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Speak Out Now

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Labor Day 2019 – *We Have Something to Celebrate!*

What is Labor Day? It's an official U.S. holiday that supposedly celebrates working people. Politicians and union officials make speeches praising hard work. Some workers may get the day as a paid holiday, but many workers don't, with businesses open with special sales and for others it's just another Monday. So, in fact, millions of U.S. workers do not even get the holiday off!

We might have something to celebrate if our wages weren't buying less than they bought forty years ago. We might celebrate if all working class people had quality health care as a basic right, or quality schools for our kids. But that's not the way it is. The bosses make a big deal about Labor Day, hoping we won't see and talk about the reality and fight back against it.

But this year, we actually have something to celebrate. Starting this summer, a small group of coal miners in Kentucky have shown that they won't take business as usual any more. And their communities are backing them up.

In late July, Blackjewel mines declared bankruptcy and laid off around 1,700 mineworkers. And the final paychecks the company sent the miners for two weeks of work bounced. A typical miner lost almost \$5,000 in wages and benefits.

So when a few miners noticed a coal train leaving the mine loaded with \$1 million in coal, headed for a customer, five of them blocked the track. They said, "No pay. No coal." The cops came and they moved down the line and stayed on the tracks. More miners came and the police understood that this wasn't something they wanted to mess with.

The slogan became, "*No pay. We stay.*"

One miner said, "*We mined the coal, and the company says they don't have money to operate. But they're selling the coal. And they can't pay us? I see us blocking the trains until we get paid.*"

It's been more than a month and no coal has moved. Other miners joined the blockade. Their families and friends came to the tracks. Communities in the area pulled together, along with some local businesses, to provide food and other necessities, including school supplies for the miners' kids as they returned to school.

A tent city has grown up by the tracks with showers and a kitchen. A children's tent has books and toys. Local musicians provide entertainment. People throughout the region are celebrating their unity against Blackjewel as a symbol of working people standing up for their rights.

As of now, the miners don't have their jobs back. The mines have been sold off to other companies and some have promised to pay the miners the money they are owed. But the miners haven't received the money the company owes them and no coal is moving. So what have they accomplished?

The Blackjewel miners' story isn't over and we don't know how it will end. But already there is plenty to learn from their fight.

Not one of the workers belongs to a union. And yet they made the decision to directly challenge their bosses and occupy tracks in violation of the law. They didn't ask permission. They didn't check to see if their action was legal. They didn't rely on politicians. Instead, they talked to each other, agreed that what happened wasn't right, and decided to organize and act. Like the teachers in last year's strikes in West Virginia and across the country, they said, "Enough with business as usual. We'll do what we need to do."

On this Labor Day, these Kentucky miners have reminded us what the working class is capable of when we talk to each other, organize together, and take action in solidarity with each other. Imagine what we could do with thousands or millions organizing and fighting together!