

Mine workers' strike was for survival

by Steve Parsons

Fifty thousand wildcatting members of the United Mine Workers union began returning to work on July 18, ending a five-day shutdown of UMW-organized mines that had spread throughout states east of the Mississippi. The return to work followed a request from a federal judge in Abingdon, Virginia that the union resume negotiations with the Pittston Coal Group, the producer that precipitated the bitter strike by its union employees last April.

Isolated UMW wildcats against other coal companies and roving pickets in support of the Pittston strikers continue, however, especially in the militant West Virginia region. Such actions have occurred throughout the strike, which both unionists and industry officials alike see as the potential watershed for the very existence of the UMW.

The issues in this strike are not simply wages, concessions, or work rules, but cut at the heart of coal mine unionization. Pittston is refusing further contributions to the UMW's retirement fund, one of the most important victories won by the union 40 years ago. The fund provides pensions and benefits for its miners, who often are forced by mine closures and cutbacks to move from company to company. The major coal companies agreed to contribute to the fund based on a percentage for each ton of coal mined, not on how many workers retired from an individual company. Pittston, however, now maintains that its own retired workers are only a small fraction of the 130,000 retired miners nationally, and that they have no obligation for the rest.

Pittston virtually forced the UMW strike action through a series of provocations over the last two years. First, in May 1987 it withdrew from the Bituminous Coal Operators Association, the industry grouping which negotiates a national pact with the UMW, thus joining the exodus of several other companies who have moved to non-unionized mining or separate agreements with the union. Pittston maintained that unlike the other members of the BCOA, which is dominated by producers who largely sell coal domestically to utilities, it specializes in more competitive spot market sales to foreign steel producers. Pittston demanded a tailor-made, more "flexible" contract with the union—including heavy mandatory overtime and work on Sundays, the latter being one of the taboos in the UMW's national contract with the BCOA.

Then on March 1, 1988, Pittston abruptly terminated all

health benefits to 1,600 retired and disabled miners, one month after its contract with the UMW expired. Despite overwhelming criticism, Pittston made clear it didn't care, and blamed the union for not assuming the costs. Finally, a year later, the company cynically offered to restore the benefits if the union would agree to a no-strike pledge, even though the union had been working without a contract. That was the final straw, and the union's 1,700 Pittston workers struck at sites in three states on April 5. Since then, Pittston has refused to budge from its final offer.

Pittston as a stalking horse

While most BCOA members express hope for a prompt settlement of the Pittston strike and a return to normalcy, it doesn't take a genius to see who they're rooting for. Pittston has suffered very little loss in actual coal deliveries, with most of its contracts fulfilled through purchases from other companies—hence, the escalating wildcats of other firms by sympathetic unionists who know that they're next. Industry-wide production and exports are sharply up in 1989.

Over the last 10 years, an increasing number of new mines opened by the coal companies—most emphatically including those in the BCOA—have been non-union operations. In fact, Buddy Brown, a spokesman for Consolidated Coal and one of the key negotiators, recently hinted that the unwritten agreement among companies is to open no new union mines, and phase out unionization at currently unionized mines through bringing in non-union coal for processing and laying off production unionists.

Through tactics like these, the UMW is increasingly getting boxed in. The union has been quietly acquiescing to this policy, while nominally "winning" contract negotiations. Meanwhile, union control of coal production has steadily eroded from a level of 50% of coal mined in 1979, to only 30% today.

The Pittston strike is also hitting the UMW with enormous fines and police-state repression. Three of the union's top local leaders have been in jail for weeks, and the union has been levied over \$4 million in fines by both Virginia and federal courts. Thousands of unionists have been arrested, and their rights to picket have been all but eliminated by the courts. Half of the Virginia State Police are now deployed to the strike area in the southwest part of the state, and many strikers have been arrested for "slowing traffic" in the mine areas where non-union "scabs" operate Pittston coal trucks. As one UMW leader correctly surmised, "we either win this battle, or we go down the tubes."

But all indications are that Pittston could hardly care less about how long the strike goes on. Over the last five years, their coal operations have lost an average of \$16 million a year, and have shrunk as a percentage of company revenues. Everything points to them as the stalking horse for what one company executive described as "the last great battle of the international union."