

Mobilize the working class behind striking Alabama miners!

Marcus Day
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As roughly 1,100 coal miners at Warrior Met Coal in Alabama enter the third month of their strike, there are growing signs that it is in imminent danger of being shut down and betrayed by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA).

On May 22, UMWA executives assaulted left-wing podcasters at a fundraiser for the strike, mistakenly thinking they were associated with the *World Socialist Web Site*. The union bureaucrats have been enraged that miners have widely read and circulated WSWs articles and statements about their struggle, which contributed to their massive rejection of the first UMWA-backed tentative agreement, voted down by 1,006 to 45.

Although the attack was directed in the immediate sense against the WSWs, its main purpose was to intimidate rank-and-file miners and subdue any opposition to the company's demands.

Days after the assault, leading union officials, including UMWA President Cecil Roberts, staged a "civil disobedience" publicity stunt, sitting on a road in front of the No. 7 mine until they were led away by police. The toothless performance was intended both as a face-saving gesture and an effort to head off any serious actions by miners that would actually impact the company's operations.

The UMWA is following a playbook "perfected" over the course of nearly 40 years of treachery. At bitter strikes against AT Massey and Pittston in the 1980s, the union worked to crush the resistance of miners, who had long been in the forefront of the class struggle and among the most militant sections of the working class. UMWA leaders, including current AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, replaced the long-standing principle of national strikes with impotent "selective strikes" and middle-class protest stunts, while at the same time directing thuggish attacks against miners who opposed these betrayals.

Warrior Met coal miners have not struck for two months only to suffer yet another sellout and defeat. The enforced isolation of the strike must be broken!

First of all, a nationwide walkout of the tens of thousands

of miners in the US must be initiated, in a counteroffensive against the relentless corporate assault on wages and working conditions. In addition to miners, the broadest sections of the working class must be mobilized, including not only railroad and Port of Mobile workers who ship coal, but also steelworkers, autoworkers, Amazon workers, and others, both in Alabama and beyond.

There is growing sentiment among workers for a genuine fightback. Inflation in consumer goods is increasingly eating up take-home pay, while the stock market continues at near-record highs and corporate executives and billionaires grow their fortunes. Alongside the two-month strike at Warrior Met Coal, walkouts have taken place this year or are ongoing by steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies Incorporated (ATI) in several states, Volvo Truck manufacturing workers in southwestern Virginia, nurses at St. Vincent Hospital in Massachusetts, and graduate student workers at New York and Columbia Universities.

In every case, the unions have not sought to expand and win these struggles, but rather to smother and sabotage them.

Similar to the UMWA, the United Steelworkers (USW) has strung out steelworkers on inadequate strike pay, while refusing to call out its tens of thousands of members at other steel companies. At Volvo Truck, the United Auto Workers (UAW) torpedoed a two-week strike just as it was set to impact other plants in the company's operations, sending workers back to the plant without seeing, let alone voting on, the tentative agreement. The blatant pro-company maneuver provoked a rebellion by workers, who organized a rank-and-file committee. Once workers learned of the concessions contained in the UAW-backed agreement, they voted it down by an overwhelming 91 percent.

At Warrior Met, the UMWA has been starving miners on just \$300 a week in strike pay, roughly equivalent to the federal minimum wage of \$7.50 an hour, or an annual wage of just \$15,000, below the already absurdly low federal poverty guideline of \$17,420 for a household of two.

While miners have been forced to choose which bills to pay or have been compelled to take on second jobs, UMWA

executives at both the district and national level, sitting on \$164 million in assets, have continued to take home their bloated six-figure salaries. UMWA President Cecil Roberts, based on his annual gross salary of \$194,416 in 2020, would have been paid approximately \$3,888 every week of the strike. UMWA District 20 Vice President Larry Spencer, who led the assault on the podcasters on May 22 and had a gross salary of \$121,277 last year, would have a weekly check of \$2,425.

A central demand of the miners at Warrior Met is to reverse the \$6-an-hour wage cut that the UMWA forced through in 2016, following the bankruptcy of the company's predecessor Walter Energy. While miners were forced to suffer this painful and humiliating concession, the income and assets of the UMWA have remained largely stable, even as thousands of coal miners continued to lose their jobs. In other words, the union executives have separated their financial interests from those of the workers they claim to represent.

The UMWA is a microcosm of the pro-corporate, anti-working class operations of the trade unions as a whole. The main US trade union federation, the AFL-CIO, is headed by former UMWA President Trumka (annual salary, \$286,000), who epitomizes this process, having sold out numerous miners' struggles, working with the mine companies to impose tens of thousands of jobs cuts during his tenure and allow large sections of coal miners to be wiped out.

Predictably, Trumka and the AFL-CIO have done nothing to inform their millions of members about the Alabama coal miners' strike, let alone mobilize them in its support.

The reality is that the AFL-CIO "unions" do not unite workers across industries, or even within a given workplace. Its resources, including those derived from workers' dues, are not used to advance workers' interests. The AFL-CIO and its subsidiaries function as extensions of management. They are overseen by executives who have acquired upper-middle class incomes and are hostile to the workers they claim to represent.

The unions are working closely with the Biden administration, which is well aware of the explosive social anger that has built up in the United States as a result of the ruling class response to the pandemic. The AFL-CIO and the UMWA have close relations with the Democratic Party, which is promoting the unions as instruments for suppressing the class struggle and disciplining the working class as part of the economic and military offensive against China.

Contrary to the attempts of UMWA bureaucrats to convince miners they are powerless and alone, workers in Alabama are in fact taking part in an international resurgence of class struggle. Last week, remote operations

workers at BHP Billiton's Escondida mine in Chile, the world's largest copper mine, initiated strike action, causing global copper prices to jump. Thousands more on-site workers at the mine are pressing for strike action over their upcoming contract negotiations.

In India, major automakers in the southern state of Tamil Nadu have been forced to idle their operations, including Ford India, Hyundai, and Renault-Nissan, in the face of strikes and labor unrest among autoworkers, who are outraged over the lack of protection from COVID-19. The virus has been killing upwards of 3,000-4,000 in the country every day for weeks, having been allowed to run rampant by India's pro-business BJP government.

Workers are up against giant multinational corporations, which control all the major political parties, state institutions and trade unions, and which view the planet as a global battlefield in the struggle to increase both their profits and their profits' source: the exploitation of workers.

Workers internationally share common class interests and face a common class enemy. Warrior Met miners are themselves an integral component of complex global supply chains and international systems of production, producing metallurgical (met) coal for export to steelmakers in South America, Asia, and Europe. The Port of Mobile is the fourth-largest exporter of met coal in the US.

But to unite and wield this vast and as-yet untapped source of power, workers require organizations of their own, rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, and an international strategy to guide them.

The International Committee of the Fourth International, which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*, has issued a call for an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). The aim of the IWA-RFC is to fulfill the burning need to unite workers across all racial, ethnic, national, and other boundaries, and to provide the framework and organizational basis for workers to communicate and coordinate their struggles internationally. We urge workers who agree with the necessity of this initiative to sign up to get involved today.



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