Memorial service for Sago miners preaches fatalism and submission

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An official memorial service was held on Sunday at the West Virginia Wesleyan College for the 12 coal miners killed after an explosion January 2 at the Sago Mine in nearby Upshur County, West Virginia. Some 2,000 people, including surviving relatives, co-workers and miners from several states, attended the event held at the Methodist school and messages of sympathy came from throughout the world.

It is no disrespect to the miners and their families who came to pay their respects to the lost miners—and try to make sense out of this tragedy—to tell the truth about the political calculations that went into this event. The memorial service was organized by the West Virginia governor's office, broadcast live around the state and widely reported in the national media to promote a sense of "closure" and resignation among the miners and their families.

Rather than honoring their memories by telling the bitter truth about the Sago Mine disaster—that these men lost their lives needlessly because of the criminal negligence of the mine owners and federal and state authorities—this fact was concealed behind a parade of American flags, evangelical pronouncements and paeans to the age-old sacrifice of coal miners. Their message was unmistakably clear: it is the religious and patriotic duty of miners to accept their lot in life, including periodic fatal disasters at the hands of the coal operators.

The theme of the memorial service—conceived of by the state's Democratic governor Joe Manchin and local preachers who kept vigil with the families of the trapped miners—was "Honor, Hope and Healing."

Several of the tributes to the dead miners pointed to their unmistakable self-sacrifice and devotion to their families. The miners' decision to work in a dangerous occupation, however, was presented as "heroic" and likened to soldiers motivated by patriotism.

Such false claims do nothing to honor the fallen miners and serve only to obscure the reality of social conditions in Appalachia. The Sago miners and many like them have no love for dangerous working conditions, but have little choice because of economic desperation and the fact that they would be fired if they spoke out. This fact has been pointed out by several family members and co-workers. (See "Coal miners denounce deadly conditions—'The government is giving a green light to the coal operators to violate safety'")

The "hope" was presumably provided by Governor Manchin and the presence of US senators Robert Byrd and Jay Rockefeller, as well as officials from the Mine Safety and Health Administration who were present in the audience. State and federal officials have assured the families that the miners "did not die in vain" and that a thorough investigation into the causes of the Sago Mine disaster will lead to improvements in mining safety.

This is no less cynical. Each of these politicians has been bought and paid for by coal interests in West Virginia. Rockefeller, whose name is synonymous with Big Coal and the repression of coal miners, dispatched hundreds of state police against striking miners when he was West Virginia governor during the 1977-78 walkout by 120,000 miners. Manchin, a former coal broker, received more money from coal interests for his 2004 election campaign than any other politician in state history.

Any investigation by these corporate-controlled politicians will at best result in a slap on the wrist for the owners of the Sago Mine, while the pro-business policies of deregulation pursued by both political parties—Democratic and Republican—will only assure

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that such disasters will be repeated in the future.

Acknowledging the widespread public skepticism in such investigations, Manchin promised it would be “open” and not take as long as the probe into the 1968 Farmington, West Virginia explosion that killed 78 miners, including the governor’s own uncle. That case took more than two decades to resolve with little or no repercussions for the coal operators.

Finally, there was the “healing.” No doubt this was aimed at dissipating the anger miners and their families feel for International Coal Group, which maintained the deadly conditions at the Sago Mine, as well as for the federal and state authorities who allowed it to continue operating, despite a record of safety violations and falsified reporting.

Sitting behind the mourning families were officials from International Coal Group, including CEO Ben Hatfield, who just last week declared that the Sago Mine was a “safe operation.” In order to deflect any criticism of the coal bosses, Manchin declared in his opening remarks that the state of West Virginia had become “one family in its grief.”

In this self-serving presentation of reality there is no class struggle. Billionaire coal operators and big business politicians “share the pain” with mourning families, an investigation is promised, the miners go back to work and the coal industry can continue to make its profits. Everybody is healed.

The fact that the coal operators and big business politicians can get away with posturing as supporters of the coal miners is a measure of the betrayal of the United Mine Workers bureaucracy and the ideological disorientation the union officialdom has created with its policy of labor-management collaboration and support for the Democratic Party.

In the 1960s and 1970s mine disasters such as Farmington and the systematic poisoning of miners with Black Lung disease provoked a widespread rebellion across the coalfields, leading to national strikes, mass demonstrations and the active participation of tens of thousands of union and nonunion miners and community residents.

The isolated and betrayed strikes of the last 25 years and the virtual collapse of the UMWA have left miners without any mass organization to defend themselves and susceptible to the type of demagogy heard at Sunday’s memorial service. Significantly, one of those lending his support to this travesty was UMWA President Cecil Roberts, who sat in the audience and has publicly urged workers to place their trust in the government investigation into the disaster.

History has demonstrated time and again that the same politicians and news media that claim to sympathize with the coal miners would turn in an instant to denounce them if they waged a struggle against the coal bosses. The only genuine way to honor the Sago miners is to recognize that they were victims of all of these forces, and that a struggle must be waged against the entire political and economic system that sacrifices the lives of the working class for corporate profit.

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