The Pennsylvania mine rescue and the human cost of coal

Paul Sherman, Bill Vann
3 August 2002

The rescue last week of nine coal miners trapped underground for 77 hours in a flooded mine shaft brought cheers of joy from people not only in Somerset County, Pennsylvania, but throughout the US. Millions had anxiously followed the successful race to reach the miners.

This tireless effort to save human life struck a deep chord nationwide. The display of solidarity and cooperation among the rescuers, the trapped Quecreek miners and the Somerset community—in a common social effort driven by human concerns rather than the drive for private profit—contrasted sharply with the prevailing news of the day, dominated by revelations of criminality and greed within the US corporate elite.

Predictably, the media shaped the saga of the rescued miners according to time-worn journalistic methods, massaging it into a “good news” story, while working to turn the miners themselves into momentary celebrities. For all the attention paid by the major broadcast and print outlets, however, virtually no one in the national media has bothered to seriously examine the background of this accident and the dangers that miners like these face every day they go underground.

To probe the conditions underlying this near fatal accident would present a very different picture from that of the rescue effort. As opposed to the mobilization of advanced technology and engineering expertise seen in the effort to bring the nine miners out alive, considerable sections of the mining industry, including the Quecreek mine, seek to realize a profit by relying on primitive methods and unsafe practices. The result has been an increase in the number of coal mining deaths in the US for three consecutive years, with the death toll reaching 42 in 2001.

The erosion of safety conditions and rise in mine fatalities are the result of a relentless offensive against coal miners and the working class as a whole over the course of more than two decades.

Located some 60 miles east of Pittsburgh, with a population of 80,000, Somerset County has undergone a social transformation as a result of these attacks. Often described as a rural and farming community, Somerset is, in fact, heavily working class, and its history is bound up with the development of coal mining, which has dominated the region for more than 100 years.

In 1979, one in every four workers in the county was a coal miner. There were 84 mines employing 6,237 miners. Many others worked in related industries that supplied or provided transportation for the mines.

By 1984, the number of mines had fallen to 55 and the number of coal miners to 1,945. By 1992 there were only 41 working mines employing 1,001 miners, and by 1998 the total had declined to just 803 miners working in 31 mines. A virtually identical decline took place in the surrounding counties of Indiana, Cambria, and Westmoreland, while in Pennsylvania as a whole, the number of miners declined from over 60,000 in 1979 to less then 17,000 today.

The destruction of mining jobs was largely the result of conscious decisions taken by the coal operators and the government in the wake of the 1977-78 national miners’ strike, which saw unionized miners humiliate the government of then-President Jimmy Carter by defying a Taft-Hartley injunction. In response, there was a concerted drive to shift coal production to non-union facilities, first in the Western strip-mining areas and then in formerly unionized mining districts.

The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) responded to this assault on jobs by seeking to prove to the coal operators that the union could be a trusted partner in making the mining industry competitive in the global market. In a series of contract concessions, the union leadership agreed to cuts in wages, job losses and changes in work rules that jeopardized miners’ safety.

In West Virginia and Kentucky, the drive to expand non-union mining provoked a series of strikes during the 1980s and early 1990s in which the coal bosses, backed by the government, returned to the use of scabs and violent attacks, including murder, against the miners. The UMWA leadership isolated these struggles, and most of them were defeated.

In Pennsylvania, the UMWA leadership did nothing to oppose the destruction of jobs and signaled its willingness to collaborate with the coal operators when it allowed Consolidated Coal, one of the nation’s top ten mining companies, to open the non-union Bailey mine in Green county in 1981. A second non-union mine, Enlow Fork, opened in the same county in 1990.

The union gave its blessing to these operations by working out a deal with Consol calling for laid-off union miners to be given a certain percentage of job openings at the non-union facilities. In addition, the UMWA was allowed to receive dues deductions from these miners' paychecks, even though they were no longer covered by a union contract.

For those miners still working, real wages declined. According to figures collected by the Pennsylvania Department of Labor, Somerset miners' earnings fell 15 percent between 1984 and 1992, while in neighboring Cambria County they plummeted by a staggering 37 percent. By 1998, earnings had dropped another 8 percent in Somerset. Since earnings take into account overtime and bonuses, hourly wages probably fell even further. The fall in earnings reflected both the concessionary contracts of the UMWA and the far greater proportion of workers employed in non-union mines.

The destruction of jobs and the lowering of earnings affected the whole community. In the 1980s unemployment soared, reaching a high of 21.7 percent in Somerset County in 1983, with similar figures in Cambria and Indiana. From 1980 to 1989, average household income declined by 12.1 percent in Somerset, 14.1 percent in Indiana, 13.7 percent in Westmoreland, and 18.8 percent in Cambria. The number of people living in poverty increased and the proportion of young children living in poverty reached 20 percent.

During the stock-market-fueled boom of the 1990s, job growth in the region was largely due to hiring by low-wage employers. No longer do steel mills and mining companies top the list of the largest employers in the area. Today the biggest employers are retailers like Wal-Mart and Revco, and Seven Springs, a ski and golf resort. Many of these jobs are low-wage, part-time, and seasonal.

In those mines that continue to operate, the deterioration of working conditions has proven even more dramatic than the fall in wages or decline in jobs. With the closing of the larger, unionized mines, a number of small non-union mines have sprung up, targeting pockets of coal that the larger mines found unprofitable. These mines, once dismissed contemptuously as "dog holes" by union miners, are among the most dangerous.

Quecreek, the site of last week's accident, is one such mine. With a low capital budget, it can raise or lower production as quickly as the market requires. Quecreek began mining operations in 2001 with fewer than 20 workers. By the middle of the year, it had grown to about 35 miners, who dug approximately 15,000 tons of coal a month. This year the workforce increased to 69 miners and was producing 50,000 tons a month until last week's accident.

To keep capital investment down, the company uses the older, but still common practice of "room and pillar" mining, in which large chambers of coal are removed, but pillars of coal are left standing to hold up the roof.

While the wages of miners have fallen, the pay is still higher than that offered by other employers in the community. At the same time, miners are constantly under the threat of layoff if a seam runs out or the price of coal falls.

This puts enormous pressure on miners to go along with whatever the operators demand, so as not to lose their jobs. For younger workers, scarce mining jobs may be the only chance to scratch out a tolerable living for themselves and their families. For the older workers, who have only known mining, the loss of the job would be a catastrophe. Fear of being fired for not being a "team player" intimidates many from raising safety concerns.

It has now been confirmed that Quecreek did not conduct either of the two standard procedures that would have detected the underground water that flooded the shafts and trapped the nine miners. Either a two-dimensional seismographic study of the area or the practice of drilling probing holds would have safely alerted the miners that they were working only four feet from the flooded abandoned mine. Nor did the Pennsylvania department for mine safety require either procedure in approving the company's request to operate so close to abandoned mines.

Meanwhile, the Bush administration is working closely with the mine operators to gut what little protection current safety regulations provide. It has proposed an additional six percent cut in the budget of the Mine Safety and Health Administration, most of it to come from the agency's coal enforcement division. It has also issued a policy change that reduces the number of times coal operators must test for dust levels inside a mine. The effect will be to allow operators to flout rules on dust contamination, resulting in more accidents and more miners stricken with black lung disease.

To ensure the subordination of safety concerns to corporate interests, the Bush administration is continuing to pack mine safety agencies with industry hacks. Most recently it nominated Stan Suboleski, an executive from Massey Energy, which has one of the worst records for mine injuries and deaths, to serve on the Federal Mine Safety and Health Review Committee. Last year, David Lauriski, former general manager of the Utah-based Energy West Mining Co., was tapped to head the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration, where he has promoted policies favoring the mine operators.

Most of the rescued Quecreek miners have said they will not go back underground. They are well aware that the flooding of their mine was not a freak accident, but indicative of how dangerous mining has become as a result of the drive by the employers and the government to boost profits.