

West Virginia towns mourn deaths of 12 coal miners

Jerry Isaacs
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Family members, friends and co-workers continued to mourn Thursday the deaths of 12 coal miners killed at the Sago Mine in West Virginia as preparations were being made in several communities to hold funerals for the men. The grieving, however, could not conceal an undercurrent of anger directed at company and state officials over well-known safety violations at the mine and the false hopes that officials generated by their report that 11 of the men had been rescued alive.

Relatives and friends viewed the bodies at a makeshift morgue set up at an old elementary school gym in the town of Buckhannon, West Virginia. They also held a candlelight vigil attended by some 200 people Wednesday night in front of the Sago Baptist Church, where they had learned the fate of the miners less than a day before. Speaking about the victims, one miner said, “I know the men under that hill and I called them my brothers.”

An explosion at the mine early Monday morning trapped the 13 men underground. One miner, 50-year-old Terry Holmes, apparently died instantly, while the other 12 further inside the mine sought to escape poisonous carbon monoxide gases by retreating to the coal face and constructing a makeshift barricade to conserve fresh air and await rescue. Eleven of those men apparently succumbed to the gas during the 41 hours underground, while one miner, 26-year-old Randal McCloy, was rescued alive. McCloy remains in a coma at a Morgantown hospital.

Some of the men reportedly left notes assuring their loved ones that their final hours underground were not spent in agony, according to a relative. “The notes said they weren’t suffering, they were just going to sleep,” said Peggy Cohen, who identified the body of her father Fred Ware Jr.

The dead include: Alby Martin Bennett, 50, of Buckhannon; Jim Bennett, 61, of Philippi; George Hammer Jr., 54, of Glady Fork; David Lewis, 28, of Philippi; Martin Toler, 50, of Flatwoods; Fred Ware Jr., 59, of Tallmansville; Jack Weaver, 52, of Philippi; Marshall Winans, 49, of Talbert; Jerry Groves, 56, of Cleveland; Jesse Jones, age unknown of Pickens; and Thomas Anderson, 39, residence

unknown.

Federal and state authorities began the investigation into the causes of the disaster on Thursday. Inspectors from the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) believe the blast occurred in a portion of the mine that had been mined out much earlier and sealed from the rest of the operation. West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin said Wednesday that because air could not circulate in the so-called “gob” area, it was doubtful that combustible coal dust had accumulated there. He said, however, that methane gas—which is particularly dangerous in the winter months—may have built up there.

A spark is needed to ignite the gas, however, and there were reportedly no signs of explosives or equipment left in that section and the latter was sealed off from the working section of the mine with federally approved floor-to-ceiling concrete block ventilation seals. This would seem to rule out the possibility that the spark came from equipment restarted by the miners after the mine lay idle over the holidays. That theory had already been weakened by the initial reports of miners who escaped, indicating that the explosion occurred before they had a chance to restart electrical mining equipment. “We don’t think they made it to the (coal) face,” said Kevin Stricklin, district manager for MSHA.

Earlier in the week Governor Manchin suggested that explosive gases might have been ignited by lightning strikes. The *Charleston Gazette* reported that a contractor monitoring thunderstorms for the National Weather Service confirmed that two bolts of lightning struck in the vicinity of the mine at 6:26 a.m. Monday morning. One of the strikes—the closest to the mine site—measured between four and 10 times more powerful than an average lightning strike.

In West Virginia, at least one fatal mining accident—which took the lives of two miners in 1986—has been attributed to lightning. In 2001 the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health studied a series of seven explosions in worked out, sealed areas triggered by lightning, including three that occurred at one mine in Alabama over a three-year period in the 1990s.

According to the *Gazette*, MSHA is not eliminating a water pressure differential to make the air in the sealed area inert and incapable of being affected by lightning, as well as eliminating concentrations of methane and other explosive gases and potential ignition sources, such as old batteries, from sealed areas of mines.

Another theory about the source of the ignition has been advanced, however, that would, if it were true, be directly linked to the well-publicized safety problems at the Sago Mine. Mark C. Radomsky, director of field services for the Miner Training Program at Pennsylvania State University, told the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* that the only logical explanation for the disaster is a roof collapse. Such a collapse would bring thousands of tons of rock crashing down, creating enough sparks to ignite methane gas that would, in turn, produce an explosion that could tear through the sealed area and ignite the combustible coal dust.

According to the *Post-Gazette*, “The Sago Mine had a history of such roof collapses. In 2005, there were 19. Some were large in size, with one on Nov. 27 measuring 18 feet high and 70 feet long, but none caused any injuries, according to federal records. Federal inspectors also ordered Sago on Aug. 16 to better protect its workers against possible roof collapses. The total of 19 collapses at Sago was more than double the eight collapses recorded in 2004.”

“For a small mine like that, 19 is probably a high number showing the roof is a weak roof,” Dan Alexander, a former mining executive and lecturer in mining engineering at the University of West Virginia, told the newspaper.

Conditions allegedly only got worse after the mine was taken over last November by International Coal Group, whose billionaire owner Wilbur L. Ross specializes in taking over bankrupt steel, coal and textile companies, cutting costs and squeezing out profits.

On December 14 a federal inspector found an accumulation of “combustible” materials at the Sago Mine and ordered the owner to clean up the coal dust. This was the fourth time in approximately three months that MSHA found a level sufficiently serious to prompt the issuance of a “unwarrantable failure order”—the agency’s most severe citation, which states that the owner “knew or should have known” about the violations. In total the Sago Mine was cited 13 times with serious failure notices in the second half of 2005, including problems with ventilation, protection from roof collapses and failure to mark accident escape routes.

Despite the repeated violations the Sago Mine was allowed to continue operating. The Bush administration has slashed funding for MSHA, eliminated 170 positions and installed former mining bosses to head the regulatory agency. Under a mandate to establish “partnerships” with the coal companies

MSHA is not doing anything but token fines while investigations and enforcement are ineffective. The promotion of the interests of Big Coal is not just a Republican policy, but one embraced by the Democratic Party, which has long dominated West Virginia’s state government.

As for the United Mine Workers union, it has all but disappeared as a force among miners and functions as little more than a lobbying group for ineffective legislation. Once a massive force in the Appalachian coalfields—with half a million members—today there are no more than 30,000 unionized miners nationally, and as little as 5-10,000 UMWA members in West Virginia. More than half the coal industry is non-union, including the Sago Mine. This disaster is the result of the betrayal of scores of militant struggles by the UMWA, which has long conducted its own form of “partnerships” with the coal companies and the Democratic Party.

The results were predictable. The coal companies have increased production and profits at the direct expense of the lives and limbs of coal miners. Dozens of miners die in accidents and more than 5,000 are injured each year. Another 1,500 miners die annually from Black Lung disease.

After being trapped for 42 hours, the only surviving miner, Randal McCloy, remains in a coma and doctors said they believe his brain is injured. The young worker, his wife and small children live in a trailer in the small mining town of Simpson, about 37 miles southeast of Morgantown. According to reports he risked working underground, even though he was a licensed electrician, to earn more money for his family. Randal “was looking to get out” after working in the mine for three years, according to his wife Anna. “It was too dangerous,” she said.

Rick McGee, McCloy’s 36-year-old brother-in-law and a fellow Sago miner, told reporters that miners know every day when they go to work that it may be their last, and everyone knew McCloy wanted out.



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