

# Support widens for mine workers' strike

by Marcia Merry

The week of June 12 saw a dramatic broadening of support of the United Mine Workers eight-week-long strike against the Pittston Coal Group. During the course of the bitter strike to date, the issue of the police-state role of the Virginia judiciary and law enforcement has come to the fore, alongside the economic brutality of the Pittston officials.

The strike began April 5 by the UMW against Pittston Coal Group of Lebanon, in Russell County, southwestern Virginia. Originally, about 1,300 Virginia union members, 400 in West Virginia, and 300 in Kentucky were involved in the action, which came after months of provocations by Pittston, and the impossibility of negotiating a new contract, despite more than 120 bargaining sessions following the contract expiration Feb. 1, 1988. The issues in the strike include basic job security, basic work times and conditions, and minimal health benefits.

On June 11, the mine workers held a 15,000-person rally in Charleston, West Virginia, the heart of the coal country. The next day, 10,000 West Virginia mine workers staged a sympathy walk-out, and June 13, some 1,000 Virginia miners walked out of the mines in Westmoreland County at Big Stone Gap.

Almost no national media coverage took place of this spreading strike wave, despite the involvement of many other workers such as the Eastern Airlines pilots and machinists, who were present at the Charleston rally. The union is receiving food and financial support from the AFL-CIO, Communications Workers, firefighters, Teamsters, and many others, including about 90 churches from Greenwich, Connecticut, Pittston's corporate headquarters.

The UMW strike against Pittston has come to represent a front of national resistance against police state measures and forced impoverishment. Between April and early June, three strike leaders, including the regional UMW president, were jailed by a Roanoke, Virginia federal judge, and more than 2,500 arrests have been made for violations of a court-ordered ban on union picket lines at Pittston facilities. Federal and state court anti-picketing injunctions could mean fines of over \$1 trillion in 22 days—an outrageous police-state tactic.

At the Charleston rally, acting UMW president Richard Trumka said that negotiations have broken down with Pitts-

ton, and the company has implemented a unilateral contract which Trumka called an "economic death warrant" for the union. The company has continued operations with scabs, and with the support of Virginia state forces. Trumka raised the issue of the right to assemble, to strike or demonstrate. "Is it the right to peaceful assembly? Just ask the Chinese or ask the 2,500 people at Pittston arrested in Virginia. Is freedom the right to lay down your tools without losing your job? Ask the Polish, or any red-blooded American who has been replaced by a strike breaker. . . . As of today, we are not only on strike against Pittston, we are on strike against the state of Virginia and every politician who's against us."

Trumka renewed his call for civil disobedience, which the miners have followed since April. He told the rally that civil disobedience has a "great tradition in this country. We will resist peonage slavery. We will resist strike breaking by the government and the courts. We will resist with nonviolent civil resistance. Let the word go forth that the sanctity of the halls of power that pass unjust laws, that the sanctity of the courts that put mine workers in jail and fine their organization a trillion dollars, will be violated by our civil resistance."

Using tactics like those of the Chinese students or the civil rights movement under Martin Luther King, the Pittston strikers have sat down in front of the strike breaking coal trucks at many mines, only to be dragged away by state troopers. The Virginia State Police have been ordered to go in for the kill by lame duck Gov. Gerald Baliles, and state Attorney General Mary Sue Terry, ambitious for national prominence. Supporting the repression against the miners, Federal District Judge McGlothlin fined the UMW nearly \$3 million in early June, rejecting labor pleas that the strike was a life-or-death struggle for the union and a way of life. "Regardless of how the parties feel about the virtues of their fight," said McGlothlin, the strike is an "economic war" that must be waged according to federal and state rules. In Virginia, a right-to-work state, the rules are rigged to destroy the union. The judge cited the draining of \$1 million from the state treasury each month to arrest and prosecute miners, as harming the economy.

The Pittston Company, parent of the coal division, for the past three years has downgraded its coal mining operations, and prioritized its international air freight division. As reported in the company's 1988 annual report, the yearly revenues from coal have fallen from 46% of the total company revenues, to 39% in 1987, and 32% in 1988.

In May 1987, Pittston withdrew from the Bituminous Coal Operators Association, which has a national pact with the UMW, on the grounds that the BCOA companies primarily sell to domestic utilities, while Pittston sells on the spot market to foreign steel producers, and wanted "flexibility" of terms of work—such as mining on Sunday. In the past the BCOA companies mined 70% of U.S. coal, and today the share has dropped to 35%, due to unilateral actions by Pittston and others.