Alabama miners and supporters denounce assault by UMWA officials and isolation of Warrior Met strike

“Spencer and Blankenship need to be removed immediately”

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Coal miners and their supporters in Brookwood, Alabama, have responded with disgust and anger over the violent assault by United Mine Workers executives against two left-wing podcasters at last Saturday’s “Strike Fest” fundraising event.

The statements denouncing the thuggish attack come as miners increasingly voice their opposition to the UMWA’s isolation of the nearly two-month strike by 1,100 Warrior Met miners.

In an assault that was caught on video, UMWA District 20 Vice President Larry Spencer and District 20 Representative James Blankenship, both members of the Alabama AFL-CIO executive board, led an attack on two members of the Dixieland of the Proletariat podcast, whom they mistakenly believed were associated with the *World Socialist Web Site*. The UMWA goons flipped over the table and repeatedly threatened the podcasters with violence. In openly racist language, Blankenship told one of the podcasters, who is black, “I’ll beat your mother f**king brains out, boy!”

On the public Facebook page: “What’s really happening in Brookwood,” several workers expressed their revulsion over the attack. One posted: “Stuff like this doesn’t make anyone sympathetic to a righteous cause.”

Another condemned the silence of the UMWA after the attack, posting: “Amazing, the non-response nor public apology in regards to the PR disaster that occurred at the miner’s fundraiser fest over the previous weekend. Perhaps UMWA leadership should educate themselves on how to support the community that supports them.” Another said of UMWA President Cecil Roberts: “Cecil makes a video about everything else but is silent on this.”

In a particularly thoughtful comment, one poster pointed to the disastrous impact of the union bureaucracy’s anticommunism, writing: “[H]onestly take a long hard look at the history of unions. It may be that the reduction in power of the unions goes hand in hand with the distancing from socialist principles.”

Contrasting the UMWA executives’ violent threats against the podcasters to their grovelling before the coal bosses, another poster said he would bet “you won’t find a video of them talking to [Warrior Met boss Walter] Scheller that way.”

In comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a miner who left after the last UMW-backed contract said, “Larry Spencer and Blankenship need to be removed immediately. They are in bed with Warrior Met LLC. The company probably pays them to agree to lower wages for the union coal miners who work for Warrior.”

Commenting on how the UMWA’s various publicity stunts during the strike, including the staged arrest of Roberts, Spencer and nine other UMWA bureaucrats during a civil disobedience protest Tuesday, the former miner said, “This is a show they are trying to put on to cover up what goes on behind closed doors.”

Another miner told the WSWS, “Larry [Spencer] and Blankenship both disgusted me in their actions when I worked there, and it’s my opinion that especially Larry only wants to control the narrative and works to silence a strong unified voice of the workers continually. It’s a slap in the face to the working men who pay dues and drag the dead weight of the union leadership every time Cecil [Roberts] does his publicity stunts.”

“I think that video showed some BS stuff,” a striking Warrior Met miner told the WSWS. “At the very least

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Blankenship and Spencer should apologize to the rank and file instead of holding a last-minute march a couple days later to deflect heat off of them," referring to Tuesday's civil disobedience stunt.

"We are being told nothing of what is going on. Only Cecil bragging about being arrested. I think they are thieves themselves, making six-figure salaries while the rank and file gets $300 a week [in strike pay]." Because of these starvation rations, the miner, like many striking miners, has been forced to take on multiple jobs and works six days a week.

Referring to District 20 Vice President Larry Spencer, the miner said, "Thuggery is all he knows. He doesn't have the skill set needed to be in that role or get what we deserve. I wish that video would go viral. I'm surprised the African Americans in the UMWA have not had more to say about it."

The miner said there was a group of contract workers in the UMWA who have honored the picket lines but are not receiving strike pay. "Spencer won't authorize strike pay for them. Horton is their name. The Horton group hasn't crossed the line yet, but the union won't let them receive strike pay. So, they can't work and can't get strike pay."

Commenting on Spencer again the miner said, "He pretends to live at the foot of the cross and is always posting church stuff, yet when he goes to the people he swears and threatens them. What a hypocrite."

The miner also commented on the impact of the *World Socialist Web Site*. WSWS articles have been widely read by miners and have outraged the UMWA officials. The WSWS has exposed the decades-long betrayal by the UMWA and called for miners to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees to expand the strike.

"They don't like y'all's articles about Cecil," the miner said referring to the top UMWA officials. "The union has clearly been taking kickbacks for years. The selective strike stuff makes it much harder for miners. All union mines should be out now. If we were, this would cause real change," he said.

Another striking miner, commenting on the meager strike benefits Warrior Met miners are getting from the UMWA, "One of the damn reps told everyone to plant a garden to survive. To hell with that."

As proof, he sent a screenshot of a recent post by UMWA Secretary Treasurer Levi Allen on a private Facebook page where he was responding to miners' demands for increased strike pay. "300 bucks a week is the highest strike benefit in organized labor that I know of," Allen wrote, "and we provide healthcare which no other Union that I know of does. In my opinion 300 a week, 1200 a month with healthcare is more than respectable."

This is coming from an upper middle class union executive, who was paid at least $176,000 last year from workers' hard-earned dues money. This is $3,385 a week, or more than 10 times the strike pay Warrior Met miners and their families are trying to survive on.

Unable to conceal his contempt, Allen continues: "We are going to have to find a way to feed kids and families by setting up food banks etc. Everyone better start a garden—a big ass one—now! As time passes and this turns into weeks and months, people will probably have to get part time jobs to supplement their income and try to find a way to last. It's not going to be anger, that wins, it's going to be patience and good planning, asking for help and support (this is a tough thing for a coal miner to do, simply ask for help), community organizing, proper messaging and a good PR campaign."

Allen acknowledges that "a lot of people think I sold these brothers and sisters out" by negotiating the contract, which Warrior Met miners rejected by a 1,006 to 45 margin. Roberts, Allen, Spencer & Co. responded to this rebuke by colluding with Warrior Met to wait the miners out and starve them into submission. Acutely aware of the deep anger of miners, the UMWA executives carried out the violent assault last week—aimed at the WSWS—to intimidate and silence the miners.

They cannot be allowed to succeed. That is why Warrior Met miners should follow the example of Virginia Volvo workers, Alabama educators and other workers by forming a rank-and-file committee to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. This committee should formulate demands, including the immediate removal of Spencer and Blankenship, full restoration of pay and health care benefits, and an increase in strike pay to fully cover lost income for the duration of the strike.

At the same time, this committee should call for all miners to join in a national strike, along with joint solidarity actions by educators, steelworkers, autoworkers, Amazon workers and others in Alabama and beyond.

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