

“It’s not just miners, but all blue-collar workers, like the teachers, who have been mistreated too”

Blackjewel miners in Kentucky vow to continue fight against coal operator

By a WSWS reporting team
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Coal miners outside the Blackjewel mine in Cumberland, Kentucky, are continuing their fight to get the money they are owed by the large coal operator. Blackjewel LLC declared bankruptcy on July 1, putting 1,800 miners out of work in Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia and Wyoming. The miners were given no warning of the impending closure, and paychecks that had been passed out June 28 bounced, causing serious hardship for miners and their families.

On July 29, scores of miners blocked the railroad tracks, preventing the company from removing 100 coal cars—valued at about \$1 million—from its Cloverlick #3 mine. The miners live in the eastern Kentucky county, which earned the name “Bloody Harlan” in the 1930s due to pitched battles miners fought against the coal bosses and their hired gunmen and local authorities.

Like the airline, automotive and other industries, the giant energy companies and their investors have long used the bankruptcy courts to destroy the jobs and loot the pensions of miners.

The *World Socialist Web Site* sat down and spoke with Chris Sexton and Jeffrey Willig, two of the miners involved in the railroad track occupation about what miners and their families are fighting for.

“We actually went to work that day,” said Chris Sexton, a miner at the Cloverlick Mine, speaking about the company’s sudden announcement that it was financially insolvent. “We worked three hours and they called us up outside. They told us we would be back to work the next day. We called up and they said, ‘Well we haven’t heard nothing, call back tomorrow.’”

“We had no information for three or four days. Finally, they just told us they would call us. They said all they had to do was sign the paperwork and we would get back to work,” Chris said.

“[Blackjewel CEO Jeff Hoops] knew when he wrote those checks that they were going bankrupt,” Jeffrey said. “They didn’t just go bankrupt overnight. They were doing this for a while,” Chris added.

Both miners have worked at the Blackjewel mine for about a year. They have been miners for nearly a decade, and both previously worked at the same mine but under a different owner.

Within the mine, Chris works putting up ventilation curtains to

ensure the flow of fresh air to the mine face and dusts limestone in active mining areas to prevent explosions from highly combustible coal dust. He also makes sure that miners have the supplies they need.

Jeffrey drives a shuttle car back and forth between the coal face and a conveyor belt that takes the coal to the surface. “This really affected our families,” he said of the sudden bankruptcy, which put him out of work even as the Willig family was in the middle of a move to a new house. “Seeing that mommy and daddy were kind of hurting quite a bit, you know kids can read vibes,” Jeffrey said.

Some miners were taking summer trips when the announcement was made, and banks began notifying miners and their families that their paychecks had bounced. Chris explained, “You had a lot of families who were on vacation, they got stuck, they didn’t have money to get back. Then people had to send them money just to get home.”

Many families had already used their June 28 paycheck to pay mortgages, car loans, credit card bills and utilities only to find that they no longer had the money to cover those checks. On top of losing the money, many were hit with overdraft, bounced check and late fees.

Chris said the company was also essentially stealing child support payments that they deducted from some of the miners’ paychecks. “You had some guys who were paying child support, the company was taking it out for their kids, but they never paid it out. They were taking the money but not giving it to the kids,” said Chris.

Jeffrey added, “Some of the guys were really scared. You lose your job and the next thing you know you’re going to jail” for not paying child support, he said.

“This wasn’t a typical layoff,” Jeffrey added. “Personally, I called them up and they said ‘we know, sorry for your loss.’ That was the answer I got. There was no explanation, no, ‘Hey, we are going to make sure you get the money back to you in a certain amount of time.’”

The bankruptcy also meant an end to health care and any pension payments. The federal bankruptcy judge overseeing the case has agreed to end Blackjewel’s 401k retirement plan. Miners desperate for cash made favorable comments on Facebook

regarding the liquidation of the plan but they will have to pay income tax on top of a 10 percent penalty on the money, while losing whatever savings they had for their retirement.

Chris and Jeffrey were among five miners that first blocked the train from leaving the mine on July 29. "This guy thought he was actually going to get away with this," Jeffrey said, referring to the millionaire coal operator Hoops. "If we didn't take a stand, he would have, because unfortunately there are so many loopholes."

"Chris called me and said that they were getting ready to take the coal out and to come down," Jeffrey said.

The miners received strong support for taking the stand they did. Within a short time, miners from throughout the area arrived, and CSX, which owns the railroad, did not move the train. A few days later, CSX reached an agreement with the miners to move their locomotives out but not the coal cars.

Miners have been at the occupation approaching nearly three weeks. They set up a camp on and near the tracks and have assigned shifts and a call tree in case the company tries to move the coal again. All day long, workers and other residents from throughout the area and beyond stop by to voice their support, often bringing food and drinks for the embattled miners.

"The CSX people, they've been behind us 100 percent," Chris stated. Jeffrey added that a CSX employee "told me last night that it is all over the railroads. He was actually shocked. This is private property and they could kick us off."

As is often the case, coal companies switch owners in order to lower workers' wages and benefits, dodge pension obligations, taxes and the payment of fines for safety, health and environmental violations. This corporate shell game, which involved companies buying and selling each other's assets, goes unopposed by state and local authorities. In addition, the United Mine Workers union has disappeared from the former union stronghold of eastern Kentucky after betraying a series of bitter strikes, including at AT Massey and Pittston in the 1980s.

Both Jeffrey and Chris said that they never met the owner of the mine or even knew who he was until Blackjewel filed for bankruptcy. "I never met this guy," Jeffrey said of Hoop. "The first time I saw him was in the paper when he came out and declared bankruptcy. I didn't even know who owned Blackjewel until this occurred." Chris added, "I've never seen him."

"This used to be a showcase mine. It was one of the prettiest mines in Harlan County," Jeffrey said. "Now they owe the State of Kentucky \$6 million in back taxes. That's not chump change.

"In my opinion, this guy knew what he was doing, he was doing white-collar criminal activity," Jeffrey declared. "He was talking about opening up another mine. So, he was just buying these mines, reaping the money from them and not putting any back."

Chris and Jeffrey also spoke about the history of the class struggle in Harlan County. Both said they were proud of the rich traditions of working-class struggle in the area and said they had given interviews to the nearby coal mining museum. "They are putting us up, part of history, coal miner history," said Jeffrey. "Because the last time this happened it was pretty brutal. The guys had every right to be angry. We are angry, we are just doing it in a peaceful way. There is total injustice here. This guy just doesn't care."

When WSWs reporters pointed to the growing struggles in different sections of the working class in the US and internationally, Jeffrey said, "It's not just miners, but the blue-collar workers, like the teachers, they have been mistreated for a very long time too."

"We are taking a stand," said Chris. "We are all brothers and we all work together. We mined this coal, some got hurt and they want to take it away from us."

"Some of these other places" were where workers are also fighting, continued Jeffrey, "They may not be small communities like this, but I can guarantee you that they are all poor, poverty areas that these people probably took a stand at. I'm not saying anything bad about them. But I guarantee you that is where it is.

"Life here is gorgeous and we are not going to take crap from somebody. We are not going to go into that mountain and work and work just for him to walk over us like that. I support any action by any blue-collar worker who takes a stand. Unite, remain strong and do what is right to defend you, your family and your friends."

Chris wanted everyone to know that "It's all right to stand up and don't let these big companies run over you."

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