

1,100 miners commence strike action in Alabama

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1 April 2021

More than 1,100 mine workers at Warrior Met Coal in west Alabama began a strike at 10:30 p.m. last night. The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) announced the decision to strike on Wednesday on the grounds of an unfair labor practice by the company. The timing of the strike coincided with the beginning of a new contract, set to begin yesterday.

The action represents the latest development in a strike wave that has swept the US. This past month alone has seen steelworkers' strikes at Allegheny Technologies in Pennsylvania and Bradken in Kansas, a strike by nurses at St. Vincent hospital in Massachusetts and a strike amongst graduate student workers at Columbia University in New York City.

Alabama in particular is emerging as a center of the class struggle. In the past year, Constellium steelworkers went on strike in Muscle Shoals and Montgomery teachers formed of a rank-and-file safety committee in opposition to the unsafe reopening of schools. In an attempt to divert this opposition, the Democrats are heavily promoting a unionization campaign at Amazon in Bessemer, Alabama, by the Retail, Warehouse and Department Store Union (RWDSU).

Alabama is the fifth poorest state in the US, with a staggering 16.8 percent of Alabamians living below the absurdly low federal poverty level. The average median household income for families in Alabama is just \$49,881, a figure \$12,056 lower than the national average of \$61,937. The state has been further impoverished in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in substantial falls in income across the entire working class.

The emergence of the struggle at Warrior Met Coal is a product of the ferment and anger which exists among coal miners and the working class as a whole.

However, the United Mine Workers of America is seeking to isolate the struggle, using the classification of the strike as an "unfair labor practice" (ULP) strike in order to avoid raising concrete demands, and to give it the ability to call off the strike at any time by claiming that the company is now bargaining "in good faith." The same tactic is being employed by the United Steelworkers in the ATI strike.

A press release by UMWA President Cecil E. Roberts clearly was addressed not to the miners, but to Warrior Met Coal. "Despite repeated attempts by our negotiating team to bridge the differences we have at the bargaining table, Warrior Met is going backwards," Roberts said. "We have always been ready to reach a fair agreement that recognizes the sacrifices our members and their families made to keep this company alive. At this point, Warrior Met is not." Roberts then concluded the press release by stating: "Nobody in their right mind ever wants to strike."

After decades in which it has deliberately isolated and betrayed one struggle after another, the UMWA is only a shell with fewer than 8,000 active miners, functioning only as a political prop for the Democratic Party.

Conditions at the company are terrible, and workers have voiced anger over strenuous workloads, pay and safety. One miner currently employed with the company wrote a review on Indeed.com titled: "This place has gone to the dumps." The miner, giving the company one out of five stars, wrote: "This place has taken advantage of the work force in the form of pay and family time. No holidays are acknowledged period. It's horrible. It's a job, but a rough one."

A belt man at the company, also giving it one star, wrote: "Lowest paid underground mine with the worst benefits and off time out of all the mines in Alabama... If you miss 4 days don't matter what it is or what you

had to do, you're fired. At [Warrior Met Coal] don't get vacation for a year and if your year hire date is after January the next year when you're able to get vacation it will be prorated so you might get 5 days."

A dozer operator, giving the company a generous two stars, highlighted the job insecurity and safety issues within the company:

"I left a good job to work at Warrior Met's No. 5 Prep plant. Before I had worked even 2 months, we were 'idle' 1 week (no pay). Three days after returning from the 'idle' week we were permanently laid-off when upper-management decided to eliminate a shift... We left good jobs, one person had resigned from his prior employer but never got to work a day for Warrior Met before being told not to report for work. We were offered a chance to work underground but I was concerned that if planning was this poor, really how concerned is the Company about the safety and well-being of their employees? This Company is a gamble for anyone considering a long-term position with job security ... This disrupted the livelihood of several good people and their families."

Coal miners have been under relentless assault over the past decade, with some 7,000 jobs slashed last year alone, bringing the total workforce in the US to just 44,000 in December. Whole sections of the coal mining industry have been wiped out in recent decades, devastating entire communities across Appalachia.

However, miners have shown a determination to fight back. Last year, Kentucky miners won between two and three thousand dollars in back pay after occupying the railroad tracks outside the mine, preventing shipments of coal.



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