”All we’re asking for is the wages we had in 2016”

Warrior Met Coal miners defiant, three weeks into Alabama strike

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On Saturday, April 24, at 2 p.m. CDT, the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is hosting a meeting calling for the unification of all workers in Alabama: “Support educators, Warrior Met miners, and Amazon workers! Unite our struggles to save lives AND livelihoods!” Register here *and invite your coworkers, friends and family to this important meeting.*

Miners at Warrior Met Coal in Brookwood, Alabama, are continuing their three-week strike in the face of stepped-up repression by the company and sheriff’s deputies from both Bibb and Tuscaloosa counties who are escorting strikebreakers through the workers’ picket lines. Company-friendly judges have also issued injunctions to limit the number of picketers.

Coal miners told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Warrior Met is also using drones and hiding private security guards in the woods to spy on striking workers. Despite this, the 1,100 striking miners remain determined to recoup pay cuts and other concessions imposed on them five years ago before the company emerged out of bankruptcy.

“All we’re asking for is the wages we had in 2016. That’s it,” a young worker told the WSWS during a strike rally at Tannehill State Park on Wednesday night. In its last contract proposal, accepted by the United Mine Workers (UMWA), Warrior Met offered a $1.00-per-hour raise, with another $0.50 in 3 years. The miners rejected the deal by a vote of 1,006 to 45.

“If we don’t stand up for ourselves now, we’re going to lose everything,” the worker said. “The company will take what they can get out of us and leave. Just take it and go. We kept this company out of bankruptcy. One of our bosses, she’s making at least a million a year and got a six-figure bonus. She told us we only “broke even” this year. They say they can’t even give us a salary like we were making in 2016.”

The previous company, Walter Energy, he said, “bought land out west that wasn’t any good and that’s why they went bankrupt, not because they were paying us good. They kept the CEO that ran [the company] into the ground. You won’t even believe what he makes.” Walter Scheller pockets $4 million a year.

“It’s dangerous down there. It’s one of the gassiest mines in the world. You make one mistake, you’re dead, and everybody down there with you is dead. The scabs they’ve got down there now don’t know what they’re doing. How are they supposed to keep themselves safe?”

“The mine was my life,” said a retired worker who told the WSWS he had worked in the mines for decades and now suffers from black lung and COPD. “I’ve lost count of the men I’ve known who died, men who were killed right in front of me. One man was cut nearly clean in two, a young black worker I trained up. I told him that morning, ‘You need to take some time off. Spend some time with your family.” He died that day. He had six kids.”

Another young miner was crushed by falling rock, he said. “His last words were ‘Get it off me!’ and I couldn’t budge it. It doesn’t take a big rock to crush a man. They look small, they look like nothing, but they weigh a ton, the rocks down there.

“People fought for us to have the wages we had and the pensions we had. These boys out here today don’t even have that. I’ve seen men who’ve mined for years die down there. How are they going to keep these boys that have no experience safe down there? We learned

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from others who'd been mining for years. That can't happen the way the company wants to run things."

Another worker said, "We voted over 1,000 to something like 45 to reject the contract and stay on strike. If we don't do this now, we'll never do it. I feel pretty good about the strike."

While the workers remain defiant, the UMWA has kept the strikers isolated in the face of court injunctions and the intimidation by private security guards and police. There are tens of thousands of industrial workers in the area, including Mercedes Benz workers in Vance, US Steel workers in Fairfield and Amazon workers in Bessemer. But the UMWA, the United Steelworkers and the other unions are incapable of and opposed to any genuine mobilization of the working class that would upset their relations with the corporations and both big business parties.

Instead, the UMWA has called a series of "Unity Rallies," with various union executives who give pep talks to the striking miners while doing nothing to actually strengthen their fight. On Wednesday, Cecil Roberts spoke before miners, acting like a traveling evangelist at a revival. He called the miners to prayer two times, called out the military veterans and said, "I know everybody in Alabama" is a Christian believer and "the most patriotic man you'll ever meet."

Adding insult to injury, Roberts announced that the UMWA was releasing a mere $50,000 towards a strike relief fund, and that that the AFL-CIO was adding the "princely" sum of $25,000. The UMWA has a total of $184 million in assets and paid out zero dollars in strike pay last year. As for the AFL-CIO, it had $116 million in cash disbursements last year, including the $286,000 salary for AFL-CIO president and former UMWA head Richard Trumka.

Roberts said that American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten had "sent her warmest regards to striking miners." Weingarten is hated by rank-and-file teachers for selling out strike after strike and colluding with the Biden administration to send students and teachers back to work during the pandemic, which has only accelerated the spread of the deadly disease.

Also speaking was Sarah Nelson, the president of the Association of Flight Attendants–CWA and a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), who has done nothing to oppose the airlines' destruction of tens of thousands of her members' jobs. "Jeff Bezos may be a very wealthy man," Nelson said, "but he couldn't stop the union from trying to organize in Bessemer."

In fact, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), which also had a speaker at the rally, failed to win any support among Amazon workers at the nearby Bessemer warehouse. That is not because Amazon workers don't want to fight, it's because the unions have spent decades collaborating with the corporations in lowering the wages and living standards of workers.

Coal miners do not need empty words at "Unity Rallies," which the UMWA plans to hold each week until they reach another deal. They need real unity by mobilizing the full strength of the working class to win their strike. This means forming a rank-and-file strike and negotiating committee, independent of the UMWA, to rally steelworkers, autoworkers and other workers throughout the area to carry out mass picketing to put a halt to Warrior's strikebreaking operations. This committee should fight to restore all the givebacks the UMWA granted the company.

To get more information on rank-and-file committees, miners and their supporters should contact us today.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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