

Warrior Met miners hit by strikebreakers' vehicles on Alabama picket lines

Shelley Connor, Jerry White
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Several Warrior Met coal miners in Brookwood, Alabama have been struck by vehicles being driven through their picket lines by strikebreakers in recent days, according to a press release earlier this week by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). More than 1,100 miners have been on strike since April 1 fighting to restore pay cuts and oppose further attacks on health care and working conditions.

On June 4, a miner's wife tweeted a video of a picket being struck by a truck leaving the Number 7 East Portal. A further video in a WBCR Birmingham news report showed a truck ramming through 12 pickets on its way to the mine.

In a June 7 statement, the UMWA said, "Three separate incidents of vehicular assault by persons working for Warrior Met Coal, Inc. have occurred on legal picket lines set up by members of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) in the last three days, raising questions as to whether the company has determined that violence and the threat of bodily harm are its best responses to the ongoing strike by UMWA miners at the company."

UMWA President Cecil Roberts said the assaults were conducted either by management or nonunion workers. "We have members in casts, we have members in the hospital, we have members who are concerned about their families and potential of violence against them if they come to the picket line."

The violent assaults are certainly serious. They follow the issuing of a court injunction by company-friendly judges who have restricted the number of pickets, a constant presence of state troopers and sheriff's deputies to back Warrior Met's strikebreaking operations, and repeated complaints by miners and local residents that private security forces are using drones to spy on their communities.

On the UMWA Facebook page one miner drew the connection with violence employed by the coal bosses during the Mine Wars of the 1920s. "I would imagine that local law enforcement and state troopers now carry Baldwin Felts credentials," he said, referring to the notorious private detective agency hired by the coal operators to terrorize striking miners. During a May 19, 1920 shootout in southern

West Virginia, known as the Matewan Massacre, seven agents and two miners were killed after the gun thugs unsuccessfully tried to evict striking miners.

Another post accused the state police of acting as "babysitters" for the scabs, saying that without their presence, "no one would cross the picket line." Another post frankly said, "Fight fire with fire. That's how you stop that."

There is a widespread sentiment among miners and broader sections of the working class to break the isolation of the strike. However, the UMWA, the Alabama AFL-CIO and unions like the United Steelworkers union at US Steel's Fairfield Works have left the embattled miners to fight alone, making them vulnerable to such violence.

Roberts made it clear he was opposed to organizing such a struggle. At the same time, the UMWA president warned Warrior Met bosses that they were taking "a dangerous course of action that can swiftly lead to events spiraling out of control. That is the last thing anyone should want," Roberts declared.

The UMWA president who has spent decades betraying and isolating struggles, including the AT Massey and Pittston strikes in the 1980s, is trying to warn the coal bosses that they are provoking an explosion from miners who have a long tradition of "fighting fire with fire," which the UMWA will not be able to control. He ends his statement by pleading with Warrior Met "to back away from violence and finally come to the bargaining table in good faith, ready to hammer out a fair and reasonable agreement."

The fact is the UMWA has repeatedly tried to ram through the company's demands but has continually run up against the resistance of rank-and-file miners. Less than two weeks into the strike, Roberts tried to sell miners a deal that would have restored only \$1.50 out of the \$6.00 an hour workers lost five years ago, while cutting medical coverage and retaining the hated attendance system. Miners voted down the UMWA-backed contract by a staggering margin of 1,006 to 45.

The coal operators and the government have always

employed violence against the miners. Warrior Met's miners have staged the first UMWA strike in 25 years on the centenary year of the Battle of Blair Mountain, when the federal and state governments partnered with the coal bosses to bomb striking miners from airplanes.

This is why the miners developed militant traditions of mass, collective struggles, and played the vanguard role in the semi-insurrectionary struggles in the 1920s and 1930s that finally led to the organization of the mass industrial unions in the rubber, steel and auto industries. The miners, particularly, championed the principle of "an injury to one is an injury to all" and industry-wide strikes of union and non-union miners until every operator signed the national agreement.

This ended when Richard Trumka and Cecil Roberts took over the UMWA in 1982 and introduced the disastrous policy of "selective strikes." The isolation of individual strikes opened the door for coal operators and the government to launch a wave of violence against the miners not seen since the 1920s.

In 1987, four Kentucky AT Massey miners—Donnie Thornsby, David Thornsby, Arnold Heightland and James Darryl Smith—were sent to prison for 35-45 years after being framed up for the death of a scab truck driver. In 1989, nine West Virginia miners, members of UMWA Local 5948 on selective strike at Milburn Collieries for five years, were arrested and framed up on charges of arson, bombing and conspiracy. The UMWA pressured eight of the nine miners to plead guilty, while a ninth miner refused and was later acquitted.

The refusal of Trumka and Roberts to oppose the frame up of the AT Massey and Milburn miners, despite the overwhelming demand of miners to defend them, gave the green light for the most murderous attack—the ambush of UMWA miners on January 16, 1990, which killed John F. McCoy in southern West Virginia. Trumka and Roberts refused to call a memorial shutdown of the mines to honor the murdered miner, boycotted the funeral and immediately cut his widow off of his strike benefits.

All these attacks against miners were supported and abetted by the police, as well as the state and federal agencies like the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF), Democrats and Republicans alike, with no serious opposition from the UMWA leadership. While forcefully opposing a nationwide miners strike, Trumka and Roberts organized the same impotent and debilitating civil disobedience stunts as today.

The violent attack on May 22 by UMWA District 20 officials Larry Spencer and James Blankenship on Dixieland of the Proletariat podcasters, whom the UMWA thugs mistook for supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site*, has

disgusted miners and local residents. The assault also demonstrates that the UMWA executives are far more hostile to socialists fighting to rally miners against their sellouts than they are against management and the state.

Miners must take the picket line assaults as a warning. Emboldened by the UMWA and the Alabama AFL-CIO's isolation of the strike, the company's violence will continue. In response, workers must fight for the expansion of the strike throughout the coalfields and among workers in other industries.

Warrior Met miners should follow the lead of the Volvo truck workers in southwestern Virginia, who have formed a rank-and-file committee, which led the opposition to defeat two sellout contracts pushed by the United Auto Workers union. The Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC) is now fighting to expand the strike of nearly 3,000 workers at the New River Valley factory, and to unite with Alabama miners, Massachusetts nurses, Texas ExxonMobil workers and ATI steelworkers in Pennsylvania and other states.

The struggle by miners in the US has been strengthened by an upsurge by mineworkers globally, including in Chile where miners have struck BHP Hilton, and in Canada where 2,400 Vale Inco nickel miners and 2,400 ArcelorMittal iron ore miners have walked out. We urge Warrior Met miners to contact the WSWS about forming a rank-and-file committee to break the isolation of their struggle and coordinate their fight with workers throughout the US and the world through the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact