

United Mine Workers announces sellout deal, sparking opposition among striking Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama

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The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) announced Tuesday that it had reached a tentative deal for a new labor agreement with Warrior Met Coal in Central Alabama and was moving to end the strike by 1,100 miners that began on April 1. The UMWA has not released any of details of the agreement, which is supposed to be presented to striking miners Wednesday before they vote on it Friday, with less than 48 hours to study and discuss the agreement.

Less than a week ago, UMWA President Cecil Roberts claimed that union and company negotiators were at loggerheads and that Warrior Met Coal was “going backwards” regarding a “fair agreement that recognizes the sacrifices our members and their families made to keep this company alive.” Since then, the company has shown no sign of conceding anything. On the contrary, it has brought in strikebreakers, which have been escorted through the miners’ picket lines by armed private security guards and Alabama state troopers.

Any deal reached on this basis by the UMWA—which has a long record of corporatist collusion with the coal companies—can only be another sellout, which rank-and-file miners should resolutely reject. On social media, Warrior Met miners denounced Roberts and called for a “no” vote.

One worker commented: “Union Brothers and Sisters stand your ground. In 2016 the UMWA said they fought for us. All they did was line their pockets and screw everyone else. They allowed the company to hand us the shit contract. Don’t let them talk you into another one saying this is the best we can get. Say no and stop the coal. Look at Warrior Met Coal’s earning and the numbers. Learn how the market really works, they have been scamming the system the entire way. Hell, they could pay you three times what you’re making now and it wouldn’t be a drop in the bucket.”

Another wrote: “Cecil Roberts is a joke! Peabody has been laid off 6 months! Not a peep out of him! Union has to stick together! Do not cave in!” Another miner added, “I was there in 2016. Talked strike but leaders wouldn’t take part. Then said we had to take what they offered or be jobless.”

There is popular support for the striking miners, but the UMWA, the United Steelworkers and other area unions are deliberately isolating the strike while the union bureaucrats hope to starve workers into submission.

In the early 1980s, then-UMWA President Richard Trumka (the

current AFL-CIO president) and his vice president, Cecil Roberts, introduced the “selective strike” policy, overturning the miners’ long-standing tradition of “no contract, no work” and national strikes, instead forcing individual sections of miners to confront the power of giant corporations and government on their own.

This disastrous policy led to the defeat of the strikes at AT Massey (1984–1985) and Pittston (1989–1990) and gave the coal bosses a green light to utilize the bankruptcy courts and dummy companies to wipe out tens of thousands of jobs and tear up the wages, conditions and pensions won by miners through a century of class struggle.

Warrior Met emerged out of the restructuring of the US coal industry over the last decade, including the bankruptcy of Warrior Met’s predecessor, Walter Energy, and major producers like Peabody, Alpha Natural Resources and Patriot Coal. The Alabama mines closed by Walter Energy in 2015 were reopened the following year under the nameplate of Warrior Met Coal, whose corporate board included many of the same executives, including former Walter Energy CEO Walter J. Scheller, III, also a former executive at Peabody and Consol Energy.

In 2016, the UMWA agreed to a \$6-per-hour wage cut, along with other cuts to benefits and pensions. In the five years since, the union has also enforced management’s grueling work schedules and its hated “four strike” policy, which allows management to fire workers automatically if they miss four days of work over a period of 15 months.

As a result of these concessions, Warrior Met has become one of the top metallurgical (“met”) coal producers in the US. The company boasts that it is a “large scale, low-cost U.S. based producer and exporter of premium met coal operating two highly productive underground mines in Alabama, Mine No. 4 and Mine No. 7,” located in Brookwood, Alabama, 40 miles southwest of Birmingham and near Tuscaloosa. The nearly 8 million tons of coal produced by the Warrior Met miners each year are sold to US steelmakers and exported through the Port of Mobile to steel companies in Europe, Asia and South America.

After lobbying state officials to classify mineworkers as “essential,” the company has seen its share value on the New York Stock Exchange almost double over the last year, despite a loss of \$35 million during the pandemic-induced downturn, compared to a net profit of \$302 million in 2019. While demanding more

concessions from workers, citing the “volatility of coal prices,” Scheller pocketed \$4 million in compensation last year.

The Warrior Met coal miners are not just fighting for themselves but for the entire working class, which has suffered more than a year of preventable deaths and a devastating economic and social catastrophe, even as the stock market and the private fortunes of the billionaire pandemic profiteers have skyrocketed. There is a growing mood of resistance in the working class. This is expressed by the increase in strikes. For more than a month, 700 nurses at St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, have been on strike against Tenet Healthcare for improved wages and safe patient ratios. In New York City, 3,000 graduate student workers at Columbia University have waged a three-week strike, in the face of sabotage by the United Auto Workers union, for decent wages and health care against the millionaires and billionaires on the university’s board of trustees.

In every case, workers find themselves in a struggle not just against the corporations and the two big business parties, but the trade unions, which function not as organizers of working-class struggle but as strikebreakers and tools of corporate management.

The betrayal of the Warrior Met workers by the UMWA should be taken as a firm warning by the Amazon workers in Bessemer, just 25 miles away, of what they can expect if the campaign by the Biden administration and the Democrats to bring in the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) to contain the struggle of Amazon workers is successful.

Instead of ending the strike, Warrior miners should elect a rank-and-file strike committee to expand the struggle, demanding a nationwide miners’ strike and solidarity action from workers throughout the area. Delegations of striking miners should be deployed to the US Steel and US Pipe mills in the nearby Birmingham, the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, the Constellium aluminum plant in Muscle Shoals, the Mercedes Benz plant in Vance and schools in Birmingham, Montgomery and other cities where educators are fighting the deadly back-to-school policy.

Preparations should be made now for a general strike to defend the social rights of the working class for safe and secure jobs and living wages, and the shutdown of non-essential production and schools, with full compensation to workers, until the pandemic is contained.

History of class struggle

There are heroic and powerful traditions of rank-and-file militancy and socialism in Alabama, particularly among coal miners. As historian Ronald Lewis noted, as early as the late 19th century Alabama mineworkers were involved in biracial unions, including the Knights of Labor and the United Mine Workers of Alabama (separate from the official UMWA). They were also involved in various working-class and socialist parties, including the Greenback-Labor party, that emerged after the great railroad strike of 1877. These organizations united black and white workers

against Jim Crow segregation. As one white miner in 1880 observed, “We who are compelled to work side by side with [the Negro] must drop our prejudice and bigotry. This is the lever that’s keeping labor in bondage to capital.”

The coal bosses maintained a brutal system of convict labor, exploiting mostly African American men who were framed up on petty charges, in order to lower labor costs and prevent unionization. As one mine operator cited by Lewis told an Alabama legislative committee in the 1880s, “convict labor competing with free labor is advantageous to the mine owner. If all were free miners they would combine and strike, and thereby put up the price of coal, but where convict labor exists the mine owner can sell coal cheaper.” This system of forced labor was not abolished until 1928.

In 1894, 1904 and 1908, the United Mine Workers District 20, which united black and white workers, waged strikes and other struggles that were ultimately crushed by company gun thugs and state militia called out by Democratic governors. They also confronted the propaganda of the *Birmingham Age-Herald*, which denounced the UMWA for “Bolshevism” and fomenting “social equality” between blacks and whites. The defeats all but eliminated the UMWA in Alabama, until the revival of struggles in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. These years saw armed marches of miners, rebellions against UMWA leaders and the 1943 strike in defiance of the wartime ban on strikes.

These traditions of working-class solidarity and socialism must be revived today. But this requires building new organizations of struggle, independent of the UMWA and the other pro-capitalist and nationalist unions, which long ago abandoned the interests of the working class. The building of rank-and-file committees to fight the sacrifice of lives to corporate profit must be combined with the building of a powerful political movement for socialism and the reorganization of economic and political life to meet the needs of the working class around the world.

For more information about building rank-and-file committees and to share your story, contact the WSWS today.



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