Hundreds of Miners Protest Patriot Bankruptcy

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — Hundreds of coal miners rallied in western Kentucky Tuesday to protest planned cuts to union wages and benefits by Patriot Coal Corp. as it goes through bankruptcy.

The rally organized by the United Mine Workers of America outside the Henderson County Courthouse ended with the arrests of about a dozen union members who briefly demonstrated in the street.

Patriot, a spinoff of St. Louis-based Peabody Energy Corp., is seeking to cut worker and retiree benefits as part of a bankruptcy filing. Last week a federal judge in that city ruled in favor of Patriot, giving the go-ahead to significantly cut health care and pension benefits to thousands of workers and retirees.

Patriot has said it would have to spend $1.6 billion to cover the health care costs.

The miners, many of them retirees, carried signs and gathered near the courthouse steps Tuesday to hear from state lawmakers and union leaders.

"If there is no justice, Peabody, you will have no rest, you will have no peace," said Dan Kane, the United Mine Workers' secretary-treasurer. "You may depend on the poisonous words of a judge to let you out of a debt, but let me tell you, we'll decide when it's over, and it ain't over yet."

The rally was streamed live Tuesday on a website sponsored by the United Mine Workers.

Several union members in the crowd wore white T-shirts that read "Peabody Promised ... Peabody Lied."

Union leaders have argued that Patriot was intentionally saddled with unsustainable pension and long-term health care obligations when Peabody formed it as a separate company in 2007.

Kentucky Sen. Jerry Rhoads, a Democrat from Madisonville, said the proposed benefit cuts for union workers were "a matter of life and death."

Rep. Brent Yonts, a Democrat from Greenville, said the May 29 federal court ruling in St. Louis was "the day big business struck down the little guy."

"The outcome will be less health care for the retirees, a poorer future for those retirees, who will likely die earlier than they would have otherwise died due to poor health care," Yonts said.

A representative from Congressman Ed Whitfield's office said Whitfield is planning to propose legislation that would make the union retirees eligible for benefits under a 1993 federal law that guaranteed benefits to a group of retirees.

"It is critical that we protect the health care benefits of the thousands of Kentucky miners who have worked hard their entire careers to earn those benefits," Whitfield said in a statement. Whitfield has received a total of $23,840 in campaign donations from Peabody and Patriot Coal political action committees since December 2007, according to federal records.

After the demonstration, about a dozen union members including United Mine Workers of America president Cecil Roberts walked out into the street, sat down and formed a prayer circle, expecting to be arrested. Police asked them leave and then quickly cuffed the members with zip ties and escorted them into a waiting van.

U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Kathy Surratt-States ruled last week that Patriot's cost-cutting proposals were legal. The company sought bankruptcy protection last summer to address labor obligations it said had become unsustainable. The union said that negotiations would continue and that it would appeal the ruling.

Bennett Hatfield, Patriot's president and CEO, said last week that bargaining with the union would continue, saying "a consensual resolution is the best possible outcome for all parties."

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