

Virginia coal miners get unusual support

by Nancy Spannaus

Spirits are high in Russell County, Virginia among miners who are striking against Pittston Coal, in the immediate wake of a major show of solidarity by AFL-CIO national President Lane Kirkland, United Mine Workers President Donald Trumka, and 16 top state and national union leaders. While there has been absolutely no movement by the Pittston Group toward settling the nearly five month old strike, members of UMW District 28 look forward to increasing support, and ultimately victory. They intend to hold out as long as it takes, to stop what is seen as a blatant union-busting effort by the coal company.

Appearing on the steps of the Russell County Courthouse on Aug. 23 to be arrested for a sit-in, was a nearly unprecedented line-up of union officials. Joining Kirkland, who is thought to have never been arrested before in his 41 years as a labor bureaucrat, were: Tom Donahue, secretary-treasurer, AFL-CIO; George Kourpias, president, International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers; Henry Duffy, president, Air Line Pilots Association; Gerald McEntee, president, American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees; Bill Bywater, president, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers; George Letiz, president, Transport Workers Union; Lenore Miller, president, Retail, Wholesale Department Store Union; John Sweeney, president, Service Employees International Union; Jim Booe, secretary-treasurer, Communications Workers of America; Leon Lynch, vice-president, United Steel Workers of America; Barbara Hutchinson, member, National AFL-CIO Executive Council; John Gannon, former president, International Association of Fire Fighters; David Laws, president, Virginia AFL-CIO; Dan LeBlanc, secretary-treasurer, Virginia AFL-CIO; Ken Young, executive assistant to AFL-CIO President Kirkland; and Dick Wilson, director, Organizing Department, National AFL-CIO.

The labor leaders were charged by the county sheriffs—rather than the state or federal authorities who have been responsible for mass arrests of nearly 3,000 strikers and their supporters on picket lines. They were soon released on \$500 bond apiece, after which they attended what is now a regular Wednesday night mass rally of miners and their families and friends, in the coal area. This rally drew more than 5,000

people, who heard Trumka, Kirkland, and others pledge “solidarity” with the miners’ plight.

Police-state crackdown

It will take more than symbolic arrests, however, to reverse Pittston’s arrogant union-busting program. Miners from District 28 struck because Pittston was implementing a policy of cuts in health care and of work-rule “flexibility” which were aimed at driving out older workers, and throwing them on the scrap heap. While the miners have a sufficient strike fund, and broad financial support from other unions, to sustain themselves, they have found themselves up against an array of aggressive police-state tactics.

First, the miners are prohibited from having more than 4-10 people on picket lines in front of the mines—as well as being subject to immediate arrest if police consider pickets out of bounds. If found to be picketing illegally, individuals are liable for arrest from both state and federal officers. The state charges amount to a misdemeanor, and allow release from jail on \$500 bond, but the federal government charges amount to violation of a federal injunction—with bond set at a minimum of \$5,000. This is clear double jeopardy—as well as overwhelming force.

The purpose of these penalties is primarily to intimidate the miners into submission—and prevent normal strike organizing activity. These rules for dispersal are supplemented by the overwhelming physical presence of Virginia State Police, who are seen constantly patrolling roads around the mines, and tailing union cars. The police dominance is the result of the deployment of a full *one-third* of the Virginia State Police force into this sparsely populated county.

One of the reasons so many police are deployed, is that the state cops are being assigned to private escort duty for Pittston, which is trying to keep the mines open with scabs and management. The official explanation is that the state police are needed to prevent violence by strikers, but union officials point out that much of the violence is being carried out by imported mercenary strike breakers.

More is needed

Despite two rulings by the National Labor Relations Board that Pittston has violated labor guidelines, as well as the solid resistance of the union, there is little indication that Pittston, and its allies in the industry and state police, are going to back down.

Already labor has begun to mobilize internationally, with the visit of an official of the Miners International Federation to the area last week. Peter Michalzik, the general secretary of the 2 million member Miners International Federation, told the miners that what is happening in Virginia is “known in Africa, in Latin America, and in Asia.”

He promised that he would bring the outrageous violation of the international rights of the miners to the attention of the United Nations.