

Canadian mine rescue highlights failings of US mine safety

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The successful recovery Monday morning of 70 Canadian miners trapped underground for 24 hours provides a striking contrast to the backward and dysfunctional mine safety system in the US, where 15 miners have perished since the beginning of the year.

On Sunday morning, at about 3 a.m., a fire broke out more than half a mile below the surface at a potash mine in eastern Saskatchewan owned by Mosaic Co., a US-based firm that extracts the mineral used in fertilizer production.

According to the Canadian press, the miners reported smoke and then went into “refuge stations” for protection until rescuers arrived. These safe rooms are sealed-off areas as large as 15 meters (49 feet) to 45 meters (148 feet) that have an internal supply of oxygen lasting up to 36 hours, along with food, water, chairs and beds.

Throughout the ordeal, rescuers were able to stay in regular communication with two groups of 40 mine workers in separate safe rooms. A company spokesman said they were in phone contact with the miners, as well as family members, and were able to give them reports on the progress of rescuers.

A third group, consisting of 30 contractors, found refuge in another safe room about one mile away. Although rescuers were not in contact with this group for some 18 hours, they were nevertheless confident of their location and well-being.

Two hours after the outbreak of the fire, teams of six rescuers wearing breathing apparatus began searching for the trapped miners, going into the mine for a few hours at a time, then coming back and sending in the next team. As the search effort continued, company spokesman Marshall Hamilton said, “They are safe where they are, they’re safe for many, many hours, potentially even days. Once we’re confident...the air is

clear and clean and safe, then we’ll go in there with a mine rescue team...and begin transporting them to the surface and home safely to their families.”

After about 20 hours, the fire was finally extinguished, and work was begun on clearing the smoke so the miners could be brought out safely. Hamilton said once rescuers entered the safe room with the last group of men, they then took a roll call of all the miners, checked out their health and helped them seal up the room again before leaving.

All 70 men arrived safely at the surface. Outside of exhaustion, they appeared in good health. A spokesman for the Communications, Energy and Paper Workers Union of Canada, which represents the miners, said, “It appears that all safety procedures were followed and that the training that our members received at the mine was critical in their survival of this potentially devastating fire.”

Afterwards, Bruce Nixon, an underground miner on the safety committee at the mine, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Our refuge stations are mandated under provincial law, which was just improved two years ago. The stations are checked by the joint safety committee once a month to make sure they are well stocked. They are also checked by the provincial safety director and we have two drills a year.”

Nixon added that provincial safety directors checked the mines often and had the power to shut down an operation if it was unsafe. “The inspectors don’t call the company first when they are scheduling a check, so the companies can’t hide things.” He said he was surprised that safety regulations were so lax in the US, adding, “I would be leery about going underground there.”

Without exaggerating the state of safety conditions for miners in Canada—and they will no doubt be further

undermined under the recently elected Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper—the fact that refuge stations are mandated in Canada only shows how medieval conditions are in US mines.

If such safe rooms, caches of oxygen and other basic safety equipment that are commonly used in Canada, Australia and other countries were mandated in the US, it is likely that most of the men killed at the Sago Mine and the Alma Mine would be alive today. However, US mining laws do not mandate these technologies and protections. Therefore, refuge stations, for example, exist only in a handful of the largest mines and have not been widely adopted by mine companies, especially smaller ones.

US miners are only required to wear Self-Contained Self-Rescuers (SCSR)—a breathing apparatus that provides just one hour’s worth of oxygen. Even this technology—which was developed 50 years ago—was sternly opposed by the coal bosses and their representatives in government. It took 13 years after the 1968 explosion that killed 78 miners in Farmington, West Virginia, which led to the passage of the Mine Act the following year, before the adoption of SCSR regulations in 1981.

In his recent testimony before a Senate hearing, Davitt McAteer, the former head of the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), admitted that mine safety methods and technology in the US were still in “the dark ages.” He noted that the lack of equipment to track the location of miners trapped underground and communicate with them had contributed to the loss of precious hours during the attempted rescue at Sago.

When Bruce Watzman, vice president of safety, health and human resources at the National Mining Association, was asked about investing in new life-saving equipment, he replied, “We’re not in the self-rescuer manufacturing business.”

The almost religious worship of the free market, adhered to by both the Democrats and Republicans, has produced the most irrational and inhumane conditions for tens of millions of working people in America. While rising demand and prices have led to a flood of investment and profits in the coal industry, only a pittance is being spent on protecting the lives of those who produce its wealth.



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