

Kentucky miners blockading coal shipments win backpay

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A group of Kentucky coal miners have won unpaid wages owed to them by Quest Energy, a subsidiary of American Resources Corporation (ARC), after they occupied the railroad tracks outside their mine to prevent coal shipments.

Miners had not been paid since December 27. Since then, they had worked every day for about two weeks, some putting in 17-hour shifts. Miners said the company owed about 50 of them \$2,000 to \$3,000 each. Meanwhile, some miners have been officially laid off by the company.

The blockade began last Monday afternoon when the company had planned on hauling coal from a mine in Pike County. Two miners initially blocked the tracks and stopped the train from carrying 120 coal-filled cars.

By nightfall, more miners joined the blockade, along with their wives. Local families have supported the miners, offering them firewood, coffee, and other supplies.

“We just want to be paid, that’s it,” miner Dylan Davidson told the Lexington *He ra ld-Leader*. “ We don’t want to block this train, but it comes to a point that we have to. You go three weeks without a payday, you gonna let that train go through here so they can put the money in their pocket and just say to heck with us? No, they can’t do that.”

Without their wages, miners and their families have suffered serious hardship. Some have had their electricity cut off, others are delinquent on their rent. Others cannot even afford a \$50 fee for children to play on their school’s basketball team.

On Wednesday, a company representative from Quest Energy arrived with some 30 employees who were still working to force the miners off the tracks, but the miners refused to back down until their demands were met.

Davidson said, “They went back and said, ‘Just pay them guys and get them the hell off the track.’”

The miners were then paid by the company for all the back pay, overtime, vacation days, and were given an advance on their next paycheck.

According to the company, the miners who had not been officially laid off would not be fired or retaliated against. This assurance from the company, however, should not be taken at face value, giving the long history of frame-ups and blacklisting in the coal fields.

Quest Energy miners were following the courageous example of the Blackjewel miners, who blockaded coal shipments out of the Cloverlick Mine #1 last July when the company, which had just declared bankruptcy, refused to pay out wages and benefits.

The stand taken by the Appalachian coal miners recalls the proud tradition of class struggle in the region, site of some of the most famous labor battles in American history. Cloverlick Mine #1 is located in Harlan County, Kentucky, site of the famous Harlan County War in 1931 and 1932.

Quest’s parent company ARC is still refusing to pay miners in Hazard, Kentucky, located 55 miles to the south of the Cloverlick Mine. Seventy-five miners at the site were laid off before Christmas and still have yet to receive their final paychecks. Twenty-four maintenance workers and security guards have also not been paid since mid-December. The company has only paid a portion of the back money to miners, who have been denied their wages, health care, pension benefits, and child support payments.

ARC/Quest bought both mines from Cambrian Coal during its bankruptcy in 2019. The *Herald-Leader* obtained records from the state of Kentucky that show neither ARC nor Quest Energy purchased a bond to cover one month of wages, in violation of state law.

Even before the sale, federal regulators had blocked ARC from being issued new mining permits because of 36 outstanding violations by the company. This did not, however, obstruct the sale.

Newly elected state governor Andy Beshear, a Democrat, previously the state attorney general, had promised during his campaign to enforce the bond requirement if elected governor. When asked last week about the non-payment of wages at ARC, Beshear was evasive, refusing to say if ARC or its subsidiaries had posted the bond.

In a subsequent statement to the *Herald-Leader*, Beshear, trying to save face, declared that he had asked “the Labor Cabinet...to not only determine the back wages due to employees, but also whether the employer is in compliance with Kentucky’s performance bond law.”

In fact, it has been public knowledge since a report by the *Herald Leader* last August, based on public records, that *every coal company in the state* has been in violation of the bond law for the past five years.

Such abusive and outright illegal practices would not be possible without the treacherous role of the United Mine Workers (UMW), which has collaborated for decades to push through concessions and the destroy tens of thousands of jobs. The UMW has remained silent on the attack upon the Blackjewel and ARC miners, who organized themselves spontaneously to oppose wage theft.

The loss of the majority of coal industry jobs in the region has also produced plummeting membership in the UMW, which no longer is active in any mine throughout the entire state of Kentucky. However, the union retains assets of nearly \$170 million and union president Cecil Roberts makes over \$211,000 per year. This demonstrates that the UMW has social and economic interests separate from and opposed to those of the miners.

The union’s main focus in the recent period has been to lobby Congress to bail out the near-bankrupt UMW pension fund. While paying on average just \$700 a month to the nearly 100,000 retired coal miners or their widows, the fund has become a major source of income for UMW President Cycle Roberts and the rest of UMW bureaucracy.

The pension fund was expected to run out of funds by 2022, but the Murray Energy bankruptcy late last year

means the fund will now run out sometime this year. Murray is the last major UMW-organized coal operation and it is seeking permission from the bankruptcy court to stop making payments into the fund.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Republican from Kentucky, allowed a bill to proceed that would allow \$750 million to be deposited into the UMW pension plan each year for the next 10 years. The money will be taken from a fund supposedly being used to clean up the environmental damage at abandoned mines—jeopardizing the health and safety of the communities where the retirees themselves live.



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