Warrior Met miners face new attacks as pro company judge extends injunction against picketing

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The historic Warrior Met Coal strike is approaching its ninth month with miners facing increased attacks from the state government and courts. In the most recent action, an injunction prohibiting picketing within three hundred feet of company property—first issued on October 27— is being extended again until December 5.

In response, the United Mineworkers has done nothing besides continue its ineffective protests aimed primarily at diverting miners' increasing anger.

Meanwhile, coal prices have reached an all-time high, allowing Warrior Met to finish its third quarter with its highest profits in two years.

When the injunction came up for renewal on November 15, the United Mineworkers asked the court to allow one miner per location to picket, with more added if no violence occurred after ten days. Tuscaloosa County Circuit Court Judge James Robert, Jr. rejected the union's proposal.

Robert wrote in his thirteen-page order that, considering the alleged violence on the picket line, the court had "the duty to choose between the inestimable prospect of continued violence in the course of picketing" and the "protection of public safety and civil order."

This is not the first time the courts have sided with Warrior Met; immediately after the strike was called, the company sought and won an injunction limiting the number of pickets on any one entrance to ten.

Warrior Met alleges that the injunctions are necessary to protect its employees from violence, and has released videos in support of this claim. In these videos, employees can be seen driving through pickets purposely. In one, they claim a miner jumped onto the hood of a scab's truck. It is clear upon watching the video that the picketer was only taking desperate action to avoid being hit. Several miners and their wives have sustained injuries. At least one miner was hospitalized. The court's concern for the "protection of public safety and civil order" apparently does not extend to the pickets.

Law enforcement has consistently looked the other way when strikebreakers have assaulted those standing picket. In a video shared on Facebook by a miner's wife, a scab deliberately swerves to hit her as she stands on the side of the road. An officer standing a few feet away claimed he saw nothing.

Vehicular assault is not the only form of violence that pickets have faced. A miner has told the *World Socialist Web Site* that firearms have been discharged at miners, especially those picketing late in the night.

The union has responded to the miners' mounting frustration by doubling down on ineffective protest actions. On Thursday, the UMWA staged a protest in Montgomery, the state capital, against the use of state troopers as escorts for scabs going in and out of the mines.

Larry Spencer, Vice President of UMWA District 20, appealed to Governor Kay Ivey, saying, "Governor Ivey needs to decide which side she is on… I'm sure the governor, if she spoke to the company, she could persuade them to do more than what they're doing."

This is laughable, when Ivey has repeatedly come down on the side of business and profit. Her media office immediately and predictably responded that Ivey supports the troopers "protecting Alabamians going to work."

In addition, UMWA President Cecil Roberts continues to stage protests in front of the Manhattan offices of BlackRock, Warrior Met's biggest shareholder.

The UMWA knows the nature of Warrior Met leadership and that of its investors. The UMWA's website says, "The people who manage the Wall Street hedge funds that own Warrior Met don't know us…and they don't care. All they care about is sucking as much money as they can, every day that they can" from the mines.

These are the same people to whom the protests are supposedly meant to appeal. Like Larry Spencer's impotent pleas to Alabama's governor, the BlackRock protests are nothing more than theatre designed to obscure the union's

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role in prolonging the Warrior Met strike by isolating the miners.

The extended injunctions take place amid a resurgence in both the price and demand for coal, including the metallurgical coal mined at Warrior Met. The nation's largest mining operations, including Peabody Energy and Arch Resources, report that all of 2022's output is already sold. Peabody, in fact, has sold its output for 2023. Average prices for the committed coal are 20 percent higher than the current price.

In a meeting with shareholders on November 2, Warrior Met Coal CEO Walter Scheller reported that third quarter profits were the highest they have had since the beginning of the pandemic. Increased demand for steel, along with "geopolitical tensions" between China and Australia, he says, "have elevated pricing...to levels we have never seen."

Despite the strike, Scheller told investors, lead days are "not materially changed."

Dale Boyles, Chief Financial Officer of Warrior Met, said that the company had "recorded its largest net income in over two years" in the third quarter.

Scheller went on to describe how cutting staffing on continuous miner operations to seven or eight miners per shift could lower operating costs, if necessary, and explained that they had been able to run continuous miners at the Number Four Mine "with experienced people from Mine Four."

He told shareholder Luther Lu that most of those "experienced people" had crossed the picket line, which Lu described as an "interesting development."

This is a company that has had no qualms about running the mines with an unsafe number of experienced staff. From the company's formation, it has focused on minimizing costs at miners' expense. It now baldly says, as profits soar amidst a strike, that they could cut staff even more. They are well positioned to enjoy record-breaking profits as miners risk their lives on the picket lines.

Under these conditions, UMWA has refused to expand the strike to other mines or mobilize broader support. In fact, the UMWA signed a new contract with Shoal Creek, a thermal coal mine about thirty minutes away from Warrior Met, in September—allowing Peabody to reopen the idled mine just as the price of coal skyrocketed.

Calling out the nation's other mines and delaying negotiations over Shoal Creek would have allowed the Warrior Met miners to leverage the unusually high price of coal in their favor. Instead, Cecil Roberts has encouraged miners to make futile appeals to the forces—the state and its courts, law enforcement, and BlackRock investors—that profit from their mistreatment.

Nationwide, working conditions for miners have deteriorated starkly. Last Monday, 49-year-old Brian Wallen became the sixth miner this year to die in West Virginia's coal mines. In Louisville, Kentucky, four coal company officials are on trial for ordering workers at two separate mines to rig dust monitoring equipment so that they could skirt safety requirements while remaining "in compliance."

The UMWA has not intervened to demand safety for their workers in these deteriorating conditions. Instead, they have continued taking union dues while giving workers nothing but pathetic and useless acts of protest. Just as the UMWA worked hand-in-hand with Warrior Met to force the hated 2016 contract on miners, now it is setting miners up for another sell-out contract.

Appeals to the UMWA leadership to change course are futile; the whole conduct of the strike has shown whose side they are on. Cecil Roberts is not invested in winning fair wages and safer working conditions, but in keeping the coal companies' profits rolling in.

Warrior Met miners are part of a growing wave of strikes, with workers standing up and resisting inhuman work environments and abysmal pay. Contrary to what Cecil Roberts might say, Warrior Met miners are not alone. However, it would be a fundamental error to entertain illusions in the courts or the state, who represent the interests of the banks and corporations. Nor can miners appeal to the nonexistent conscience of BlackRock investors.

Warrior Met miners must heed the lesson of Dana, Volvo and John Deere workers by forming a rank-and-file committee, independent of the UMWA. This committee would discuss and implement measures to break the isolation of the strike by reaching out to other miners, as well as autoworkers, teachers, and workers globally. There is little time to lose. Contact the *World Socialist Web Site* for further information.

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