

Alabama coal miners are not to blame for UMWA leaders' racist assault

Eric London
28 May 2021

In politics there are incidents that reveal a great deal about the mechanisms through which the capitalist parties suppress the class struggle. The violent assault carried out on May 22 by United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) executives against podcasters associated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) is one such event.

During the assault, which took place at a public fundraiser for 1,100 striking Warrior Met coal miners in Brookwood, Alabama, UMWA Region 20 Vice President Larry Spencer (salary=\$141,000) and Region 20 Representative James Blankenship (salary=\$101,000) made death threats against two podcasters, ignoring their attempts to explain they came to support the strike, which is currently in its third month. Both Spencer and Blankenship are also members of the executive board of the Alabama AFL-CIO.

Using openly racist language, Blankenship threatened to kill one of the podcasters, who is black, shouting "I'll beat your mother f*cking brains out, boy." A video recording of the incident has now been viewed thousands of times. The UMWA leaders attacked the podcasters under the mistaken belief they were members of the Socialist Equality Party and writers for the *World Socialist Web Site*.

On Facebook pages used by workers in the region, striking miners and local residents expressed shame and anger over the thuggery and backwardness of the UMWA leadership. Before the strike, opposition to the UMWA already ran deep among miners as a result of decades of sellout contracts, including a 2016 contract that resulted in a \$6 per hour pay cut for miners. In April, the miners voted 1,006 to 45 against a contract promoted by the UMWA. UMWA bureaucrats have been receiving full salaries, and the massive strike fund sits largely untapped while strikers subsist on starvation-wage strike pay.

Saturday's incident only deepened workers' disdain for the UMWA leaders. One local worker wrote on Facebook, "These are the idiots leading them! They ought to be ashamed of how they treated people that were fundraising for them! Get rid of these men and you may get somewhere with your strike."

Another denounced the UMWA leadership as "arrogant and racist," saying, "If this is the UMWA leadership acting like this..... he is a total embarrassment and is not what the union needs as it's representative!!!!!" A third commenter said, "This was Larry Spencer and James Grape Blankenship. The Vice President and District Rep!!!! The FRIGGIN leaders!!!"

Statement by DSA organizer blames striking coal miners for assault

Many workers also expressed the fear that the UMWA leaders' actions would cause supporters of the strike worldwide to assume it was the workers themselves who were racist, thereby further isolating the strikers

and weakening their fight against the company.

This is precisely the narrative now being promoted by DSA member Jacob Morrison, who is also North Alabama AFL-CIO Treasury Secretary and recent Programs Director for the Alabama College Democrats. Morrison and the show he hosts, the Valley Labor Report, organized Saturday's fundraiser in consultation with Alabama AFL-CIO President and Democratic Party leader Bren Riley.

Following the incident, the Valley Labor Report issued a statement falsifying what took place:

Today we became aware through video evidence that yesterday at the rally, a misunderstanding by a handful of UMWA members about the identity of two members of the Montgomery podcast Dixieland of the Proletariat, who had been invited to the rally, quickly spun out into racially charged violent threats made by at least one of the white UMWA members against a Black member of the podcast.

The statement continues:

We stand completely and irrevocably against white-supremacy and anti-Blackness, period. The language used and threats made in this video are completely unjustifiable, and we urge members of the UMWA locals currently on strike to ensure that this type of ideology is rooted out of their locals and district.

It is not "a handful of UMWA members" who are to blame for Saturday's assault, but top UMWA and AFL-CIO officers who were caught in the act on video. There is no evidence whatsoever that any actual miners were involved in the attack. The attempt to blame strikers for the violence and racism of the AFL-CIO officers is a cynical and dishonest act. It severely undermines the strike and weakens the miners in the eyes of the working class on a national and international scale, playing off the false stereotype that all southern workers are backwards and racist.

The aim of the AFL-CIO and UMWA is not only to protect its own leaders from criminal prosecution for assault, battery and criminal threats, but also to use the workers as a scapegoat, inject racial divisions into the strike, demoralize strikers and pave the way for the strike's capitulation to Warrior Met on terms similar to those presented by the UMWA in their first proposed contract. The response of the trade union to Saturday's event confirms that these organizations are totally hostile to the interests of the working class.

DSA says criticism of UMWA “endangers Black and Brown folks”

As opposition to the UMWA grows among miners, the DSA works even more intensely to defend the trade unions and justify the suppression of left-wing criticism to the bureaucracy.

This task is made complicated by the blatantly racist character of the UMWA thugs’ assault on a black podcaster. The DSA is dedicated to the promotion of middle class racial and gender politics, and so it must unload the responsibility of this racist attack from its allies in the UMWA leadership, which is filled with fascist types like Spencer and Blankenship. The DSA therefore blames the striking workers and the *World Socialist Web Site* for the racist actions of the UMWA bureaucrats.

Alongside the Valley Labor Report statement falsely blaming “white UMWA members” for the assault, Nicole Watkins, co-chair of the DSA’s chapter in Birmingham, tweeted that the DSA is “tired of watching Black and Brown folks in Alabama be endangered by so-called ‘socialists’ hell-bent on ruining labor organizing in our state,” a reference to the WSWS and SEP.

Watkins also blamed the WSWS for its “role in the harm perpetuated upon Black comrades.” The official account of the Birmingham DSA tweeted that the attack was the product of “the harm certain anti-union ‘socialists’ have done.” For all the middle class’s obsession with identity politics, when their allies in the trade union bureaucracy are exposed as racist thugs, the pseudo-left covers for the culprits.

By blaming the WSWS and Socialist Equality Party for what took place, the DSA argues that the WSWS deserves to be attacked because it publishes exposures of the bureaucracy. It thereby accepts the premise that the bureaucracy has the right to use violence to intimidate and silence working class opposition.

One leader of the Birmingham DSA retweeted a post by Joshua Armstead, DSA member and Vice President of UNITE HERE Local 23, which reads, “It is a shame that this happened, is a result of WSWS f*cking around and agitating workers on the strike line, on pickets and in print.”

In other words, militant workers who “agitate” against the bureaucracy deserve to be beaten—or worse—if they criticize the bureaucracy to fellow workers on the picket line or on social media. This tweet was also “liked” by several DSA members and the Twitter account of Morrison’s Valley Labor Report. The DSA supports the trade union executives not despite their anti-democratic behavior, but because of it.

The UMWA and DSA are lashing out because the *World Socialist Web Site* has been conducting regular work among the miners, providing workers with information and details of the sellout the UMWA attempted to force through. These exposures contributed to a massive rejection of the contract by a vote of 1006 to 45. In the course of the strike, the WSWS has won a substantial following among miners. WSWS articles have been read by tens of thousands of people, including many thousands in the towns populated by striking miners and their families. The fascist gangsters were provoked by the wide readership of WSWS articles supporting workers and opposing the betrayals by the UMWA.

The DSA-associated *Jacobin* magazine has published only one article on the Warrior Met strike, an article authored by Morrison which presents the Republicans as the sole enemies of striking workers. The WSWS’s readership among miners is doubtless an order of magnitude higher than any publication associated with the DSA, which is oriented entirely to the middle class. The DSA leaders blaming the WSWS for Saturday’s incident have no experience in the social struggles of the working class.

Violence in the labor movement

The history of the miners over the last half century is one of desperate struggle by miners against the leadership of the UMWA. The UMWA bureaucracy has used violence to suppress any effort to reform the organization since its degeneration in the later years of John L. Lewis’s tenure as president.

In 1969, UMWA President Tony Boyle, Lewis’s hand-picked successor, murdered reform leader Joseph “Jock” Yablonski in the most horrific way, breaking into his home and also killing his wife and 25-year-old daughter.

The murder came in the midst of a years-long fight by the bureaucracy to suppress opposition to the increasingly conservative business unionism of the UMWA leadership. Boyle was an autocrat who ran the union on behalf of the mine owners and allowed workers’ grievances to wither on the vine. Wildcat strikes of UMWA locals grew increasingly common throughout the 1960s. To crush this opposition, Boyle ended elections for district presidents and granted himself the power of appointment.

In 1969, Yablonski challenged Boyle for UMWA president, pledging democracy for miners and an end to the pro-management orientation of the Boyle machine. Boyle used a combination of fraud and violence to defeat Yablonski, and on December 31, 1969, thugs paid by Boyle killed Yablonski and his family in their home.

Within hours of the discovery of Yablonski’s body, tens of thousands of miners began walking off the job in a massive strike in protest of the Boyle leadership. In the aftermath of overwhelming miner opposition to Boyle’s involvement in the crime, the Miners for Democracy reform caucus emerged and its candidate, Arnold Miller, defeated Boyle for UMWA president in 1972. In the years that followed, the Democratic Party was engaged in a constant fight to control Miners for Democracy and suppress the class struggle.

Nevertheless, the 1970s were a period of ongoing and intensive social struggle among miners as frustration grew among workers over the slow pace of democratization promised by the Miners for Democracy leadership. The miners were the forefront of a wave of labor struggles taking place across the United States and internationally.

The *Bulletin*, the newspaper predecessor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, actively covered and intervened in all of the militant miners strikes of the 1970s. A strike took place in 1973-74 among miners at the Brookside Mine in Harlan County, Kentucky, followed by a national strike by miners later that year. In 1974, UMWA District 20 President Sam Littlefield, a leader of the reform wing of the union, was shot and killed under suspicious circumstances in a Holiday Inn in Washington D.C. in what many believed was a hit by the UMWA leadership.

In order to win re-election as UMWA president in 1977, Arnold Miller was forced to support the demand that a right to strike over local grievances be introduced into the 1977 national coal wage agreement, the national contract that bound all miners employed by companies in the Bituminous Coal Operators Association.

In 1977-78, miners launched a 110-day strike that paralyzed the coal operators. Then-President Jimmy Carter, a Democrat, invoked the Taft-Hartley Act and attempted to use a federal court injunction to force the miners back to work. Miners defied this order and rendered it unenforceable. In March 1978, the UMWA leadership ordered and carried out a brutal attack against members of the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, leading to the hospitalization of *Bulletin* reporters. News of the assault rapidly spread through the mines and caused shock and outrage among striking miners.

In 1981, the incoming administration led by Ronald Reagan decided to avoid a direct confrontation with the miners during a 72-day strike involving 160,000 miners, fearing they were too militant and would stifle plans for a national union-busting effort.

That same year, Richard Trumka was brought into UMWA leadership. In 1982, he became president of the union, and launched a ruthless

campaign to break the back of rank-and-file miners' opposition. Control over locals was reasserted through violence, victimization and strikebreaking. The tradition of "no contract, no work" whereby miners would strike nationally in solidarity with local strikes, was ended and replaced with "selective strikes." The UMWA forcibly attempted to put an end to wildcats.

The efforts to reform the unions were unsuccessful as workers confronted an entrenched bureaucracy, allied with the state and the Democratic Party, and prepared to use violence to crush dissent. As a result, the membership of the UMWA was reduced from 100,000 at the time Trumka took over to 35,000 today. The social conditions in mining areas are deplorable, with unemployment rampant. Hatred for the Democratic Party in these regions is so deep that once solidly blue counties now vote overwhelmingly for the Republican Party.

Trumka was rewarded for crushing opposition in the UMWA by his selection as president of the AFL-CIO. He turned leadership of the UMWA over to his crony Cecil Roberts, another autocratic "president for life." By legitimizing the use of violence against opponents of the bureaucracy today, the DSA endorses the decades-long efforts by the bureaucracy to stifle reform in the UMWA and suppress the class struggle through force.

Oppose UMWA slanders against the miners! Defend the Warrior Met strike!

The assault took place because the union executives are sensitive to the growing social discontent among Warrior Met strikers to forty years of betrayal by the UMWA and AFL-CIO.

In the last several weeks, workers in critical industries have begun to fight against corporate exploitation and the massive levels of wealth accumulated by the capitalist class during a pandemic that has left over 3 million dead worldwide. Autoworkers at Volvo in Virginia, nurses in Massachusetts, home care workers in Connecticut and auto parts workers at Nexteer in Michigan have initiated strikes or authorized strike action, as have autoworkers in India, where the deadly coronavirus is spreading through the factories like wildfire.

In each case, the workers are constrained by the trade unions, whose job it is to isolate these struggles and prevent them from coalescing in a common movement of working people against the corporations. The UMWA's thuggishness is a prime example of a universal phenomenon. The efforts by the UMWA and DSA to blame striking Alabama coal miners for the racist assault of the bureaucracy is part of the bureaucracy's plan to break these struggles, isolate the strikers and end the strike on the company's terms.

For this reason, coalminers everywhere and workers across industries must oppose the UMWA and its allies' efforts to slander Warrior Met strikers as guilty of the crimes carried out by the bureaucracy. Workers in all industries must mobilize in defense of the Warrior Met strikers before the UMWA is able to break the strike and ram through another sellout contract.

This requires the formation of rank-and-file committees—organizational structures run democratically by the workers themselves to carry forward these struggles outside the control of gangsters in the UMWA leadership. These committees are based on the principle that workers must have organizational control over the conduct of their own struggles. This task is necessary in order to spread the strike, popularize its message and build an independent movement of the international working class for social equality.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)