

As Warrior Met strike nears end of fourth month, United Mine Workers appeals to Wall Street hedge fund

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The strike by 1,100 coal miners against Warrior Met Coal in Brookwood, Alabama will reach the end of its fourth month on August 1, the longest strike by United Mine Workers of America members since the strike against Pittston Coal in 1989-90.

The miners walked out on April 1 to demand the reversal of \$6-an-hour wage cut and other concessions the UMWA agreed to in 2016. Warrior Met has seen profits rise along with the demand by global steel producers for metallurgical coal and it will be announcing its second-quarter profits in a few weeks.

The Warrior Met strikers are also fighting against the UMWA, which attempted but failed to push through another pro-company contract within weeks of the start of the strike. Since then, the UMWA has isolated the embattled miners and tried to starve them into submission with poverty level strike pay. Pickets have been threatened by state troopers, hit by strikebreakers' vehicles and most have been forced to work two or even three part-time jobs to keep their families afloat.

On Wednesday, the UMWA organized a protest in front of the midtown Manhattan headquarters of asset management firm BlackRock, Warrior Met Coal's largest stakeholder.

The protest was largely attended by UMWA and local union officials in New York City, with no more than 100 miners bused in from Alabama, as well as Ohio, Kentucky and West Virginia.

Protesters marched in front of the headquarters, chanting, "No contract, no coal!" and "Warrior Met Coal ain't got no soul!"

Speakers at the rally included UMWA President Cecil Roberts and local UMWA officials, actress Susan Sarandon, and Stuart Applebaum, the president of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union

(RWDSU). Applebaum led the failed effort by the RWDSU to unionize Amazon's warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, a short distance from Warrior Met's mines.

Carl White, president of UMWA Local 2397, said that BlackRock likely sees "that this company is not performing like it did when the union workers were in these coal mines," according to one media account. "We're not asking for much here," White said. "It's time to come to the table and give us a fair and decent contract."

In April, coal miners voted 1,006 to 45 against the contract brought back by Roberts and White, which would have seen the miners recouping only \$1.50 of their 2016 pay cut—within three years.

"We're in New York City because we are simply following the money, and demanding that those who created the wealth, the miners, get their fair share of it," UMWA President Cecil Roberts declared demagogically in a statement.

There is no doubt that the miners have produced huge profits for BlackRock and other Wall Street firms by working long hours of forced overtime in some of the most dangerous mines in the country. BlackRock, the world's largest asset manager with a staggering \$9 trillion in investments, holds nearly 7.5 million shares of Warrior Met stock, or nearly 14.6 percent of the company's outstanding shares.

It is absurd and debilitating, however, to claim that the miners who never won a thing without mass struggle against the coal companies and the government, can defend themselves by appealing to the conscience of Wall Street investors. The endless rise on the stock market and the \$1.1 billion personal fortune of BlackRock CEO Larry Fink depend on the continuous exploitation of the miners and every other section of the working class.

It is also a matter of fact that the trade union executives like Cecil Roberts and American Federation of Teachers President Randy Weingarten have also enriched themselves through their control of pension funds invested in mutual funds. Some of BlackRock's clients include the New York Teachers Retirement System and the state employee retirement systems of Louisiana and Alaska.

While it does not appear that the UMWA has any investments tied up with BlackRock, according to its filings with the US Labor Department, the union invested \$137 million in mutual funds in 2020, including the Longview Broad Market 3000 Index, the Delaware Pooled Trust Core Plus Fixed Income Trust and PIMCO (Pacific Investment Management Company) funds. The \$137 million in Wall Street investments is 32 times more than the pathetic \$4.3 million the UMWA has spent on strike and healthcare benefits for Warrior Met miners over the last four months.

And, if the UMWA wanted to protest BlackRock, it could have just as easily paid a visit to President Biden at the White House. The Democratic president's administration is packed with former BlackRock executives, including Brian Deese, the head of Biden's National Economic Council, which advises the president on economic policy. Other administration officials include Adewale "Wally" Adayemo, a Treasury Department deputy secretary who was once the chief of staff to BlackRock's boss Larry Fink, who is a prominent supporter of the Democratic Party; and Blackrock's former global chief investment strategist, Michael Pyle, acts as chief economic adviser to Vice President Kamala Harris and served in served the Obama administration prior to joining BlackRock.

The UMWA is closely allied with the Biden administration. It has taken government grant money for job training programs and vowed to work with the White House in the "transition from coal." Roberts & Co. are positioning themselves to profit as mines close and miners are forced into training programs for lower-wage jobs. The union cannot portray itself as David to Wall Street's Goliath when it is so thoroughly embedded in the administration of Wall Street's president.

Biden, who has spent his entire political career serving the corporate and financial aristocracy, is continuing the policies of the Obama and Trump administrations of funneling limitless Federal Reserve money into the stock markets to boost the wealth of the super-rich. But the massive buildup of debt has to be paid for by the working

class, through a ruthless drive to increase the extraction of surplus value from the backs of workers.

Biden is trying to strengthen the UMWA and other unions to suppress the growing struggles of workers, including at Warrior Met, to overturn decades of union-backed wage and benefit concessions. The continued enrichment of the capitalist class and its servants in the AFL-CIO depend on blocking a counter-offensive by the working class.

But that is exactly what is needed. Warrior Met miners should follow the example of the Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia and teachers across the US who are joining and building a growing national and international network of rank-and-file committees to take the control of their struggles out of the hands of the pro-company unions.

Instead of impotent appeals to Wall Street, miners should appeal to their brothers and sisters facing the same struggles. This includes the growing wave of strikes by metal miners and smelter workers. Copper miners in Chile have now been on strike for two months at the world's largest copper mine. Nearly 2,500 nickel miners at Sudbury, Ontario's Vale mining complex have been on strike since June 1. On July 6, 900 workers walked off the job at mining giant Rio Tinto's aluminum smelting and power plants in British Columbia.

The UMWA has not even called a strike at the unionized Oak Grove mine, a mere 30 minutes away from Warrior Met's mines. In opposition to this, Warrior Met miners should set up a rank-and-file committee to appeal for joint strike action at Oak Grove and across the Appalachian and western coalfields, where miners are increasingly coming into struggle against deadly conditions, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuous sacrifice of workers' lives for corporate profit.



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