

Bush rubs shoulders with the Pennsylvania miners

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Fresh from his family summer estate in Kennebunkport, Maine, George W. Bush traveled to a firehouse in southwestern Pennsylvania to rub shoulders before the cameras with the nine Quecreek coal miners who last week were pulled from a water-filled mine shaft after being trapped for three days.

Patting one of the miners on the back and hugging another, Bush hailed the mine rescue as a symbol of “the spirit of America” and attempted to portray it as somehow linked to his “war on terrorism.” Bush sandwiched in his photo-op with the miners between an appearance before well-heeled Pennsylvania Republicans, where he helped raise a million dollars for the party’s gubernatorial nominee, and a month-long vacation at his Texas ranch.

Few American administrations have rivaled that of Bush when it comes to hypocrisy and cynicism. But even for the Bush White House, there was something particularly obscene about the meeting between the Republican president and the coal miners. Here is man who has barely performed an honest day’s work in his life, born with a silver spoon in his mouth that he has never bothered to remove. By selling his family’s name, he managed to parlay a series of failed business ventures into a multimillion-dollar fortune, much of it in payoffs from the energy industry whose interests he has so steadfastly defended.

Standing besides men who have between them spent decades doing the dangerous and backbreaking work of mining coal, he preached the importance of “responsibility” and not asking “where am I going to get my next paycheck from.”

If Bush had been prepared to speak frankly, he might have told his assembled audience: “I’m glad you fellows were rescued. But the fact remains, you and your kind have to work at dirty and unsafe jobs for a

pittance so that I and my kind can live in luxury.”

The miners themselves seemed somewhat embarrassed by the event. They failed to join in the clapping at the president’s applause lines. Bush’s handlers kept them far away from reporters and refused to organize any question-and-answer period. As a pretext they cited a \$1.5-million deal that Disney had clinched with the nine men to buy the exclusive rights to tell their story in both a TV film and book. It is unlikely, in any case, that the poodles of the White House press corps would have asked any embarrassing questions about the miners’ opinions of Bush and his policies.

Was the miners’ apparent diffidence at the event motivated by political considerations? It is impossible to say. One thing is certain, the policies of the Bush administration would have, in an earlier period, made a trip to the coalfields a highly dangerous enterprise.

Now, the United Mine Workers of America has virtually abandoned southwestern Pennsylvania, once a UMWA stronghold, leaving miners there to eke out a living in nonunion “dogholes” like Quecreek. Job insecurity has curbed the militancy that once characterized these miners. Ironically, those who were trapped may fare considerably better than their coworkers who escaped the disaster. While the nine survivors will have the money from Disney, it appears that some 70 others may lose their jobs.

Since coming to office, Bush has twice moved to slash the budget of agencies that are tasked with enforcing safety in the coal mines, such as the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA). These cuts have been proposed in the context of a steady rise in the number of deaths resulting from mine accidents for the past three years. Last year, 42 coal miners died, including 13 in the Brookwood, Alabama mine last

September.

Bush's proposed 6 percent cut to MSHA in this year's budget is to be taken primarily from safety enforcement. The result would be as many as 65 fewer mine inspectors on the job, under conditions in which the agency is already falling behind on its schedule of inspections. The administration has further called for changes in policy that would allow coal operators to reduce the number of times they must test for excessive coal dust in the mines, a contributing factor in explosions and the cause of black lung disease.

Another proposal in the current budget is a 9 percent cut in funding for the enforcement and regulatory activities of the US Office of Surface Mining (OSM). The cuts come on top of the Clinton administration's slashing of the agency's budget and reduction of its workforce by some 25 percent.

Financed through taxes on coal production, OSM is charged with aiding states in the cleanup and reclamation of abandoned mine sites. The disaster that nearly claimed the lives of the Quecreek miners resulted from their mine shaft being flooded from water that had accumulated in an adjacent abandoned mine.

Moreover, in line with the administration's now familiar routine of getting foxes to guard the chicken coop, Bush has stacked mine safety boards with ex-coal industry executives, whose principal concern is eliminating safety regulations and other restraints on profit-making.

These policies are by no means unique to mining. The Bush budget likewise calls for slashing the budget of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, eliminating 64 inspectors' jobs, and includes further cutbacks at the National Institute for Occupational Safety. The administration has succeeded in blocking proposed safety rules for ergonomics, replacing them with meaningless "voluntary guidelines."

This is the reality behind Bush's homilies to the miners about the importance of "family," "prayer," individual responsibility and voluntarism. With its stepped-up drive to eliminate safety and health regulation of industry, this is about all the government would leave for American workers to rely upon.

Bush declared that the rescue of the miners demonstrated "a new spirit prevalent in our country, that when one of us suffer, all of us suffers [sic]; that in order to succeed, we've got to be united." This spirit is

hardly evident among the corporate millionaires and billionaires who placed him in office and whose interests his administration represents.

From Enron to WorldCom, the watchword has been: let the workers suffer—with the loss of pensions and jobs—while the top executives loot whatever assets remain. Unbridled accumulation of personal wealth at the top at the expense of the great majority below is the true "spirit" embodied in the Bush administration.

The sentiments of social solidarity and sacrifice to which Bush alluded—and which did indeed animate the rescue effort—are historically linked to a very different social layer, i.e., the working class. If one overlooks the president's mangled syntax and clumsy phrasing, one uncovers principles enunciated long ago as "an injury to one is an injury to all," and "in unity there is strength." These were forged in bitter struggles over the course of a century, in which miners fought the coal operators, company gunmen, police, politicians and militia to win their rights.

While these principles of class solidarity have been under attack as the result of decades of betrayals by the UMWA and AFL-CIO union bureaucracies, they remain deeply imbedded among American miners and other sections of workers. For this "spirit" to genuinely prevail "in our country," as Bush put it, requires a fundamental social transformation. The mines, factories and other means for producing social wealth must be separated from the parasitic and criminal elements that presently subordinate them to their personal enrichment, and placed at the service of society as a whole.



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