

Warrior Met tries to frame up striking workers for gas line explosion

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A gas pipeline exploded on March 24 near an entrance of the Warrior Met Coal mine in Brookwood, Alabama. Without presenting the slightest evidence, a company spokesperson immediately claimed that the blast was an “attack” and was “related to the ongoing labor dispute.” The company offered a \$25,000 reward for information leading to an arrest and conviction. No one was hurt, and the extent of the damage to the pipeline has not been made public.

More than 1,100 coal miners at the mine have been on strike for nearly a year after walking out on April 1, 2021, to demand the restoration of a \$6 an hour paycut and other concessions imposed on them in 2016. Over the last year, the miners have repeatedly been the victims of company violence, with pickets hit by vehicles driven by strikebreakers and other provocations. In addition, company-friendly judges have issued injunctions to limit picketing and allow the company to maintain production with strikebreakers.

The United Mine Workers has denied the company’s accusations. UMWA spokesperson Phil Smith said the union “condemns violence in any form, whether it be the violence the company continues to subject our members and their families to by needlessly prolonging this strike, or any other violent act.”

After the blast D’Andre Wright, a spokesperson for the company, issued a hypocritical statement. “Warrior Met Coal and its subsidiaries have always focused on the safety of our employees and the communities in which we live and operate. As a critical infrastructure industry, it is imperative we protect our assets from acts of violence and vandalism to ensure public safety,” Wright said in a statement released by the Alabama Mining Association (AMA).

At least six different law enforcement agencies have descended on the rural area of west Alabama, including agents from the Tuscaloosa County Violent Crimes Unit, the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (BATF).

While the cause of the blast has yet to be discovered, it could just as easily have been caused by a breakdown of the mine’s infrastructure or lack of maintenance by inexperienced replacements. The mines owned by Warrior Met are some of the gassiest in the world. The landscape around Warrior Met is covered in natural gas lines and pipes carrying the methane filtered from the mines. Prior to its 2015 bankruptcy, the mine’s previous owner, Walter Energy, had been trying to profit from the coal bed methane drawn up from the mines.

Explosions are an ever-present possibility. In a little churchyard

that borders Warrior Met Number Five Prep Plant, 13 names inscribed in granite testify to the dangers. In September 2001, when a series of methane explosions in Jim Walter Number Five Mine—now Warrior Met Coal Number Five Prep Plant—killed 13 miners and injured others. Twenty years on, miners are still haunted by the disaster. The stretch of Alabama Highway 216 that runs through Brookwood, past Warrior Met’s corporate offices, is named Miners Memorial Parkway in their honor. A monument at Brookwood Community Church, flanked by 13 evergreen trees, bears the names of the men.

Since its formation in the aftermath of the Jim Walter Resources’ bankruptcy, Warrior Met Coal—which retains many of the corporate executives who ran the company into the ground—has been devoted to cutting its costs. Before the strike, miners were worked for 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week with the blessing of the UMWA. Since the walkout, the company has operated with an even leaner staff. In November 2021, CEO Walter Scheller boasted to shareholders that the mine was making its biggest profits in the middle of the strike. He went on to say that they had cut down continuous miner crews to only seven or eight workers and could operate with even fewer employees if conditions demanded it.

Running skeleton crews, manned largely by inexperienced miners, exacerbates all the mines’ manifold risks. Instead of investigating this possibility, Warrior Met, with the assistance from the federal government and the Alabama Mining Association, is attempting to convict the striking miners in the court of public opinion before they are even charged.

The timing of the explosion is suspicious to say the least. Just six weeks ago, Alabama Governor Kay Ivey signed into law an act that expanded penalties for protesters around gas pipelines and mines, which were designated as “critical infrastructure.” Interruption or interference with these industries is now a Class C felony, punishable by imprisonment for one to 10 years. In the past, interfering with a utility or with infrastructure has also been used to charge and convict people with “terrorism.”

State and federal authorities have already demonstrated their contempt for the miners’ rights and safety by turning a blind eye to the many acts of violence against the pickets. The new law, combined with the March 24 explosion, marks a new stage in the attack in the striking miners. This takes place as the federal courts and the Biden administration have repeatedly intervened to block strikes by railroad, oil and other “critical infrastructure” workers

as the US prepares for direct military confrontation with Russia.

There is a real danger that the explosion will be used to railroad militant miners into prison to intimidate all workers. This was certainly the case in the 1980s, when the coal companies in West Virginia and Kentucky hired private mercenaries, including former military personnel, to provoke picket line incidents to frame up and jail militant miners. In addition, the BATF was notorious for recruiting criminal elements as agent provocateurs to infiltrate groups of striking miners and propose violence, including the destruction of mine equipment.

These incidents followed a definite pattern. First, the United Mine Workers, including current UMW International President Cecil Roberts, isolated embattled coal miners involved in long drawn-out strikes, including at A.T. Massey, Pittston and Milburn. After miners were jailed or physically attacked—including being murdered by mine guards in the case of West Virginia A.T. Massey miner John McCoy in 1990—the UMWA did nothing to defend them, emboldening the coal bosses and state authorities to escalate attacks.

This was not an omission but a deliberate policy by the UMW that was aimed at breaking the militant traditions of miners—including the principle of shutting down all mines, union and non-union, until all companies signed contracts—and further integrating the UMW into the structure of corporate management.

On October 19, 1989, nine West Virginia coal miners, members of UMW Local 5948 on “selective strike” at the Milburn Collieries for five years, were arrested and charged with arson, bombing and conspiracy. As the *Bulletin*, one of the forerunners of the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time, “The bogus nature of the charges was obvious. The alleged arson involved an unused tipple, which the company was planning to demolish. The federal government obtained the indictments through a carefully orchestrated conspiracy carried out over a number of months and involving two government stool pigeons—Danny Howard Fout and Douglas Stover—recruited from among the strikers. These two wore hidden microphones on the picket lines and borrowed items from the accused men to plant at the alleged bombing site...”

“In the face of this frontal assault,” the *Bulletin* wrote, [then UMW President Richard] Trumka and Roberts did nothing to defend the Milburn miners, just as they had refused to defend the Kentucky Massey miners who were framed up and jailed two years before. Instead, the UMWA bureaucracy aided and abetted the government in victimizing miners whose ‘only’ crime was defending the union.”

The UMW, which refused to provide the framed men with legal protection, pressured seven of the nine miners to plead guilty to the government’s bogus charges in exchange for promises of lighter sentences. The federal authorities relied on the UMW because they feared if the cases went to trial a working class jury in West Virginia would see through the fabricated nature of the case and recognize it as a frame-up.

That is precisely what occurred in the one case that did go to trial, that of Larry Paul Massey, who refused to plea bargain. During the trial, federal prosecutors based their case on the testimony of the state agent Danny Fout, who admitted that he had planted a bomb in the tipple that was allegedly set on fire by

Massey. Even though Massey, under duress from the police had previously signed a confession, the jury acquitted him.

The UMW has deliberately isolated the courageous Warrior Met miners for a year. To a large extent this has been punishment for the massive “no” vote—1,006 to 45—that rank-and-file miners delivered on April 9, 2021, against the UMW-backed deal with Warrior Met, which would have only restored \$1.50 an hour—over five years—of the \$6 paycut the UMW agreed to in 2016.

Over the last year, the UMW has kept miners on starvation-level strike benefits, forcing them to find other jobs and rely on local food banks and left the workers exposed to provocations by the company and state and federal authorities. While decrying “violence,” the UMW District 20 Vice President Larry Spencer and Representative James Blankenship conducted a physical assault on left-wing podcasters on May 22, 2021, mistakenly believing they were associated with the *World Socialist Web Site*, the only publication that has fought to break through the UMW’s betrayal of the strike.

If the authorities attempt to victimize miners, the UMW will not do anything more to protect them from trumped-up charges than they did in the 1980s. Railroaded miners will be upheld as an example of what happens to workers who do not accept the contracts the union tries to force down their throats.

Workers must be on guard. To fight the corporate-government-UMW conspiracy, workers must build a rank-and-file strike committee to mobilize the support of the working class throughout Alabama, the US and internationally to defeat Warrior Met and win their just demands. At the same time, it is an elemental class duty for workers throughout the US and internationally—

including at the Bessemer Amazon warehouse, the autoworkers in Tuscaloosa and throughout the South, the thousands of coal and metal miners throughout the country, and other manufacturing, education and health care workers—to come to the defense of the Warrior Met miners and fight any government frame-up.



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