

Kentucky miners block train tracks for sixth day demanding back pay

By Samuel Davidson
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Out-of-work Kentucky coal miners are now in their sixth day of blocking railroad tracks and preventing the coal company from moving coal out of the bankrupt mine that they worked.

On Monday, a group of miners at the Blackjewel Cloverlick mines in Harlan County, Kentucky, stood on the railroad tracks as a train loaded with coal attempted to leave the closed mine, demanding that they receive the back pay they are owed (see: “Unpaid Kentucky Blackjewel miners block coal train to demand wages”).

Word quickly spread, and the miners were soon joined by fellow miners and dozens of other supporters in this small town. Miners have continued blocking the train round the clock and are now in their sixth day.

Nearly 600 miners worked at the Blackjewel mines in Kentucky. Another 1,300 miners worked at the company’s other mines. Blackjewel employed 500 miners in Virginia, 30 in West Virginia, and nearly 700 in Wyoming in part of a massive strip mine operation in the Powder River Basin.

On Monday July 1, Blackjewel LLC abruptly declared bankruptcy, shutting all its operations. Miners found out about it only when they showed up to work that morning. A few days later, local banks began notifying the miners that the paychecks they received the week before had bounced.

Most workers had already used the money to pay car and home loans, credit cards and utility bills. Many have been hit with bounced check fees and late fees on top of no longer having a job.

“No Pay, We Stay,” are among the signs that are posted around the workers’ camp site.

In addition to missing their paychecks, workers have found out that the company canceled their health insurance, stopped paying into their pension plans and even stopped making child support payments for

miners who had the money directly removed from checks.

Many workers report that they had to pay cash for needed medical procedures when medical facilities refused to take their insurance.

Kentucky law requires that companies that are less than five years old take out a bond to insure four weeks of payroll. Blackjewel never took out the insurance, and Kentucky lawmakers never mandated any enforcement of the law.

While workers are being robbed of their livelihoods, Blackjewel CEO Jeff Hoops continues to build a \$32 million resort and golf course.

On Wednesday, state police were called to the Cloverlick Mine along with officials from CSX, which owns and operates the railroad. They reportedly worked out a deal with the miners to allow them to remove the two engines they had there, while leaving the cars loaded with coal in place.

Workers are continuing to occupy the tracks to prevent any further attempt by the company to remove the coal.

On Friday, the federal judge overseeing the bankruptcy approved a bidding process for the company’s assets. Tennessee-based Contura Energy submitted an initial bid of \$20.6 million for Blackjewel’s Eagle Butte and Belle Ayr mines in Wyoming and Pax Surface Mine in Scarbro, West Virginia.

Contura previously owned the Wyoming mines and sold them to Blackjewel in 2017. Contura itself was created out of the 2015 bankruptcy of Alpha Natural Resources. Other bids will be accepted until Wednesday, with an auction between the bidders held August 15.

A hearing before Judge Frank W. Volk that had been

set for Saturday has been moved to the morning of Monday, August 5.

Coal operators play a continuous shell game, forming and declaring bankruptcy to provide a legal cover for robbing workers and their communities of millions of unpaid taxes and other fees while absolving themselves of any costs for the environmental damage they do to the areas they mine.

A host of state and local politicians have visited the site of the Harlan County occupation expressing their support for the miners—most recently US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who represents Kentucky. Bloomberg news is reporting that an aid for McConnell sent them an email that reads in part that the senator “believes strongly these miners should be paid in full for their work” and that he is following the situation.

Far from an ally of miners, McConnell has been instrumental in blocking funding for black lung benefits and healthcare for miners.

Many miners and supporters have pointed to the fact that Harlan County was the center of bloody battles by miners in the 1930s, '40s and '50s to build the union and secure for miners safer working conditions and a better living standard.

The United Mine Workers has betrayed those struggles. The 1980s marked a major turning point in the history of the UMW when then-President Richard Trumka isolated and betrayed a number of strikes, particularly those against A.T. Massey (1984–85) and the Pittston strike (1989).

Trumka’s aim was to suppress the militancy of coal miners and to drive down their wages and benefits and destroy tens of thousands of jobs in order to ensure that the US coal operators could remain competitive in the global market.

Today, the UMW has fewer than 10,000 active miners. In fact, there is not a single UMW mine in all of Kentucky. Trumka was rewarded for his betrayal by being placed at the head of the entire AFL-CIO, while his lieutenant Cecil Roberts took over the UMW. Roberts is now the longest serving president of the organization, enjoying a six-figure salary plus expenses.

The current resistance of the miners in Kentucky is part of a growing international movement of workers against the attacks of the government and big business.

From the wave of teachers strikes last year in West Virginia, Kentucky and Oklahoma through the strikes by auto parts and other workers in Matamoros, Mexico, to the Yellow Vest protest in France, workers are entering into struggle against attacks on their living conditions.

All these struggles started and took place outside of the traditional unions, which then worked hand-in-hand with the Democratic Party and their backers to curtail and bring them to a close.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party is working for the formation of workers committees to unite all the struggles of all workers across all borders in a common struggle against the capitalist system. Contact us today to discuss how to organize such a committee and fight back.

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