Court grants Warrior Met Coal restraining order against striking miners

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Take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy! If you are a Warrior Met coal miner, contact the World Socialist Web Site *to discuss forming a rank-and-file strike committee at* wsws.org/workers.

On Wednesday, a Circuit Court in Tuscaloosa, Alabama granted an injunction requested by Warrior Met Coal against 1,100 miners who have been on strike since early April. The temporary restraining order is the latest in a series of provocations by the company against the ongoing strike.

In April, the miners voted down a sellout contract by 95 percent. This was an early sign of what was to come nationwide, as workers in one workplace after another have voted down concessions contracts by huge margins and pushed for strike action. Following the vote at Warrior Met, workers at Volvo Trucks, Dana Inc., John Deere, Nabisco and others have rejected tentative agreements by similar margins.

The order prohibits virtually any activity that disrupts the company's operations, including "picketing or other activity… within three hundred yards of any entrances of the premises," and interfering with "the conduct and operation of Warrior's business and supporting activities, including… mass picketing." It effectively enables the company to bring in as much scab labor as possible, while further browbeating the strikers into submission.

For weeks, the company has conducted a smear campaign against the strike by ratcheting up provocations and employing a PR firm, Sitker and Company, to paint the strike as "violent" in the news and on social media. On a company-sponsored YouTube page, a surveillance video was posted which claims to show picketers "attacking" a scab. In fact, it shows a vehicle running directly into miners on the picket line. Throughout the strike, multiple picketers and their wives have been struck by vehicles, with at least one miner hospitalized for his injuries.

John, a striking miner who recently spoke to the WSWS and whose name has been changed to protect him from retaliation, noted that, "violence is increasing on the picket lines. Miners have been shot at late at night. The cops don't care about the miners and do little when they call in a shooting or vehicular assault, which have continued to occur. Meanwhile, the cops escort the bus with the scabs every day."

The company's strikebreaking activity has been facilitated at every turn by the United Mine Workers (UMWA). Since the start of the strike, the UMWA has left the miners isolated and totally vulnerable to physical attacks and the company's efforts to defeat the strike. In response to Wednesday's order, the UMWA immediately ordered its members to leave the picket line, warning they would be held in contempt of court for failing to disperse. This is a warning that the UMWA will use the injunction as an opportunity to convince workers to accept the next concessionary contract proposed and end the strike.

The strike has dragged on for months, while workers have been starved out on low strike pay, recently raised from $600 to $800 every two weeks, forcing many to seek second and third jobs. John, who is working another job to support himself during the strike, reported that the UMWA has failed to call out multiple mines in the area including Oak Grove and Shoal Creek, and after many months, some pickets have gone to work there or have gone back to work for Warrior Met itself.

In 1982, the UMWA, under the presidency of Richard Trumka, abandoned the principle that an injury to one is an injury to all by introducing the "selective strike" policy. The UMWA has made no effort to mobilize its membership across Alabama to ensure a victory, let alone across the country. This policy led to the defeats of the strikes at AT Massey in 1985 and Pittston in 1990. Instead, President Cecil Roberts has performed a series of public stunts and toothless protests, including appealing to the Wall Street hedge fund BlackRock, Warrior Met's largest stakeholder.

The miners have been left in the dark about whatever discussions are happening. John reported that the union leadership told members that the contents of negotiation were "confidential." Another miner told the WSWS earlier this year, "We are being told nothing of what is going on.

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Only Cecil bragging about being arrested. I think they are thieves themselves, making six-figure salaries while the rank and file gets $300 a week [in strike pay].” He continued, “The selective strike stuff makes it much harder for miners. All union mines should be out now. If we were, this would cause real change.”

The miners at Warrior Met are above all demanding the reversal of a $6 wage cut and other concessions that the UMWA agreed to in the 2016 contract. As well, there are serious safety concerns and abuses by management.

John reported that he has been fired by Warrior Met multiple times for refusing to work in unsafe conditions. Once, “I was working on a belt line. When I arrived at work, the headers on the belt were white with rock dust. When the men spraying rock dust began spraying in a new section, a hole in the hose caused the dust to fill up my station, causing serious visibility problems. I refused to run the belt in that kind of visibility and went up top. The supervisor shouted at me to go back to my station without addressing the visibility issues, and when I refused, I was let go by that supervisor. I phoned in a report to MSHA. Someone from HR called that night and told me to return the next day and do my usual shift.”

He reports that another supervisor tried to fire him because he was tasked, along with some others, with putting timber supports into a new section. The section had been taped off with red tape. When the roof began to groan, he and the other miners turned and left the area and the roof collapsed behind them. The supervisor demanded that they go back into the section, but he and the other miners refused to return to the section. The supervisor’s boss informed the supervisor that he couldn’t fire them for this particular incident.

Meanwhile, the use of injunctions as a means of strikebreaking is spreading across the country. In Kentucky, Heaven Hill Distillery won an injunction against 400 striking workers while cutting off their health benefits. John Deere, facing a strike by 10,000 workers across the US, won an injunction at its plant in Davenport, Iowa, banning the use of chairs and barrels, long-time staples on picket lines. There too, the United Auto Workers Local 281 meekly told workers to obey the order.

Writing about “government by injunction,” labor historian Irving Bernstein wrote in the *Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933*: “The labor injunction achieved its greatest popularity during the 1920s,” with “1,845 orders issued by federal and state courts in the half century 1880-1930, half of them—921—in the decade 1920-30. This figure takes an added meaning when viewed against the fact that employers faced very few strikes at this time. The number of injunctions issued in the New York City garment trades also concentrated in the twenties, especially the relatively high strike years of 1921 and 1926. By the end of the decade, a union calculating a strike call contended with the strong possibility, if not probability, that a restraining order would be issued.”

The intensification of the attack on the coal miners at Warrior Met comes at a critical time in the class struggle, both in the US and internationally. Facing the largest strike movement in the US in generations, the corporations and capitalist state are desperate to stamp out the growing strike wave by every means at their disposal—through the courts, physical violence, starving workers into submission, and especially through the use of their trade union lackeys.

The lessons of the struggles by other workers across the US are indispensable to the fight by miners in Alabama. They must carefully study the experiences of Dana Inc. auto parts workers, who were forced by the UAW and USW to remain on the job, creating parts and profits for the company, after voting down a contract by over 90 percent. After leaving them isolated for over a month, the unions have succeeded in ramming through a concessionary contract. Similarly, last week the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa called off a strike by 150,000 steel and metal workers just as it was having a powerful impact on the auto industry there.

The key to victory is turning out to these and the thousands of other workers who are currently striking across the US and internationally and uniting in a common struggle to secure high wages, robust benefits, and health and safety measures in the workplace. Such a strategy requires breaking free from the constraints of the UMWA. We urge miners to follow in the footsteps of workers at Dana, John Deere, Volvo Trucks and teachers across the US by forming an independent rank-and-file committee to fight for their demands through the means of class struggle.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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