

Alabama miner speaks on 2001 explosion that claimed 13 lives

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Ricky Rose, a coal miner from Alabama, contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* after reading material posted on our site about the rescue of nine coal miners at the Quecreek mine in southwestern Pennsylvania this past July.

Rose works at the Jim Walter Resources Blue Creek No. 5 mine in Brookwood, Alabama, where two explosions on September 23, 2001 claimed the lives of 13 miners. It was the worst mining accident in the United States since December 1984, when 27 workers were killed in the Wilberg mine near Orangeville, Utah.

Rose was working in the mine at the time and was one of many miners who traveled to the site of the first explosion to provide assistance when a second more powerful explosion ripped through the mine. Ten of those who died had stayed underground after the first explosion to help.

The recent Quecreek mining accident and subsequent rescue of the nine trapped miners received widespread media coverage, including a visit by President Bush and offers to the miners from Disney for a movie deal. However, despite all the coverage, little attention was given to the unsafe working conditions faced on a daily basis by miners, or the conditions faced by workers in industries across the country that lead to thousands of deaths, injuries and poisonings each year.

There has also been little news on the budget cuts and policies changes made to the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which have weakened those agencies' abilities to enforce safety regulations on the job.

Ricky Rose spoke with the WSWs about his experience that day last September at the Alabama mine and its impact on his life.

"I was underground at the time; I was working with a

crew by the seven side track. We were fixing splices in the main belt. We were near a mine phone and at 5:15 we got a call that there was a fire in four section and we were needed to help put it out.

"We weren't told there was an explosion, we would have evacuated the mine had we known. At the time, we had the main belt in two, anyone who works in a mine knows you don't leave the main belt in two, but we were told to go to four section and leave the belt.

"We were told to go to the fire in four section. They needed people to help put it out. In the past several weeks there had been several fires in the mine and we are needed to help put them out. It is the most gaseous mine in the country and this had been happening."

"We got in the bus and headed to four section. Wendell Johnson was sitting next to me. He said, 'Ricky, are you afraid to die?' I started praying. About three minutes later the second explosion took place, and Wendell was dead and I was groping around in the dark trying to figure out which way to go to get out.

"I was looking down the shaft. All this dust and dirt started blowing, it looked like a tornado coming towards me. The wind, the pressure was pushing in and out. By the time it got to us, we also heard the explosion. I was knocked down, head over heels.

"I jumped up. It was so dark you couldn't see the hand in front of you. I was disorientated, I didn't know which way was out. I heard someone calling, 'Let's go, let's get out of here.'

"I couldn't see but I made my way back to the bus by following the voices. We couldn't see the controls but we felt to get the bus started up and turned the headlights on. We still couldn't see, there was so much dust, but we put it on full throttle to get out of there. It was wide open, there was no slowing down. Three guys had no bus and had to walk. They held onto each other

and by hand on the rail track.

“You don’t know the fear you have. Miners know that when there is one explosion, there can be another. I spoke with other guys who were in there and they said the same thing. As we were coming out, I never looked back. I was afraid I would see a fire ball coming towards me.

“We reached the elevator to take us out of the mine. It takes 3 minutes to ride to the surface, it felt like 45. I never looked down, so afraid of seeing the fire ball coming up.

“I came out a different person than I went in that day. The company did not care a rat’s ass about me. I have to see a psychiatrist. I forget what she calls it, something like what Vietnam veterans suffer from. I have blackouts. Sometimes I don’t know where I am or what I am doing.

“I have dreams that I am riding on that bus again. I wake up with my heart pounding, I am breathing hard and sweating like I had just run a 100 yard dash. You wake up after going through a night like that and you don’t want to go back, but you have to. I have bills to pay and kids to support. I don’t have any choice.

“I am about to lose everything that I had as a consequence of this. They had to go back in and clean up the destruction and repair the ventilation system and everything before we could go back to work. I lost four months’ work.

“When I did go back to work, I wrecked my car. When I saw the spot where I wrecked it, I didn’t remember driving the three or four miles before it. My psychiatrist says it was probably due to the accident, but there is no way I can prove it. I lost another two months’ work because of that. But I still have kids and bills coming in. Plus I have to miss a day a week to go see my psychiatrist—the company doesn’t pay for that.

“This is the most gaseous mine in the US. It was a freak accident. The top fell in and hit a battery charger station. There was gas in the roof and it hit a spark. That caused the first explosion. The first explosion knocked out the ventilation system. Air was not circulating. Methane gas travels at 45 miles per hour in the mines.

“They don’t have any warning system when the ventilation system stops working. If a fan goes out or something like that they know, but nothing to show if the whole system is working. If we had known the

ventilation system was down, then everyone would have got out of the mine right away.

“When I did go back, I volunteered to go back to four section. I wanted to see the explosion area. I didn’t want to take anybody’s word that things were OK. I wanted to see it for myself. I had been in that section of the mine thousands of times, but I would not have known it. It looked like a nuclear bomb had gone off—equipment was bent, lines all destroyed, twisted metal.

“After walking a while, I came to the spot where some of the guys had been killed. I had to just sit down in the middle of the track for a long while, I couldn’t go on. We were all underground. Nobody knows when the top is going to fall in. I have to live with that each day.”



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