

US media sheds crocodile tears for West Virginia miners

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The US media coverage of the West Virginia mine disaster has been a spectacle of ignorance, condescension and chasing higher circulation. Unburdened with any serious knowledge of the lives of coal miners or their history, scores of highly paid, highly coiffed journalists from the cable and network news channels and print media produced little but the most superficial explanations of the tragedy and its background.

In the hundreds of hours of television news coverage and reams of news articles, nothing could be found that enlightened the worldwide audience following the gripping events as to the Sago Mine disaster's social and historical dimensions.

Indeed it generally takes such a tragedy for the US media to discover there is a working class at all. This was all but acknowledged by the editors of the *New York Times*, who commented, "Just as Hurricane Katrina forced Americans to look at the face of lingering poverty and racism, this mining tragedy should focus us all on another forgotten, mistreated corner of society."

"Forgotten, mistreated" by whom? If the social realities of West Virginia or New Orleans have been kept out of public view it is because the US media has done its best to conceal them. The media has spent much of the last quarter century celebrating wealth and power and doing everything possible to cover up the social consequences of the "pro-market" and right-wing policies of both big business parties. The manufacturers of public opinion are well aware that mistreatment and oppression are not limited to the "corners" of society but are a permanent feature of life for tens of millions of working people throughout America.

Prior to the mine explosion, where were the hard-

hitting articles examining the conditions of economic desperation in West Virginia—one of the poorest states in America—and the systematic dismantling of federal safety standards and other pro-company measures that have cost miners their lives and limbs? And it should come as a surprise to no one that after a flurry of articles and CNN news "specials," the cameras will be packed up and the lives of West Virginia's miners and their families "forgotten" again.

The focus of the privileged layers in the editorial offices and news studios lies elsewhere. A cursory look at any edition of the *New York Times*, for example, reveals their preoccupations and concerns. Amid the countless ads for Rolex watches, luxury cars and multi-million dollar real estate deals in Manhattan, one finds life-style features about hiring your own personal shoppers and image consultants and the \$950 cocktail drink that is all the rage among the young and affluent.

For the celebrity talking heads, like NBC's Matt Lauer, a visit to a West Virginia mining community was like a voyage to a distant planet. These people inhabit an entirely different world than ordinary working people, particularly the miners of West Virginia. Hence the media personalities' recurring depiction of the miners as a strange and exotic species on the verge of extinction.

Any sincere concern for the plight of the miners and their families—and there is no reason to believe even that even this affluent crowd was not moved by the tragedy—found expression in a patronizing attitude that depicted the miners as simply oppressed and downtrodden.

The news media can express sympathy for the masses as long as they stay downtrodden. Just a month ago, the news media conducted a vicious campaign to vilify the 34,000 New York City transit workers who went on

strike to defend their pensions and livelihoods. The media spokesmen, who are feigning sympathy for the working class today, echoed the foul attacks of billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg, who denounced the striking workers for being “selfish,” “greedy” and indifferent to the plight of lower paid workers.

Is there any doubt, however, that these same newscasters would turn on a dime and denounce the miners and their families if they dared to organize a strike of all mineworkers against the deadly conditions in the industry? There has never been a major strike in the coalfields, including the AT Massey and Pittston strikes of the 1980s, in which the news media did not blackguard the miners as unlawful, violent and deserving of the most severe penalties.

At the same time the media has deliberately played up the influence of religion among the miners, widely publicizing each pronouncement by a local preacher or relative that the miner’s fate is ultimately in the hands of God. The aim is to present the miners and their families as “God-fearing,” good Christians, willing to turn their cheeks to whatever blows are delivered.

Without denying the influence of religion—which has long been utilized by the mine operators and the authorities to counter the influence of socialism and the early efforts to unionize the coalfields—the truth is the miners have never been identified with deference before authority and resignation to their fate. The resurgence of religious views today, including a certain element of passivity, is a by-product of the betrayal and collapse of the United Mine Workers union, which has left coal miners without any mass organization to defend them, and the abandonment of social reformism by the Democratic Party.

Nowhere in the news coverage would one get any inkling that for nearly a century, beginning in the 1890s, the Appalachian coalfields were the setting for some of the bloodiest class battles in US history—and that the miners enjoyed the distinction of being known as the most militant section of the American working class. Just a short distance from the Sago Mine the towns of Monongah, Farmington and Fairmont are forever etched in the history of the miners’ struggles, including early efforts to organize politically against the coal bosses and their two parties. In nearby Preston County, for example, Socialist presidential candidate Eugene Debs won 30 percent of the vote in 1912.

In its efforts to build ratings and get more advertising the news media set out to provide a “human interest” story when it began covering the Sago Mine disaster. Hoping to top this with a happy ending, like the Somerset, Pennsylvania rescue in 2002, the cable stations and network journalists, relying on hearsay and rumor rather than serious investigative reporting, contributed to the disastrous misinformation that led the miners’ families to believe the men had been found alive.

Since the tragic conclusion of the rescue attempt the news media has instinctively reacted to the concerns of the coal companies that the Sago Mine disaster might persuade younger workers to avoid the occupation in the future, exacerbating the shortage of skilled miners that is already plaguing the industry, just as rising coal prices are making it more profitable than ever. Over the past few days the media has suggested that the safety violations at the Sago Mine were an aberration and that working conditions in the mines have steadily improved. Along these lines one CNN reporter urged the governor’s wife to explain how she was “encouraging family members” and others to “stay in the business” and “tell them how important it is, alongside the dangers, just to keep the economy going and surviving as a very important industry in your state?”

For its role in the Sago Mine disaster the news media has incurred the disgust and anger of many miners and their families. One can only say that this is entirely deserved.



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