

After rebelling against UMWA, Warrior Met coal miners face need to expand their strike

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Coal miners at Warrior Met Coal in Brookwood, Alabama are entering their thirteenth day on strike today after having overwhelmingly rejected the tentative agreement reached between the company and the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) negotiating team. In response, the union is stepping up its efforts to isolate, wear down and betray the courageous struggle being waged by 1,100 striking miners to restore pay cuts, abolish the company's vindictive attendance system and improve their working conditions.

The UMWA published a press release on their website Monday claiming the union will be holding "unity rallies" in the Brookwood area to mobilize "support" for the striking miners. These rallies are aimed at building "solidarity," the statement says, among "local and national allies."

In addition, the press release says the UMWA is establishing a \$50,000 "relief fund for workers and families," paying "\$600,000 in the first wave of bi-weekly strike benefits to dues-paying members who have participated in strike activity" and purchasing "health care insurance for striking members and families."

The decision to hold "unity" rallies came after the UMWA International Executive Board held a "special meeting" to discuss how it would mobilize its "entire resources" to "support" the striking workers. In other words, after rank-and-file Warrior Met miners chased President Cecil E. Roberts back to the UMWA's Washington, D.C. headquarters, burned his sellout contract and voted it down by 1,006-45 votes, the International Executive Board held an emergency meeting to try to figure out how to put out the fire.

The worst mistake miners could make is to believe that their repudiation of the contract will force the

UMWA to come back with a better deal. The union hopes its upcoming rallies will be the kiss of death to the strike. The rallies will not be aimed at extending the strike to broader sections of the working class and defeating the company's government-backed strikebreaking operation.

On the contrary, the "local and national allies" will be union bureaucrats and Democratic Party politicians, who will swear their support for the striking miners while they do everything they can to isolate and defeat the strike. These could include officials from the United Steelworkers, who have overseen tens of thousands of layoffs at the US Steel's Fairfield Works and other mills; and representatives from the failed campaign by the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU) to unionize the Bessemer Amazon warehouse. Although Amazon workers want to fight the deplorable conditions, the unions, which have spent decades colluding with big business, were unable to generate any support from Amazon workers in Bessemer.

Roberts and Secretary Treasurer Levi Allen have already resumed their behind-the-scenes negotiations with company executives. Their plan is to come up with a slightly modified version of the deal which the miners overwhelmingly defeated in the hopes that the UMWA could sell it to rank and file this time. Meanwhile, the union will try to starve miners and their families into submission with poverty-level strike benefits.

The amount of "relief" being given to miners and their families, who are taking a stand for all workers, is an insulting pittance. According to the latest Office of Labor-Management Standards (OLMS) filings (fiscal year 2020), the UMWA sits atop \$164 million in total assets. Last year, it paid out \$0 in strike benefits. At the

same time, it had cash disbursements of \$45 million, which included \$210,693 in compensation to Roberts and \$176,887 for Allen and millions more for “general overhead,” “representational activities,” “political activities and lobbying” and “contributions, gifts and grants.”

Another warning must be made: The call for “unity” will be used to intimidate miners, who will not go along with another sellout. The UMWA bureaucracy has a long history of organizing thuggish attacks against its opponents, including the 1998 beating of dissident local officials and rank-and-file miners protesting the union’s abandonment of the eight-hour day during a Mitchell Day celebration in western Pennsylvania. Afterwards, Cecil Roberts justified the assault, telling the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, “This is not the way we want to resolve disputes, but you can’t curse the union and its leadership and expect that no one will take exception to that.”

Last week, miners passed their judgment on the UMWA when it tried to ram through a five-year agreement that included a measly \$1.50 raise after the union pushed through a \$6-an-hour wage cut in 2016. Workers took the agreement and tossed it into fire barrels.

By bringing a contract that was written by Warrior Coal CEO Walter Scheller and his attorneys, the union has ceded any authority to conduct negotiations and the strike. Rank-and-file miners should take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by forming a rank-and-file negotiating and strike committee. This committee should reach out to rank-and-file steelworkers, Amazon workers, educators, Mercedes Benz autoworkers and others to prepare common action against Warrior Coal’s strikebreaking operations and to overturn all the concessions granted to the company by the UMWA.

A rank-and-file committee must fight for what miners and their families need, not what the wealthy executives and UMWA bureaucrats say is affordable. This should include:

- Restore fully all wage and benefit concessions and include a large pay increase to make up for what has been sacrificed.

- End all pay tiers. Equal pay for equal work.

- Abolish the disciplinary system. Rehire with back pay all workers who were unjustly terminated.

- End forced overtime and grueling work schedules. Hire additional miners to ease the workload and give workers time off with their families.

- Oversee health and safety conditions by the miners. Enforce appropriate social distancing and daily COVID-19 testing. Uphold the right of workers to refuse to work under unsafe conditions.

Warrior Met coal miners must unite their struggles with the strikes being waged by thousands of ATI steelworkers in Pennsylvania and other states, Massachusetts nurses and New York City graduate student workers who have launched strikes to demand living wages and decent working conditions.

Workers everywhere are fighting the same global corporations and are increasingly facing identical conditions under a rampaging pandemic. The fight against the sacrifice of workers’ lives to the drive for profit must be combined with the building of an international political movement of the working class for socialism and the reorganization of society so that the wealth created by the collective labor of workers goes to them not the wealthy few.



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