

# Warrior Met Coal miners strike in Alabama nears two months in historic region of class struggle

Shelley Connor  
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The seven-week strike by 1,100 miners at Warrior Met Coal in Brookwood, Alabama is being conducted in an area that is rich in the history of the class struggle and miners' resistance to the violence of the coal bosses and the government. The miners, who walked out on April 1 determined to restore previous pay cuts and fight abusive and unsafe working conditions, have displayed enormous resilience and courage.

This is in sharp contrast to the actions of the United Mine Workers and the AFL-CIO, which have isolated the striking miners and forced them to fight alone against Warrior Met and the Wall Street investors who run it. Opposed to a real mobilization of the working class, including mass picketing to halt Warrior Met's strikebreaking operations, the UMWA organized a civil disobedience style protest in front of the company's main offices on Alabama Route 126 on Wednesday morning.

The scenes of camouflaged miners sitting in the road waiting to be arrested by state troopers are reminiscent of the impotent publicity stunts then UMW Vice President Cecil Roberts organized during the 1989-90 Pittston strike. Despite the determination of the miners, that struggle was defeated, leading to the devastation of mining families in Virginia, West Virginia and Kentucky.

On April 9, Warrior miners voted down a proposed five-year contract brought back by Roberts (UMW president since 1995) by a margin of 1,006 to 45. Miners were livid that the deal restored only \$1.50 of the \$6 pay cut workers suffered in 2016, while maintaining the hated attendance system.

The UMW responded to the rebuke by deciding to let the strike drag out, hoping that the economic pressure of a long strike would wear down the miners' resistance. Although the UMW has not called a major strike in more than 25 years and has assets of more than \$164 million, it has kept the embattled miners on starvation rations of \$625 in strike benefits every two weeks, forcing many to rely on local food banks.

"I think they're dipping into it," a striking miner said of the UMWA's strike fund. "We pay that, you know. It comes out of our paychecks. I think they're dipping into it to pay for their marches on Washington and stuff," the miner told the *World*

*Socialist Web Site*. He said many miners were forced to take second and third jobs, including at Amazon's nearby Bessemer warehouse. "There are guys working three 12 hour shifts in a row at Amazon," he told the WSWs.

Many miners are also worried they will lose at least part of their 401(k) earnings with the next contract, and they have tapped into those funds to survive the strike. Like his fellow pickets, the miner must be on the picket line at least 16 hours a week to earn strike benefits. Warrior Met sought an injunction early in the strike to limit the number of pickets to five at a time for each site. Now, 10 pickets are permitted.

Along with their pay and health benefits, the safety of the mines they work concerns the striking miners. "I got friends who are disabled from injuries in the mine," the Warrior Met miner told the WSWs. "I know people who have black lung, and a lot more who probably have it."

Under the Federal Coal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1969, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) is supposed to coordinate with the UMWA and mine management to provide screenings for coal workers' pneumoconiosis (commonly known as black lung). "I've never seen anything like that," the miner told the WSWs. "I have never once been screened for black lung."

Other, more immediate hazards lurk within the mines. Many miners point out that Brookwood's mines are not only the nation's deepest, but also its gassiest. The area around the mine is dotted with hundreds of degasification fields, where the methane from the mines is pumped out of the mines and dispersed into the air above ground.

On September 23, 2001, an explosion in Jim Walter #5 Mine tragically illustrated the dangers of the odorless, invisible gas. A roof collapsed, trapping one miner and crushing a large battery charging unit. As 12 miners rushed to rescue their fallen coworker, a spark from the charging unit ignited the methane. In the ensuing explosion, all 13 men were killed. A monument at West Brookwood Church stands amid 13 evergreen trees in testimony to the devastating loss. Twenty years on, the disaster is seldom far from the thoughts of the miners, who remember that the miners in Jim Walter #5 warned management about the

lack of ventilation for weeks before the explosion.

Warrior Met Coal is situated within the Warrior Coal Field; spread over 7,810 square miles, it is Alabama's most expansive and productive coal field. It has also been the ground for some of the state's bloodiest labor struggles.

In September of 1920, mounting anger over unfair payment, poor housing, and inhuman hours led Alabama's miners to strike under the leadership of the UMW, which at that time led many courageous struggles. The wage increases they had been promised during World War I were being denied as were the promises of eight-hour days. Miners worked 12 hours or more daily.

The UMW pulled some 20,000 Alabama miners out of the mines, bringing the state's coal production to a halt. In response, Alabama Governor Thomas Kilby imposed martial law in mining towns, making it illegal for miners to convene even in pairs. UMW officials were harassed and menaced. Miners suspected of organizing were imprisoned.

In December of 1920, Alabama Guard soldiers pulled labor organizer Adrian Northcutt from his home in Walker County on charges of labor organizing. His son-in-law, Willie Baird, heard seven shots and ran outside to find Northcutt dead. In the ensuing melee, Baird shot the soldier who killed Northcutt.

Baird fled, but quickly turned himself in to the local sheriff and was jailed. On January 5, nine guardsmen invaded the jail and hauled 21-year-old Baird away.

A mail carrier discovered Baird's body, riddled with at least 20 bullets, on the side of the road later that day. Former Governor Braxton Bragg Comer remarked that the lynching had "an element of self-defense about it" and the militiamen got away with murder scot-free.

As the trial proceeded, violence continued to rage in Walker County with at least 16 people on both sides killed during the strike. The UMW appealed for the government to step in. As arbitrator, Democratic Governor Thomas Kilby oversaw a settlement that did not recognize the union, blocked the companies from reinstating striking miners and eliminated any proposed pay increases.

Underscoring the deep egalitarian traditions of the miners, Baird was the descendant of an anti-secessionist family who tried to create "the Free State of Winston" against the Confederacy, which had its first White House in Montgomery, Alabama. The mine Baird and his father-in-law Northcutt were trying to organize was worked mostly by black miners, including many entrapped in the state's convict labor system.

The murder of Baird and Northcutt occurred during a period known as the Mine Wars, which raged across the coalfields from central Alabama to Appalachia. It was a period of relentless class struggle in which the miners, many of them influenced by socialism and inspired by the Russian Revolution, engaged in battles with names like the "Matewan Massacre," the "Battle of Blair Mountain" and in the 1930s, "Bloody Harlan." These defiant struggles of miners, along with

rubber, steel, auto and other workers, finally led to the establishment of the mass industrial unions in the mid-1930s.

The UMW long ago abandoned these traditions. A major turning point was the introduction of the "selective strike" policy by then-UMW President Richard Trumka and Vice President Cecil Roberts in the 1980s. This policy overturned the long tradition of "no contract, no work" and shutting down all the mines, union and non-union, until every operator signed the national contract. This led to the defeat of the AT Massey (1984-85) and Pittston (1989-90) strikes, and was part of the UMW's drive to help the coal operators establish "labor peace" and boost their profitability and competitiveness with international rivals.

The UMW of 1920 fought for an eight-hour day. One hundred years later, UMWA miners expect to work 12-hour shifts. Black lung, almost eradicated by the 1990s, is surging anew while the UMWA does nothing.

Brookwood's miners must understand that the UMWA uses the struggles of the past to disguise its own treachery. Were today's UMWA the legitimate heir of those bloody struggles, they would have ceased production at every union mine in the United States when miners voted to go on strike at Warrior Met.

If miners are to prevail, they must create their own rank-and-file organizations, independent of the corporatist UMW, to champion their own demands for better wages, reasonable working hours, and safer work conditions, just as their predecessors did a century ago. This means building rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by miners themselves, which will turn out to area steelworkers, autoworkers, Amazon workers and others, along with coal miners throughout the country, to prepare common action to win this decisive battle.



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