

# United Mine Workers holds rally in Alabama as Warrior Met Coal strike enters its fifth month

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On August 4, the United Mine Workers (UMWA) organized a rally in the small town of Brookwood, Alabama for the Warrior Met Coal strike, which entered its fifth month on August 1.

Over 1,000 miners walked out of the mines on April 1 after rejecting the union's first tentative agreement with the company. As the strike has dragged on, miners have been subject to violence, including multiple instances of vehicular assault, and exhaustion as they struggle to maintain the picket lines while also supporting their families. The mainstream media has largely ignored the strike.

Over the course of the strike, the UMWA has focused its public appeals on claims that the company is "not bargaining in good faith." At the beginning of the strike, Larry Spencer, UMWA District 20 International Vice-President and AFL-CIO Alabama South District president-at-large, stated that the company had sent human resources officials to bargain individually with workers.

While the company is determined to crush the resistance of workers, the UMWA's use of this phrase is designed to reframe the strike away from workers' key demands relating to wages, benefits and working hours. The strike was "Not about the pay," one UMWA claimed early on in the strike.

This was a clear indication that the UMWA, which had not called a strike since 2007, is concerned only that the company work with them to implement concessions.

One miner's wife reported that, without overtime, her family lived "paycheck to paycheck." They resented the company's punitive attendance policy. A striking miner told the WWS in May that six-day weeks are the norm, with each worker expected to sign up for a lottery to work a seventh day each month. Despite this, Warrior Met allowed only four absences or tardies before terminating

workers. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, this policy becomes particularly cruel.

In July, a Warrior Met official was recorded telling a group of scabs, "The biggest change we're going to make going forward is [that] your opportunity for bonuses is going to change from \$1000 a month to \$1500 a month."

The official was careful to explain that the bonus was still tied to their performance. Since the beginning of the strike, Warrior Met has maintained that the miners could recoup the \$6 per hour they lost in 2016 by making production bonuses. These bonuses, which are also tied to the price of coal, harken back to the payment schemes coal operators used to cheat miners over 100 years ago; miners have told the WWS in past interviews that the only way to make these bonuses is to work 12 or more hours daily.

Striking miners bitterly denounced the company's strategy, which it has used to woo strike-weary pickets back to work. In addition to the bonus, the company gave scabs a \$1 an hour raise and agreed to pay them for their lunch time. An insult upon myriad injuries, the paid lunches rankled pickets and their wives; prior to the strike, miners were forced to eat as they worked, while Warrior Met withheld 30 minutes worth of pay from each shift's pay. For many of the miners, this amounted to the loss of a full hour's pay every day with no commensurate break.

Brookwood's Community Facebook pages are filled with nervous projections about the duration of the strike. More and more miners have theorized that the company intends to outlast them until next April, when labor law would allow them to end their contract with the UMWA and become a non-union mine. The miners currently on strike would lose their jobs in an economy where coal mining jobs are scarce, dangerous, and fickle.

Last week's rally was a desperate bid by the UMWA, not only to posture for the press, but to hold onto the pickets' good graces amid these mounting pressures. "Look around, guys," Larry Spencer told the crowd. "This is what the union's about."

Despite his grandstanding at the protest, Spencer demonstrated what the union bureaucracy is really "about" last May when he and other top union officials, including District 20 Representative James Blankenship, carried out a racist assault against young activists from the Dixieland of the Proletariat podcast, after mistaking them for campaigners from the *World Socialist Web Site*.

In the attack, which was caught on video, Spencer belligerently asks the Dixieland of the Proletariat representatives if they're with the "World Socialist Party," barely allowing them to answer before turning over their table and threatening to "fold up" their cars. Blankenship is later heard telling one of the podcasters, "I'll beat your motherfu\*\*ing brains out, boy!"

The rally also featured the last public address by AFL-CIO president and former head of the UMWA Richard Trumka, who died the following day. In a pre-recorded video speech Trumka declared, "I stand with my brothers and sisters at Warrior Met ... I'll stand with you for as long it takes for you to win a fair contract."

He promised, in addition that the "twelve and a half million brothers and sisters in the labor movement," would stand with the strike.

His promise to mobilize the membership of the AFL-CIO was belied by the fact that neither he nor the AFL-CIO have lifted a finger in defense of the strike, even as the company has resorted to violence and intimidation. In fact, Trumka's career as a union bureaucrat was bound up with the transformation of the unions into a labor police force integrated financially with management.

Elevated to the presidency of the UMWA as a "reform" candidate in 1982, Trumka played the leading role in destroying what had been the most militant union in the United States. Abandoning the basic principle that "an injury to one is an injury to all," he introduced the disastrous selective strike policy which isolated workers at different mines from each other, allowing the companies to defeat them individually. Trumka isolated and betrayed major strikes at AT Massey in 1985 and Pittston in 1989, and stood aside as the companies brutally attacked strikers, including the murder of John McCoy in 1990.

While UMWA membership has fallen from 120,000 when Trumka took office to 16,000 today, when the union

is controlled by Trumka's hand-picked successor Cecil Roberts, it still controls nearly \$200 million in assets, which it uses to pay out six-figure salaries to its small army of privileged bureaucrats.

Trumka was able to parlay his experience in the UMWA into a long and successful career in the AFL-CIO. Since becoming president in 2009, Trumka oversaw the decline of strike activity to its lowest levels on record, in a period which saw surging levels of poverty and social inequality.

It is this record which accounts for the plaudits which Trumka has earned posthumously. President Biden called him a "close friend," while the "Senator from Wall Street" Charles Schumer, choking back tears on the floor of the Senate, declared, "we need him so." Robert Lighthizer, Trump's US trade representative, called him "a true giant of the labor movement."

This is the layer with whom Spencer, Sanson and Roberts are in solidarity—not miners. Echoing Trumka's rotten legacy, a UMWA official told the WSWs in May, "We don't want to shut down the entire economy."

Significantly, Trumka finished his address to the Warrior Met protest by calling for support for Biden's PRO Act, which is aimed at expanding the control of the union apparatus over the working class in order to suppress the class struggle.

Last week's rally was a further demonstration that the way forward for Warrior Met miners is to establish their own independent initiative from the UMWA bureaucracy by forming a rank-and-file strike committees to raise their own demands, and build up the support of the international working class. The example for miners was established by Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia, where a rank-and-file committee was able to powerfully challenge the United Auto Workers betrayal of their five-week strike, piercing the union-imposed blackout of the strike by appealing directly to workers across the world for support.



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