

West Virginia explosion traps 13 coal miners

Barry Grey
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An explosion ripped through a coal mine in West Virginia early Monday morning, trapping thirteen miners below ground. The blast occurred between 6 a.m. and 6:30 a.m. as the first shift of miners entered the Sago Mine, located 100 miles northeast of the state capital of Charleston, near the town of Buckhannon.

As of this writing, the condition of the miners, believed to be trapped thousands of feet inside the mine, remained unknown.

The blast took place as two groups of miners in separate carts were entering the mine to reopen operations after the holidays. Miners in the second cart felt an explosion ahead of them and quickly evacuated.

Some 200 family members and co-workers gathered near the mine as rescue operations got underway, repeating a grim vigil that has become all too familiar in coal mining regions in the US. Four co-workers attempted to reach the trapped miners, but were stopped by a wall of debris, and the explosion knocked out the mine's communications equipment, preventing authorities from contacting the workers.

The miners have individual air-purifying systems that give them up to seven hours of clear air, but no oxygen tanks, a co-worker said.

Federal inspectors cited the Sago Mine for 46 alleged violations of federal mine health and safety rules during an eleven-week review that ended December 22. According to *Newsday.com*, "The more serious allegations, resulting in proposed penalties of at least \$250 each, involved steps for safeguarding against roof fall, and the mine's plan to control methane and breathable dust. The mine received 195 citations from MSHA [the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration] during 2005, up from 68 citations in 2004."

Hours after the explosion, eight search-and-rescue teams had assembled to go into the Sago Mine, but they had to wait while dangerously high levels of carbon

monoxide, caused by the explosion, were vented through holes drilled into the ground.

Newsday.com quoted Anna McCoy, whose husband, Randall, 27, was among those trapped below, saying that he had worked at the mine for three years "but was looking to get out. It was too dangerous."

The Sago Mine is owned by International Coal Group, which acquired the mine last March when it bought Anker West Virginia Mining Company, which had been in bankruptcy. In 2004, the Sago Mine produced about 397,000 tons of coal.

While the number of coal mine fatalities in the US has decreased in recent years, this is due in part to a sharp decline in the number of active coal miners. Conditions remain extremely dangerous and little is done by the federal government to enforce existing, already inadequate rules and safety standards.

The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), which once had half a million members and was known as the most militant union in the US, has been reduced to a little more than a shell over the past two decades. It claims today to have 220,000 members, and represents 42 percent of active coal miners in the US. It has refused to oppose the ongoing destruction of jobs and has instead collaborated in company efforts to drive up production and impose concessions in wages and working conditions.

In the 1980s, a series of bitter struggles by miners against unionbusting and concessions demands, most notably at A. T. Massey and Pittston Coal, were isolated and betrayed by the UMWA, leading to a surge in non-union coal mining operations.

Recent mine disasters include a series of explosions that killed 13 miners in September 2001 in Brookwood, Alabama. That was the nation's worst mining accident since 1984, when fire killed 27 miners near Orangeville, Utah.

In July 2002, nine coal miners were rescued after

being trapped by a flood for 77 hours in a mine near Somerset, Pennsylvania.

The deadliest coal mining disaster in US history was an explosion in 1907 in Monongah, West Virginia that killed 362 workers.



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