

Alabama miners brace for long battle against Warrior Met Coal

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Striking coal miners and their families in Brookwood, Alabama, are bracing for a drawn-out battle against Warrior Met Coal, where nearly 1,100 coal miners have been on strike for five weeks. The first job action called by the United Mine Workers (UMWA) in more than a quarter of a century began on April 1. The company has adamantly refused miners' demands to restore pay cuts from 2016, although Warrior has enjoyed record output and profits for years.

Warrior Met is a major producer of metallurgical coal for the steelmakers in Asia, Europe and South America. It is owned by some of the powerful Wall Street financial institutions, including Blackrock, SSgA Funds, the Vanguard Group and Fidelity Management. With investors making fortunes from the rising stock market—even as more than 3 million people worldwide and 600,000 in the US died from the pandemic—the corporate and financial elite are determined not to accede to any of the demands of workers for improved wages and working conditions.

In a meeting on its first-quarter results Wednesday, Warrior executives assured investors that they could meet customer orders of 4.9 to 5.5 million tons even if the strike continues for the “remainder of the year.” Warrior CEO Walter Scheller said the company was “executing our business continuity plans” and would meet customer demand with existing coal inventory and “expected production during the rest of the year.”

Asked if he were concerned that a new contract with the UMWA would lead to an unexpected rise in labor costs, the CEO dismissed such fears, saying labor costs had “a very small impact over the last five years, primarily with things just like bonuses based on the benchmark pricing.” The company was more concerned with rising transportation royalties than labor costs, the CEO told investors.

In the central Alabama coalfields, about 40 miles southwest of Birmingham, miners are convinced the struggle could go on for another six months or longer. On the picket line, one miner told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I’ve worked in different mines for nearly 20 years. Of all the

years I’ve worked, the last five have been the worst,” pointing in particular to the wage cut and management abuse. “A mine is a mine. It doesn’t matter if it’s 400 feet or 1,200 feet deep. It’s dangerous and it’s hard. But we gave up a lot because of the promise that they would make things right with our next contract.”

The miner said the company was solely focused on profit not with safety and the quality of workers’ lives. “Miners want to work if you pay them right, treat them good and give them time with their families. They’ll stay loyal and work until they retire. But now, miners want to leave, and they only stay so they can feed their families.”

He said mining had destroyed many marriages because miners had to work so much overtime and had little time to spend with their wives and children. When they were off, much of the time was spent recuperating from work, the veteran miner said.

The mines around Brookwood are the deepest and some of the gassiest mines in North America.

Pickers who spoke to the WSWWS recalled the 13 miners who died when methane explosions ripped through Mine #5 on the afternoon of September 23, 2001. Surviving miners and the families blamed Jim Walter Resources—then the owner of the mine—and Alabama officials from the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) for covering up dangers at the mine.

In 2015, Jim Walter Resources, also known as Walter Energy, filed for bankruptcy. This was part of a wave of insolvencies of at least 50 coal companies, including Patriot, Peabody, Arch and Murray Coal, which used the bankruptcy courts between 2010 and 2019 to gut the jobs, wages and pensions of miners. In 2016, the UMWA agreed to massive concessions, including a \$6-an-hour pay cut, ostensibly to shore up the newly restructured company Warrior Met Coal, which is run by many of the same executives, including CEO Scheller, who had thrown the previous company into bankruptcy.

Over the ensuing five years, the UMWA has enforced this pro-company sweetheart contract on miners, even as

supervisors gloated over the bonuses that they, not the miners, got for meeting production quotas. It is apparent that UMWA President Cecil Roberts—who has not called a strike since taking over union presidency in 1995—only authorized the walkout because of the uncontrollable determination among miners to recoup all their losses.

On April 9, Roberts tried to ram through another five-year deal that restored only \$1.50 of the \$6 pay cut workers suffered in 2016, while maintaining the hated attendance system. The miners responded by rejecting the deal by a vote of 1,006 to 45, burning copies of the contract outside the union hall and denouncing Roberts as a sellout.

It is clear this resounding rejection by the workers sent shock waves throughout the Washington, DC-area offices of the UMWA and the AFL-CIO, which is headed by the former leader of the UMWA, Richard Trumka. Having been unable to get the miners to swallow another pro-company contract, it appears that Roberts and Trumka, like the Warrior Met coal bosses themselves, have decided to drag the strike out and try to starve the miners into submission.

Although the UMWA has \$164 million in assets and paid out \$0 in strike benefits last year, the miners and their families are only being paid \$650 every two weeks in strike benefits, if they put in 16 hours a week on the picket line. The AFL-CIO national headquarters, with assets of \$116 million, has donated a total of \$25,000 to striking miners!

As a result, the miners have been forced to take second and third jobs, delay medical visits, and organize bake sales and other fundraising events to survive. At one such fundraiser on May 1 outside the Local UMWA hall, miners' wives, seeking to raise funds to sustain the strike, sold baked goods, soft drinks and t-shirts with the logo "No contract, No Coal!" that sell for \$20 each.

The miners' wives told reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* that their families had already been living paycheck-to-paycheck before the strike and were only getting by if their husbands could work a lot of overtime. With the strike now in its fifth week, the miners are trying to string together any job—working on cars, electrical work, welding—to pay their bills.

"When my husband was working overtime at the mine, he got home at 4 a.m. and the most he saw the kids was for 30 minutes a day," said one wife who has four children. "With the strike, he's seeing even less of me and the kids because he is working multiple jobs and taking any side job he can get."

The UMWA's treatment of the Warrior strikers—who are waging the most important miners struggle in more than a generation—is a travesty. While Roberts never tires of saying that "Warrior miners are in a fight against Wall Street," he has done nothing to utilize the union's resources to sustain

the embattled miners. While putting striking miners on starvation rations, Roberts and Trumka continue to collect annual salaries of \$210,693 and \$286,000, respectively.

The UMWA, like the rest of the AFL-CIO long ago abandoned any defense of the working class. The UMWA, the United Steelworkers and other unions are isolating the Warrior Met miners and are opposed to any broader mobilization of miners, even at the Shoal Creek Mine and other nearby mines in Adger and Oak Grove, or workers at US Steel's Fairfield Works.

If this strike is not to be defeated—like Trumka and Roberts did to the AT Massey and Pittston strikes in the 1980s and early 1990s—Warrior Met miners must take the struggle into their own hands. This means forming a rank-and-file strike and negotiating committee, democratically controlled by workers themselves, to fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class to stop Warrior's strikebreaking operation and to restore the concessions handed over by the UMW.

To sustain this fight, workers and their families require resources. The rank-and-file committee should demand an increase in strike benefits to \$750 a week, plus full medical coverage for workers' families. To pay for this, we suggest that the UMWA sell off its \$164 million in assets and reduce the pay of Roberts and the rest of the UMWA staff to the level of a striking worker.

The resistance of the working class is growing from ExxonMobil workers in Texas, Virginia Volvo Truck workers, and ATI steelworkers in Pennsylvania and other states, to Massachusetts nurses and grad students in New York City. This is part of an international movement including striking workers in Colombia and Turkey.

We urge Warrior Met Coal miners to join the growing network of rank-and-file committees by contacting us at wsws.org/workers and to read the call for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact