

Warrior Met Coal to mobilize scabs against 1,100 striking mine workers in Alabama

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As the strike of 1,100 mine workers at Warrior Met Coal in Alabama enters its fifth day, the company has signaled its intentions to mobilize scabs. The company announced April 2, likely in a move to assuage investors' fears, that it has "continuity plans" should the strike continue. Workers have also reported that the company intends to bring in scabs, as well as armed private security and Alabama state troopers to secure the mines.

The mobilization of scabs, police, and modern-day Pinkertons should serve as a warning to the miners at Warrior Met that the company is aiming to crush the strike. The only way forward for striking mine workers is to break out of the isolation which currently exists around their struggle and take matters into their hands through the formation of a rank-and-file strike committee. An appeal must be made to striking steelworkers at ATI and Bradken, along with Amazon workers, autoworkers, educators, and broader sections of the working class to join them in a common fight against the corporate attack on the working class.

Such a struggle cannot be waged through the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), which is currently doing all it can to keep the mine workers isolated. The UMWA is using the tactic of an "unfair labor practice" strike to avoid raising any concrete demands, while at the same time planning to shut down the walkout at the earliest opportunity under the pretext that management is "bargaining in good faith."

Warrior Met Coal arose out of a larger restructuring of the American coal industry that occurred between 2014 and 2016 with the clear aim of vastly ramping up the exploitation of mine workers. This process involved the bankruptcy of Warrior's predecessor, Walter Energy, and a number of major coal companies such as Peabody, Alpha Natural Resources, Patriot Coal

Company, and James River Coal.

Walter Energy filed for bankruptcy in December 2015, receiving permission from Federal Bankruptcy Judge Tamara Mitchell to terminate retiree benefits for 65 non-union employees and their dependents. Coal Acquisition LLC, a company formed by senior members of Walter Energy and bankrolled by Wall Street investors, entered into a stalking horse agreement with Walter Energy to buy up its assets as soon as the bankruptcy proceedings had concluded. The new company, renaming itself Warrior Met Coal, quickly scrapped the old contract with its workforce with the complicity of the UMWA.

The 2016 contract, drawn up at the time of the reopening of the mine under Warrior Met Coal, imposed a \$6 wage cut, as well as additional cuts to benefits and pensions. It was precisely on this basis—through the evisceration of the living standard of its workforce—that the company was able to make record profits and coal shipments.

While the company's earnings took a hit in 2020 due to the pandemic, its cash flow rebounded by the end of the year, after lobbying the state government to classify miners as "essential" workers to keep production flowing. For the past two years, Warrior Met CEO Walter J. Scheller III has raked in an annual salary of over \$4 million. Despite this, the company is demanding that further cuts to wages, benefits, and pensions be imposed on the mine workers.

The workforce at Warrior Met Coal faces long hours, grueling schedules, and dwindling pay. The company runs a dictatorial "four strike" policy in which workers are automatically fired if they miss four days of work over a period of 15 weeks, or around four months. There are no extenuating circumstances outlined in the policy—even for work-related injuries.

Safety is also a grave concern for the miners. In 2001, a buildup of methane gas in the No. 5 mine (at the time under Walter Energy) triggered an explosion which killed 13 miners. This was the same root cause of the Upper Big Branch mine disaster in West Virginia which tragically took the lives of 29 miners. In both cases, the warnings made by gas sensors put in place to measure methane levels were ignored by management in the interest of continuing coal production.

None of these issues are being raised by the UMWA, which will not lift a finger against the company threats to use scabs to break the strike. Over the past 40 years, the UMWA has turned a blind eye to, or even participated in the violent suppression of miners' struggles—such was the case in the tragic murder of West Virginian miner John McCoy. Cecil Roberts, now president of the UMWA, collaborated with the company and the state to protect the identity of the gunmen who killed McCoy.

If mine workers are to wage a struggle, they must do so outside of the straight-jacket of the union.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges miners to join autoworkers, educators, Amazon and logistics workers, postal workers, and city bus drivers in forming rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and the Democrats and Republicans, in order to fight for safe and decent working conditions, higher wages, fully paid for health care and retirement, and more. For more information and to share your story, contact the WSWS today.



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