

# Alabama mine blast kills thirteen

Joanne Laurier  
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Thirteen coal miners are dead as the result of two gas explosions September 23 at the Jim Walter Resources Blue Creek No. 5 Mine in Brookwood, Alabama. Ten of the victims were miners who refused to evacuate and rushed to help coworkers after the first explosion.

Rescue workers are flooding sections of the mine to extinguish fires that have made it impossible to retrieve bodies trapped a half mile underground. Officials estimate that it will take at least six days to begin recovering the miners' bodies in what is the worst US mining disaster since December 1984, when 27 workers were killed in the Wilberg mine near Orangeville, Utah.

The Blue Creek mines are located between Birmingham and Tuscaloosa. No. 5 is the nation's deepest vertical shaft mine, and is considered by the federal government to be "ultra-gassy" because of the large amounts of methane released during the mining process.

The first explosion erupted when falling rock struck a battery charger and ignited a pocket of methane gas. A second, much larger explosion some 45 minutes later was probably caused by methane that was trapped when the first explosion damaged ventilation shafts. The blasts hit equipment up to 6,000 feet away and sent temperatures in the mine soaring to 2,500 degrees. Methane gas flames can travel through mine tunnels at about 900 feet per second.

Miners told the *Birmingham News* that rising levels of volatile methane gas had been ignored by company officials. "They wouldn't listen. They didn't do anything," said Shirley Hyche, a miner with 20 years at No. 5. She said there had been three ignitions in recent weeks in which methane gas quickly flared and went out. "It was like a little bomb," she stated. Company officials stated that an investigation into the explosions is under way.

Jim Walter Resources (JWR) is the southernmost Appalachian coal producer. Formed in 1976, the

company is now one of the 25 largest coal producers in the US. The three Jim Walter mines in Brookwood, employing 1,300 workers, produce about 7 million tons of bituminous coal a year for use in electric generating plants. Jim Walter's No. 5 was the site of a fatality on November 10, 1995 when the chute portion of a refuse bin and refuse material fell on a heavy equipment operator. Four fatalities have occurred at the company's No. 4 Mine since 1995: one electrocution in 1995, an asphyxiation in 1996 and falling deaths in both 1999 and 2001.

Last year the company had double the industry average of serious injuries, according to the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA). MSHA records indicate that JWR has paid nearly \$600,000 in fines for violations of federal safety rules since 1995. The agency has recorded 32 fatalities in the US coal mining industry to date in 2001.

In the Brookwood area, virtually all the residents are connected to the mine. Janice Nail, the widow of Charlie Nail, 59, a 25-year veteran of the mine, told the *Birmingham News* that her husband was putting his own safety mask on another miner, who had been pinned under rock after the first explosion, when he was lost in the second explosion.

Ray Ashworth, 53, was the only miner to come out of the mine alive after the second blast, but later died at the University Hospital in Birmingham. Clarence Boyd, 38, had 16 years in the mine. His widow, Teresa, told a reporter: "He's saved many people before.... I know he was the first to raise his hand to go back in. I wish he wasn't so brave, but that's just him." His brother Michael, who also works at No. 5, said: "He wasn't going to leave anybody, he would have been the last one out."

Wendell Johnson, 52, worked seven days a week for the past five years at No. 5. He made it out of the mine after the initial blast, but, like the others who died, went

back to help.

Others who perished were Nelson Banks, 52; Dave Blevins, 52; Gaston Adams Jr., 56; John Knox, 44; Joe Riggs, 51; Terry Stewart, 44; Joe Sorah, 46; Charles Smith, 44; and Dennis Mobley, 56.

The miners were members of United Mine Workers of America Local 2368. Over the past two decades the policies of the UMWA bureaucracy have led to the loss of tens of thousands of miners' jobs and the surrender of gains won at high cost over the course of a century of struggle. The UMWA has collaborated fully with mine management to speed up production. Most recently it enthusiastically endorsed George W. Bush's energy policy.



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