One year since the start of Warrior Met Coal strike in Alabama

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Last Friday marked one year since the beginning of the strike at Warrior Met Coal in central Alabama. On April 1, 2021, more than 1,100 miners hit the picket lines to demand the restoration of pay cuts and health care and pension concessions imposed on them in 2016.

The year-long strike—the longest by US coal miners in decades—has thrown light on the intense level of class conflict in the United States. Company-friendly judges in Alabama have issued strikebreaking injunctions, pickets have been harassed by private security guards, hit by vehicles driven by scabs, and had guns drawn on them. Late last month, without the slightest evidence, the company accused striking miners of blowing up a gas pipeline near a mine entrance, raising the specter of a company-government frameup of militant miners. Just weeks before, Alabama's Republican Governor Kay Ivey signed a new law designating mines and gas pipelines as "critical infrastructure."

At the same time, the struggle has revealed the burning necessity for Warrior Met miners to break the stranglehold of the pro-company United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), which has deliberately isolated the courageous miners and kept them on poverty-level strike benefits of $400 a week. Miners tell the *World Socialist Web Site* that some of the pickets have experienced foreclosures and repossessions while many rely on local food banks. Most work at least two part-time jobs, including at local Amazon and Walmart locations, to provide for their families. At $1,600 a month, health care premiums almost equal their strike pay.

All of the publicity stunts organized by the UMWA and AFL-CIO—civil disobedience arrests, protests on Wall Street, congressional hearings with Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren—have done nothing. Warrior Met continues to operate its mines and recorded $227 million in 2021 profits.

This struggle can still be won, but only if rank-and-file miners draw the lessons of the past year and take the conduct of their struggle in their own hands by forming rank-and-file strike committees, independent of the pro-company UMWA. Only in this way can Warrior Met miners link up with the growing struggles of the working class in the US and internationally against the ravages of inflation and the efforts of the Biden administration and capitalist governments around the world to make the working class pay for the massive bailout of big business and the reckless drive to war.

Several national media outlets, including the *New York Times*, have written articles on the one-year anniversary of the strike. All of them conceal the treacherous role of the UMWA at Warrior Met and throughout the coal industry. From the very beginning of the struggle, however, Warrior Met miners have been in open rebellion against the UMWA.

The fact is the UMWA never wanted to call the strike at all. In 2016, it had signed the contract that had reduced the Warrior Met miners' wages by $6 an hour or more and it was prepared to sign another pro-company contract in April 2021. But the fact that Warrior Met pumped record production and profits out of workers, handed all the productivity bonuses to supervisors, and gave its top executives multimillion-dollar payouts led to such anger that the UMWA had no choice but to call a strike.

A little more than a week after the walkout began, the UMWA tried to get miners to ratify a five-year agreement, which would have restored only $1.50 out of the $6.00-an-hour pay cut the UMWA accepted in 2016. New hires would get a dollar raise to $23.77 by 2026, while grades 1 and 2 would get a $2 increase to $25.90 by the end of the contract. By contrast, coal miners in 1982 were earning $11.83 an hour, the equivalent to $34.78 in today's dollars.

The deal would have also forced miners to keep paying high out-of-pocket costs for health care, work six-day weeks and continue to face victimization under the company's punitive "Four-Strike" attendance policy. Describing the hated policy—which deprives miners of taking time off for family emergencies, one miner told the WSWS, it is "almost a military occupation in the mine." Supervisors regularly bet on which worker would be fired first while devising ways to terminate workers, "especially with more than 10 years' seniority, so they can replace them with contractors making $18 or $20 an hour," the worker said.

After accepting these intolerable conditions for five years, Warrior Met miners were in no mood to accept more of the same. In a stinging rebuke to the UMWA, the miners rejected the contract proposal by a vote of 1,006 to 45, with many workers burning copies of the UMWA contract outside of the ratification meetings.

Describing the militant sentiment of the workers, at one UMWA "informational meeting," a Warrior Met miner with over a decade experience told the WSWS: "Everybody began cussing [UMWA President] Cecil Roberts and walking out after we heard all the union got was a $1.50 raise and a $500 signing bonus. It got hostile up there. Roberts gave his song and dance about how 'democratic' the union was, and we could vote it down and stay on strike if we wanted to."

In a statement after the vote, Roberts said the miners "could have had a contract that made improvements in their terribly bad working conditions, or they could choose to strike. And they overwhelmingly chose to strike."

After the vote, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that it "would be dangerous to think that the defeat of the sellout deal will lead to any retreat by the giant corporation or the UMWA. On the contrary, they will redouble their efforts to isolate and intimidate strikers, while the union seeks to starve miners into submission with only $300-$400 a week in strike benefits" while "the UMWA sits on top of $164 million in assets, and Roberts pockets $210,000 a year."

Indeed, Roberts and the other UMWA executives decided to make an example of the Warrior Met miners to discourage any similar "misbehavior" from other miners. What the UMWA ruled out from the beginning, and what was needed to fight Warrior Met, was the mobilization of every miner across the country in a common fight against decades of job cuts and union-backed concessions.

In comments to AL.com on the one-year anniversary, Roberts issued an even more chilling message to miners, declaring that the UMWA had enough in its strike fund to keep the Warrior Met miners out for another four to five years. "If the company is trying to put us in a position where we couldn't pay these workers strike benefits, that's not going to

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happen.”

The betrayal of the Warrior Met miners is part of a long record of sold-out struggles, beginning with the adoption of the “selective strike” policy in the early 1980s by then UMWA President Richard Trumka and his vice president Cecil Roberts. Miners at Massey, Pittston, Milburn and other locations were isolated and left on long strikes in the 1980s, opening the miners up to company provocations, frameup and even the picket line murder of John McCoy in 1990.

The abandonment of industry-wide strikes until every company signed the national UMWA contract opened the door for companies like Peabody, Patriot, Walter Energy, Arch Minerals and others to use the bankruptcy courts to destroy the jobs, wages and pensions of miners. The number of miners under the national UMWA agreement with Bituminous Coal Operators Association (BCOA) has fallen from 180,000 at the time of the 110-day national strike in 1977-78 to barely 6,000 miners today.

In 2016, the same year the UMWA imposed on Warrior miners what Roberts admits was a “contract worse than any other union coal mine in the nation,” the UMWA had to beat back a rebellion by Murray Energy miners in West Virginia and Ohio who rejected a UMWA proposal that included a three-year wage freeze, increased health care costs for active and retired miners, and a reduced number of days off.

After making his routine declarations about the UMWA “respecting the decision of the membership,” Roberts worked with the coal bosses to force through another vote, using the threat of mass unemployment. Three days after the vote, Murray issued Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification notices to 4,400 workers across its operations in six states announcing their imminent layoffs. The UMWA immediately organized a revote, and then announced it had passed by 60-40 percent.

“This was a tough vote for our members to take,” Roberts declared. “The coal industry is in a depression and more than 50 companies have filed for bankruptcy in the last few years. Thousands have been laid off … But despite all that, our members took a courageous stand by voting to try to keep their company operating while maintaining the best wages, benefits and working conditions in the American coal industry.”

In 2019, the UMWA signed a wage reopener, which included two 50-cent annual pay increases, leaving miners ravaged by the sharp rise in food, fuel and other prices. Although the last BCOA contact was set expire on December 31, 2021, the UMWA has been completely silent on its “negotiations,” worried that Warrior Met, Murray Energy and other miners will link up their struggles.

Class struggle vs. class collaboration

In a press release on the anniversary of the strike, Roberts states, “I have negotiated contracts with just about every coal company that has been around the last 30 years, including contracts with difficult operators like Don Blankenship and Bob Murray. I remain prepared to do that at Warrior Met.”

After the UMWA agreed to $1.1 billion in concessions in 2016, Roberts declared, “It was reasonable to assume that once the company became profitable, a fair and decent contract would be negotiated in 2021.” But the private equity firm Apollo that has control of the company, Roberts complains, is more interested in profits than workers.

Oh, what a revelation! Wall Street financiers and the capitalist owners defend their class interests ruthlessly.

That is something miners in the central Alabama and Appalachian coalfields learned through bitter experience a century ago.

It is the UMWA, not the miners, which has preached the supposed virtues of class collaboration for the last 40 years. During this time, miners have suffered terribly while company shills like Roberts have prospered, cashing in from the salaries, fees and kickbacks they get from various labor-management schemes, government-funded “retraining” programs to place laid-off miners in low-paying jobs, and their returns from investing the UMWA Health and Pension Funds on Wall Street.

The ruthlessness of the UMWA is not directed at the corporate hand that feeds them but against their socialist opponents who have sought to warn the miners and provide them with a means of expanding and winning their struggle. In May 2021, UMWA District 20 Vice President Larry Spencer and Representative James Blankenship assaulted two left-wing podcasters at a fundraising concert in Brookwood, Alabama, mistakenly believing they were supporters of the WSWS. While the attack was aimed at intimidating and silencing all opposition, miners disassociated themselves from the thuggish attack by the two union officials.

The conditions are emerging to break the isolation of the strike. In 2021—a hundred years after the famous Battle of Blair Mountain—working-class militancy boiled over amid conditions of deteriorating pay and mounting hazards. Throughout the United States, workers walked out of classrooms, grocery stores, auto assembly plants and foundries, rejecting sellout contracts pushed on them by their unions. Internationally, in Atacama, Chile, 500 miners called a wildcat strike in protest of what they call “subhuman” work conditions.

This year, the growth of working-class opposition is rapidly accelerating worldwide as the ruling class seeks to impose the cost of inflation, the bank bailouts and the massive increase in war spending on the backs of the working class. While a million died from COVID in the US and millions more were sickened, the wealth of the billionaires surged by 70 percent to $5 trillion.

The Warrior Met miners can only take their struggle forward by forming rank-and-file strike committees to expand the struggle throughout the coal industry and beyond, including striking teachers and oil refinery workers in California, educators fighting the pandemic and austerity, and BNSF and other railroad workers fighting exhausting schedules and punitive attendance policies. To take up this fight, we urge you to contact the WSWS.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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