

Media silence on background to the Pennsylvania mine disaster

Occupational hazards kill thousands of US workers every year

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National and international media attention focused last month on the successful rescue of nine Pennsylvania miners, who had been trapped in a tiny pocket of air after a wall burst, flooding the mine. There was no attempt, however, to use the Quecreek mine disaster to expose a critical aspect of life in America, namely, the extraordinarily high rate of job-related accidents and deaths which claim the lives of thousands of workers each year.

Indeed, over the three-day period as the rescue effort unfolded in Pennsylvania, a number of fatal workplace accidents took place. Three workers were crushed to death when a wall collapsed at a Home Depot store under construction in Greensboro, North Carolina; a painter hurtled 150 feet to his death when the man lift tipped over at the new Lions' football stadium in Detroit; and three more workers died in Snellville, Georgia when the billboard they were working on collapsed. None of these deaths registered more than a brief mention in news reports.

A report published in April 2001 by the AFL-CIO Safety and Health Department, entitled "Death on the Job: The Toll of Neglect," reveals a situation in which thousands of workers are killed and many more injured and poisoned each year. The report also demonstrates that while many of the injuries and deaths are preventable, measures to protect workers are systematically sabotaged in the interest of profit.

According to the US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, an average of 16.2 workers were killed on the job every day during 2000 (the most recent year for which figures are available), bringing the total killed on the job that year to 5,915. In construction, where the most deaths occurred, 3.2 men and women

died every day, raising the total in that industry to 1,154 deaths for the year.

In other words, if the Quecreek miners had died, they would have made up about half the national statistical average for a single day. In the mining industry as a whole—including coal, oil and gas extraction and non-metallic minerals—fatalities increased by 22 percent between 1999 and 2000, to a total of 156. The AFL-CIO does not point out the connection between this increase in deaths and the fact that the Bush administration has stopped action on 13 job safety initiatives of the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and another 19 initiated by OSHA.

It is further worth noting that the authors of "Death on the Job," along with the rest of the trade union leadership, are themselves responsible for pushing through decades of concessions on workplace safety. In the name of labor-management "cooperation" they share responsibility with management in gutting many protections, which has led to increased danger, maiming and death on the job for thousands.

And it is not only accidents that claim workers' lives. When work-related poisoning and disease are taken into account, the total killed increases by a factor of 10, with an additional 50,000 to 60,000 lives lost every year. Thus, on an average day in America, 180 men, women and children die from the conditions they face at work.

Deaths amounted to 670 in manufacturing, 1,012 in transportation and public utilities and 231 in wholesale trade. In the retail trade, 596 died; in finance and insurance, 83; and in other service jobs, 852. Another 724 died on the job in agriculture and forestry and 392

in public administration.

A number of occupations are notable for exceptionally high job-fatality rates: 122.1 timber cutters were killed for every 100,000 employed. The rate for sailors and deckhands was 121.4. In addition, 103.9 fishers, hunters and trappers, 100.8 airplane pilots and navigators, and 100 railroad brake and switch operators died for every 100,000 employed. The fatality rate per 100,000 for mining machine operators was 79.4; structural metal workers, 59.5; garbage collectors, 42.6; garden and scraper operators, 38.5; and for roofers, 30.2.

Deaths resulting from on-the-job falls increased in 2000 to the largest annual total since the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) began the fatality census in 1992—734 lost their lives. The boom in the telecommunications industry has contributed to this gruesome toll. Since 1996, when a total of 50,000 telecommunications towers existed, an increase in demand has boosted construction to between 20,000 and 50,000 new towers each year.

The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) estimates 95 workers died between 1992 and 1997 from falls and other injuries related to tower construction and maintenance. In one incident, a contractor, his 16-year-old stepson and a 19-year-old employee fell 1,200 feet when the hoist line they were riding slipped. NIOSH estimates that deaths in tower construction for cellular and wireless communications range from 49 per 100,000 workers to 468 per 100,000, compared with about 5 deaths per 100,000 in US industry as a whole.

NIOSH attributes the wide variation in its estimates to the difficulty in distinguishing the numbers of workers involved in tower construction from those in other related industries and occupations. This admission itself is quite revealing. In a mad dash for profit, driven by the share prices for cellular phone service providers, the agency cannot even keep track of the employees in the industry.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) was established in 1970 to develop and enforce safety regulations on the job. Between 1970 and 2000, US employment rose from 77.7 million to 136.4 million. During the same period, work deaths declined from 13,800 to 5,900, for a change in the rate of deaths from 18 to 4.3 per 100,000. These figures do

not include deaths from occupational contamination and disease and therefore cannot provide a complete picture. They do, however, indicate a glimmer of the potential to eradicate industrial injury and death.

As national employment increased by 76 percent, however, the number of people employed by OSHA declined by 5 percent, from 2,435 to 2,316. When active inspectors from both federal and state agencies are combined, 2,238 people confront the task of monitoring more than 8 million workplaces. With current staffing and a static number of work sites, it would take 119 years to inspect each site just one time!

By any objective standard, OSHA's enforcement provisions are toothless. When serious violations—that is, those posing a substantial probability of death or serious physical harm—are reported, the average penalty is an incredible low \$910. In the death at the new Detroit Lions stadium, for example, the contractor responsible was issued two citations for a total fine of \$1,750.

OSHA's current budget of \$443.6 million amounts to only \$3.66 per worker. For next year, Bush proposes to eliminate 83 positions by cutting \$9 million from the OSHA budget. The administration proposes a further cut from NIOSH of \$28.3 million, or 10 percent, reducing the allocation for the only agency researching health and safety issues for workers from \$286.6 million to \$258.3 million.

The Bush administration became the first ever to support and sign into law the congressional repeal of an OSHA worker-protection rule, when it repudiated the ergonomics standard written to protect workers from musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), such as carpal tunnel and repetitive motion syndrome.

Between 1992 and 2000, the percentage of total lost-time injuries involving MSDs rose from 33.6 percent to 34.7 percent. Workers reporting the highest incidence of MSDs include truck drivers, nurses aides, laborers, assemblers, janitors and registered nurses.



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