

Alabama AFL-CIO leader opposes Warrior Met miners' demands for higher strike pay, calls workers "clueless"

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For over two months, 1,100 striking coal miners in Alabama have subsisted on just over \$300 weekly strike pay in their courageous struggle against the powerful Warrior Met corporation. As a result, miners have been forced to accept part-time work and hold raffles to support their families. Miners know that the harder it is to pay bills, the easier it is for the company to break the strike. For this reason, many miners have called for a substantial increase in strike pay to strengthen their position and send the company a message.

On Friday, a leader of the Alabama AFL-CIO and member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) publicly stated his opposition to these demands. North Alabama Area Labor Council Secretary Treasurer Jacob Morrison tweeted that higher strike pay would "liquidate" the United Mine Workers of America's (UMWA) assets and called workers "clueless" for requesting the increase.

The June 11 statement reads: "Imagine thinking that it'd be wise for an organization representing tens of thousands of workers to liquidate all of its assets for a single strike. Clueless."

This statement is an urgent warning to Warrior Met workers that their strike is in danger. It is an open admission that the AFL-CIO and UMWA are actively working to defeat the strike and that their only goal is to protect their own assets. The AFL-CIO and UMWA are engaged in a strategy to starve workers out until they are forced to accept a sellout deal. Despite the sacrifices and courage of striking miners, if these organizations are allowed to dominate the strike it will be isolated and defeated.

The AFL-CIO official's claim that the UMWA would "liquidate all of its assets for a single strike" is significant for several reasons.

This "single strike" is, in fact, the first UMWA strike since a one-week strike of Foundation Coal in 2007, which ended with the closure of the Wabash mine in Keensburg, Illinois and the dismissal of 250 miners. Between the 2007 strike and the beginning of the present strike, the UMWA had not paid a dollar in strike pay. The only reason the UMWA called a strike at Warrior Met is because it felt it would be unable to impose a concessions contract. One week after the strike began, workers voted the UMWA's sellout contract down 1,006 to 45 and shared photos of themselves burning copies of the contract.

The UMWA's assets do not belong to the leadership like peasants' land belongs to a king. The UMWA has acquired vast financial resources by taking workers' dues money.

Since 2000, Labor Department reports detailing the UMWA's assets show UMWA members have paid \$209,654,616 (more than \$209 million) in dues.

It is easy for miners' eyes to glaze over with a figure as high as this

but think of it this way: If a coal miner making \$30 an hour pays two hours a month in union dues, this is the equivalent a combined 3,494,243.6 hours of work. In other words, since 2000, miners in the United States have collectively worked 145,593 days—or 388 years!—to build up the UMWA's massive assets.

And what do the AFL-CIO and UMWA have to lose if workers' demand for increased strike pay is met? This requires a review of how the UMWA has spent miners' dues money.

Since 2005, the UMWA has paid \$163,668,927 for "representational activities," largely salary to the UMWA's small army of well-paid officials, plus \$65,189,081 on "general overhead" and \$35,519,365 on "union administration." From 2005 to present, the UMWA has also spent \$22,434,723 on "political activities and lobbying." Since 2000, it has doled out \$6,022,546 in "gifts."

At present, the UMWA national headquarters has 102 people on staff, making an average \$70,000. Forty-nine of those officials make roughly \$100,000 or more, equaling a total salary of \$5.4 million per year. While workers on strike pay are expected to live on \$325 a week, the "fabulous forty-nine" cash checks worth over \$2,000 a week. Between 2002 and 2018, workers' dues money provided President Cecil Roberts with a total of over \$3 million in salary.

These lavish expenses—which only include payments that are "above board"—exceed the total received in dues money because the UMWA has also gambled workers' dues in the stock market. From 2000 to today, the UMWA has purchased over *one billion dollars* in "investments and fixed assets"—a total of \$1,274,513,981. It has received \$11,940,530 in dividend payments alone. No wonder the UMWA wants to keep strike pay low—the strike is reducing cash available for their next purchase of mutual funds.

In response to articles by the *World Socialist Web Site* exposing this reality, UMWA executives redbait WSWS writers, slander them as "anti-union" and threaten them with violence.

In reality, it is the UMWA which has betrayed the class struggle traditions of coal miners. The UMWA membership has fallen by more than half in just 20 years, from 112,481 in 2000 to just 56,580 today. In 2016, only 2.5 percent of coal mines were unionized, compared with 40 percent in 1956, according to census data. The UMWA is not a "union" but a pro-business entity overseen by executives whose interests are directly hostile to those of miners. When Morrison speaks of protecting the UMWA's "assets" from "liquidation" through increased strike pay, he speaks not as a "trade union" official, but as a corporate representative of management.

The American ruling class has spent well over a century attempting

to tame coal miners, who have been among the most courageous and militant sections of the working class. Thousands of coal miners have sacrificed their lives in bloody class battles to win the right to organize and demand the most basic health and safety precautions, from the Molly Maguires of the 19th century and the state massacres at Ludlow, Colorado and Blair Mountain, West Virginia in the early 20th century, to the 1990 scab murder of striker John McCoy in Welch, West Virginia.

Over the course of the last 50 years, the UMWA has suppressed the struggle of miners and has helped the coal operators bring strike levels down far below any time since the Civil War. This began in earnest after World War Two, when coal miners launched a series of militant strikes and won massive concessions from the operators.

In his 1971 book *Death and the Mines*, Brit Hume describes how a 1968 jury had found “that the United Mine Workers had, since 1950, conspired with the Consolidation Coal Company and other major producers to create a monopoly in the coal industry.” Hume writes:

It was the second time in three years the UMW had been found guilty of antitrust conspiracy with the major coal operators. As surprising as those unprecedented verdicts might seem, they could have come as no shock to thousands of coal miners who had been wondering for years what the leaders of their union were up to. For in the aftermath of the bitter strikes of the years that followed World War II, an era of labor peace had come to the coal industry. Gone were the inevitable strikes, the tumultuous public bargaining sessions, and the constant threats of national coal shortages during the walkouts. In their place were the closed-door negotiations between UMW chieftains and a delegation representing nearly the entire coal company. Invariably, these resulted in new contracts without a strike.

Throughout the 1960s, opposition to the UMWA leadership, which had passed from John L. Lewis to his hand-picked successor, Tony Boyle, found expression in a series of wildcat strikes throughout the country. A reform movement called the “Miners for Democracy” emerged, which the Boyle machine attempted to crush with violence. At the union’s convention in 1964, Boyle deployed thugs in helmets to beat rank-and-file miners senseless for attempting to speak against the leadership’s betrayals. On December 31, 1969, Boyle hired thugs who broke into the home of Miners for Democracy candidate for UMWA president Joseph “Jock” Yablonski, killing him, his wife and their 25-year-old daughter.

Federal authorities arrested Boyle, threw him in jail, and a 1972 union election brought Miners for Democracy leadership into control of the union under President Arnold Miller. Strikes in 1974, 1977-78 and 1981 showed the continued militancy of coal miners, who defied federal court injunctions and won significant victories, overcoming the UMWA’s efforts to limit the strikes.

After Richard Trumka was introduced as union president in 1981, the UMW intensified this long process of betrayals, isolating workers’ struggles in strikes at AT Massey in 1984-85 and Pittston Coal in 1989-90. Since these strikes, the UMWA and Trumka’s successor, Cecil Roberts, have effectively brought all strike activity to an end.

As a result of this process, the UMWA has amassed huge fortunes and enriched the layer of bureaucrats who are, in effect, paid to

suppress the class struggle and intimidate opposition from rank-and-file miners. These managers view the Warrior Met strike as a drain on their resources and a threat to their cozy relationship with the coal companies. In their minds, the strike must be brought to a swift conclusion so that it, in Morrison’s words, does not result in the “liquidation of its assets”!

The transformation of the UMWA into a corporate labor management syndicate is expressed in that the social types who now staff the trade union bureaucracies are about as far from the class struggle as the man on the moon. Before becoming a paid staffer for the AFL-CIO, Morrison was a college leader of the Alabama Democratic Party. The Democrats have for decades stood on the side of the coal operators, enforcing injunctions, throwing miners in jail, and greenlighting savage attacks by state troopers on strikers from the 1940s through the 1970s. In 2016, its candidate for President, Hillary Clinton, bragged about mass layoffs among miners, celebrating the poverty that dominates in many coal communities. Now that the Republican Party has dominated mining regions for a few decades, this pro-business party has made clear that its false claims to represent “coal country” are no truer than the Democrats’.

The period in which the UMWA and AFL-CIO could isolate workers is coming to an end. The massive repudiation of the UMWA’s proposed contract at Warrior Met, as well as the determination of Volvo workers in Dublin, Virginia to reject two rotten contracts put forward by the United Auto Workers (whose leadership is in federal prison for accepting bribes from the company in exchange for sellout contracts), testifies to this powerful growth of opposition from below.

The success of these struggles depends on breaking the isolation imposed by the trade unions and mobilizing the working class as a whole, in the US and internationally, in defense of striking workers.



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