

”This is a slap in the face”

Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama denounce UMW president, say they will reject sellout deal

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A meeting of striking coal miners in Alabama erupted in anger Wednesday afternoon after United Mine Workers (UMWA) officials presented the details of their tentative agreement with Warrior Met Coal. The miners denounced UMW President Cecil Roberts and stormed out of the meeting, declaring that they would reject the contract when they vote on Friday because it did nothing to restore wage cuts accepted by the UMWA five years ago.

The 1,100 coal miners walked out April 1 at Warrior Met’s mines and processing facilities in Brookwood, Alabama, about 45 miles southwest of Birmingham. The striking miners are determined to recoup lost wages and abolish the company’s hated “four-strike” disciplinary program, which is used to terminate long-standing miners and replace them with low-wage contractors.

“Everybody began cussing Cecil Roberts and walking out after we heard all the union got was a \$1.50 raise and a \$500 signing bonus,” one miner with more than a decade at the mine told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “It got hostile up there. Roberts gave his song and dance about how “democratic” the union was, and we could vote it down and stay on strike if we wanted to.

“They began the meeting with a prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance to try to get us calm but then they presented a video on the contract. The base pay for a miner, with the \$1.50 an hour raise, will be \$25. In 2016, we took a \$6 an hour pay cut to get the company out of bankruptcy and it has gotten record production and big profits over the last few years. We expected a \$5 or \$6 raise and a signing bonus of \$10,000. Instead, we got a quarter of what we lost back. This is a slap in the face,” he declared.

According to the summary of the five-year deal passed out at the meeting, new hires would get a dollar raise to \$23.77 by 2026, while grades 1 and 2 would get a \$2 increase to \$25.90 by the end of the contract. By contrast, coal miners in 1982 were earning \$11.83 an hour, the equivalent to \$32.24 in today’s dollars.

“The contract includes the same crappy health insurance—they just modified the deductibles,” another miner added. “It’s still an 80-20 co-pay plan when we used to have 100 percent employer-paid insurance.

“The bonuses for record production went to the supervisors, not the workers,” he continued. “Half of the workers who helped get

the company out of bankruptcy and broke the records have been fired. The company deliberately targets higher seniority workers and they set them up with the ‘four-strike’ policy. It’s so bad that the supervisors set up money pools to bet on who will get fired next.

“They supposedly upgraded the four-strike policy in the new contract to missing six days before they can fire you. But it’s the same thing. I’ve known guys who the company has had to take to the hospital after getting hurt and they still got a strike against them. They said, ‘You were off the premises.’ Yeah, but you took him to the hospital, that’s why he was off the premises! You can get hurt in an accident and they can airlift you to the hospital and you will still get a strike against you. They don’t accept doctor’s excuses, nothing.

“I’ve lost a lot of good union brothers because of that policy. Even if your car breaks down on the way to work, they’ll give you a strike. If you are late, they won’t say anything and will send you underground. But when you come back up you got a strike.”

Another worker described this system as “almost a military occupation in the mine. They plan on how to fire this or that guy, especially the workers with more than 10 years’ seniority, so they can replace them with contractors making \$18 or \$20 an hour.”

He went on to describe the other brutal conditions at the Warrior mines, which the UMWA helps the coal operator enforce. “We’ve been on a mandatory six-day week. At the end of the week, they can come up to you and say, ‘We need you to work another day.’ You tell them you’ll need another day off next week and they’ll tell you, ‘Sorry, we can’t do that day because we don’t have enough workers.’ You end up working 9, 10 or 11 days in row, with no rest. You have to work for years and years to accumulate paid time off.”

None of this will be improved in the new contract, he said. It will still take one to five years to get 120 hours off, six to 10 years to get 160 hours, and 11 years or more to get 200 hours. The long hours go hand-in-hand with unsafe and potentially deadly working conditions.

“They talk good about safety above ground, but when you are underground, safety goes out the window. We have one of the

gassiest mines in the country. We have methane everywhere. Stuff falls on you. There is acid water and miners get Black Lung. In 2001, 13 miners were killed at the No. 5 mine when a methane explosion caused a cave-in. A month or two ago, workers found out that the methane sniffer devices were shut off. They probably did it deliberately to run as much coal as possible. If you complain to a supervisor about safety, they write you up.

“Our struggle is to get back what we lost and to gain respect. They don’t want to pay us fairly. It’s been a couple of years since they have been out of bankruptcy and they have been making record profits. Instead of paying us, management sends its dogs after us. We are struggling to be treated fairly, but none of that is in the contract.”

Another worker added, “We are looking for a good raise and signing bonuses, but they came up with nothing but more harassment. They’ve got a lot of miners working seven days a week. The supervisors got \$30,000 to \$50,000 bonuses for record production and we got nothing. Underground, the supervisors show off the new homes they’ve bought with their bonuses. It’s humiliating.

“With all the harassment, we couldn’t wait to get on the picket lines. When you cuss them as they head into the mines—it is therapeutic.”

The strike by miners occurs as graduate students at Columbia University, nurses in Worcester, Massachusetts and ATI steelworkers in Pennsylvania are also striking. The rebellion against the UMWA is part of the growing mood of resistance among workers after a year in which millions have suffered from the pandemic and the economic catastrophe while the billionaires have gotten even richer.

Workers throughout the area, including a US Steel’s Fairfield Works, face the same attack on jobs and working conditions as the Warrior miners. Non-union workers at Amazon’s Bessemer warehouse, 25 miles from the Warrior mines, and autoworkers at the nearby Mercedes Benz plant in Vance, Alabama, are also looking for a way to fight against unsafe conditions imposed by companies that have made huge profits during the pandemic.

But the UMWA, the United Steelworkers and other unions have deliberately isolated the strike by central Alabama coal miners. At the same time, the UMWA is seeking to starve the miners into submission by paying them only \$300 a week in strike benefits. While miners’ families suffer and many strikers are considering getting other jobs, including at the Amazon warehouse, Roberts pocketed \$210,693 in compensation from the UMWA last year, according to the union’s filing with the US Labor Department. In 2020, the UMWA paid out \$0 in strike benefits, according to the report, even though it controls assets valued at \$164.28 million, in addition to the multibillion-dollar UMWA Health and Retirement Funds.

The UMWA controls this vast wealth in spite of the fact that decades of betrayals have reduced it to an empty shell, from 160,000 active coal miners in 1978 to fewer than 8,000 today.

The UMWA is employing the same “selective strike” policy that led to the disastrous defeats of miners in the AT Massey and Pittston strikes in the 1980s. This is paving the way for mine bosses, including the executives at Warrior Met’s predecessor

company, Walter Energy, to use the bankruptcy courts to wipe out tens of thousands of jobs and the hard-won wages, pensions and working conditions of miners.

This underscores the needs for the Warrior miners to form a rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the UMWA and other corporatist unions, to break the isolation of their struggle and fight for common action by steelworkers, autoworkers, Amazon workers and others.

Biden and other corporate-controlled politicians have backed the union drive at the nearby Amazon Bessemer warehouse not to advance their interests of workers but to install a labor police force, similar to the UMWA, to contain the growing opposition of the working class. Whether the union campaign is successful or not, Amazon workers will need independent organizations to fight.

“When I first got here, it seemed like the UMWA was strong and we had old-school guys teaching us the ropes,” the miner, with more than a decade of experience, told the WWS. “But they have all retired or died. The UMWA is weak. We need a change. We have to unite with the teachers, the Amazon workers, the steelworkers to make us stronger. But the unions won’t do that. We need a different avenue.

“We need to unite around a different view from the Republicans and the Democrats. When our strike started, they sent 140 cops out to the docks to protect the company. The government uses the money for the companies, not to take care of the needs of the workers.

“We need a real socialist party for workers. The Democrats and Republicans put on this dog-and-pony show for the public, but behind closed doors they’re working together. They don’t stay in power this long without working together. They push this black vs. white thing to divide workers and try to keep us ignorant by working us all the time and with all the TV shows, basketball, and other distractions. But people are starting to wake up. All this wealth comes out of working people and we have to take it back.”



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