I would breathe a lot of dust. You would go out so far and set a brace and the miner would come along. The masks they gave you would do nothing, you would be just breathing that dust the whole day.

“Especially if you were working on the left side of the miner, you would just get a lot of dust but you had to just keep putting up those braces. They would hold up the roof for the miner. It was always running and you just keep breathing in that dust.

“What I think you need is for all these senators and congress people to make them come work for one month in the mine and for them to breathe that dust in like we do and tell me you can’t have black lung unless you have worked for 20 years.

“But they don’t care about the people, they just care about the rich. All of them, Democrats and Republicans. They don’t care about you. I don’t care what Trump says, he doesn’t care about the miners. The rich are for the rich. Put a poor person in there, they will know what to do.

“I know people with black lung and it is real bad. They can barely walk around. Breathing is getting hard for me. I take a few steps and I have to catch my breath. I live doing odd jobs. Cutting grass, and things like that. I used to be able to knock a job like this out in a few hours, now it takes me all day.

“My father-in-law died in 2015 from black lung. He had worked for 37 years in the mines. That was very painful for him and hard for my wife to watch. We did what we could for him.”

Montey Bentley is a disabled worker who was injured

while working as an explosive demolition expert.

“I support them. A lot of those miners have kids and they have to feed them. School is starting and they need to buy them clothes and things that they need.

“It is not right. Those men worked for that money and they should get paid. These companies come in here, just take everything that they can and they don’t care about the working man or what it does to the community.

“I worked as an explosive expert for tearing down apartment buildings. I got hurt real bad, my knees are gone and several ribs busted.

“It is real hard around here. There are not very many jobs. There are kids that are starving. I do what I can to help the kids, I hate to see a kid go hungry. School is starting and they need school supplies.

“I know what it is like for these miners. If I lost my check, I’d be homeless, me and my wife. With rent, electric, car payment, insurance, I’m broke as soon as I get paid. It’s time that people stand together and put an end to this.”

Jason and his wife Angela are struggling to make ends meet with one boy and another baby expected soon.

“There are not many jobs around here,” Jason said. “I was driving an hour and a half, and hour 45 minutes to my last jobs in London, Kentucky. I was lucky to get on with a company here so I didn’t have to drive so far.

“I hope they get their money, them shutting the door and walking out on this is not right. These people worked hard for that mine and they should be paid.

“It would be pretty devastating, especially when you have young ones and one on the way.

“I hope they get their money and I hope they get jobs. There are too many people out of work and not enough jobs. Those people need to keep their jobs and it is worth taking a stand.”



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