

With no contract after a 2-year strike, United Mine Workers of America sends miners back to work at Warrior Met

Shelley Connor
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On February 16, United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) President Cecil Roberts announced that the union was sending Warrior Met miners back to work at the mines in Brookwood, Alabama, by March 2. This would end a nearly two-year-long strike, the longest in state history.

Workers are being sent back by the union without a contract. They will continue to work as the union “negotiates” a new contract with Warrior Met. This is the final betrayal of a strike which the UMWA spent nearly two years isolating.

Roberts tried to spin the announcement on the UMWA website by claiming that the struggle was merely “entering a new phase,” saying: “We have been locked into this struggle for 23 months now, and nothing has materially changed. The two sides have essentially fought each other to a draw thus far...”

The strike began in April 2021, when the miners rejected the tentative contract concocted by the UMWA and Warrior Met Coal. Five years prior, UMWA officials talked them into a contract that cut their wages by \$6 an hour—some of the lowest wages in the mining industry and the lowest wages in any UMWA mine. In addition, they were forced to pay higher health care insurance premiums with higher out-of-pocket expenditures.

Twelve-hour days and six-day workweeks have become the norm; workers were also made to register for a “lottery” for a seventh day. The “four-strike” attendance policy was so strict that many miners were forced to work during a spouse’s or child’s medical crisis.

The earlier contract, the UMWA bureaucracy argued, was necessary in order to avoid layoffs. The union

assured workers that once Warrior Met became profitable, miners would be rewarded with even better raises and benefits in five years.

But five years later, even with the demand for metallurgical coal booming and the company having made enough to pay its CEO over \$5.6 million, workers were told that they had not yet sacrificed enough to regain the wages they had lost. The wage increase proposed by Warrior Met and approved by UMWA leadership amounted to a meager \$1.00 per hour, with another \$.50 over the course of five years. The health care costs remained, as did the “four-strike” attendance policy. This, the UMWA told them again, was the best that they could do.

The miners voted down the contract offer by 1,006-45 and authorized strike action. Warrior Met had prepared extensively for a strike, having recruited scabs throughout the economically-depressed Appalachian coal towns from West Virginia and Kentucky. Sheriff’s deputies from both Bibb and Tuscaloosa counties escorted busloads of these replacements past the picketing miners daily. Warrior Met sought—and was granted—an injunction limiting the number of pickets to five at each site. This was later expanded to ban all picketing within 500 feet of mine entrances.

Miners told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the company had begun using drones and hiding private security guards in the woods to spy on them. Warrior Met employees menaced the picketing miners and their wives with their vehicles as they entered the offices, and one miner was hospitalized with serious injuries after being struck by a scab car. Alabama state police looked the other way, even though the assault was captured on film, and nobody was ever charged.

The explosion of a gas pipeline near the entrance of a mine in March 2022 was seized upon by Warrior Met for a further counteroffensive against the workers. The company labeled the explosion an “attack” that was “related to the ongoing labor dispute,” and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco Firearms and Explosives (BATF) were summoned to the mines.

The mining industry interest group Alabama Mining Association (AMA) joined Warrior Met in what was clearly a well-rehearsed chorus about protecting “critical infrastructure” from “acts of violence and vandalism.” Alabama’s right-wing Governor Kay Ivey had signed legislation that enhanced and expanded laws against tampering with “critical infrastructure” for the industries only six weeks before the blast.

The pressure continued. In August 2022, the NLRB levied fines greater than \$13 million against the UMWA for lost profit, security costs and property damaged sustained by the coal company during the strike. Not only the company but the capitalist state was determined to make an example of the strikers.

The UMWA’s response to these brutal attacks was to isolate the miners and create the conditions where they could take place with no organized opposition. A unionized mine 30 minutes away from Warrior Met was never called out, and in September 2021, the UMWA ratified a separate five-year deal with the long-idled Shoal Creek mines, instead of doing anything to unite workers there with the Warrior Met strikers.

Meanwhile, the UMWA, which has total assets of nearly \$200 million and pays its top 49 officials a total of over \$5 million a year, strung out the workers on only \$300 per week in strike pay. Miners’ wives made T-shirts to raise money, supporters set up food banks and miners scrabbled for casual work and side-gigs to support their families while still keeping their required watch on the picket lines.

When the WSWS criticized the union’s isolation of the strike and raised the demand that the strike pay be increased, the trade union bureaucracy reacted furiously. This reached a crescendo when several right-wing bureaucrats physically assaulted a group of young socialists at a union fundraising event, mistaking them for the WSWS.

The back-to-work letter is the UMWA’s bitter final betrayal of the strike. This entire experience

underscores the fact that workers must organize themselves independently in order to fight against both the company and the state as well as their backers in the union apparatus.



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