

Twelve of 13 miners found dead after false rescue report

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State officials in West Virginia have confirmed that 12 miners were killed in the massive explosion that ripped through the Sago Mine on Monday morning.

The horrifying news came only hours after the miners' families had been told, and CNN prominently reported, that all but one of the miners had been found alive and were being pulled up to safety.

Jubilation erupted in the mining community when the initial rescue report came through. CNN broadcast scenes of what it claimed to be ambulance vehicles ferrying survivors to local hospitals for treatment.

However, within three hours the families were told that 12 miners were dead, and that the one survivor had sustained serious injuries.

Ben Hatfield, president of the International Coal Group, stated: "The initial report from the rescue team to the command center indicated multiple survivors. That information spread like wildfire, because it had come from the command center. It quickly got out of control."

The false reports of survival served only to intensify the anguish felt by the families when the later reports of the miners' deaths emerged.

The disaster began with an explosion early Monday morning, as the first shift of miners entered the mine, which had been closed Sunday for the New Year holiday.

President Bush issued a perfunctory statement on Tuesday, saying the nation was praying for the men and pledging federal help in the effort to bring them out alive. "May God bless those who are trapped below the earth," he said.

The hypocrisy of Bush's remarks is highlighted by the role of his administration in gutting mine safety inspections and promoting the downsizing, deregulation and unlimited profiteering that have contributed to this tragedy.

A number of those in the grim vigil outside the Sago Mine have remarked bitterly over the fact that workers in the impoverished Appalachian coal fields are forced to risk life and limb every day simply to earn enough to support their families.

There have been 149 fatalities in mine accidents nationwide and 38 in West Virginia in the last five years, including 27 miners who died in underground accidents in West Virginia. Despite the dangerous conditions, economic desperation

continues to drive workers into the occupation.

Samantha Lewis, whose 28-year-old husband, David, is among those trapped, said he worked the mines so he could be home every night to take care of their three daughters while she worked on a master's degree in health-care administration. "This was a good way to make a living until we could find something else," Lewis said. "It's just a way of life. Unless you're a coal miner or you have a college degree, you don't make any money."

Mac Davis, a former miner who awaited word of a loved one trapped in the mine, said one reason he quit mining was the relaxed attitude toward safety in many mines, especially in the recent coal boom. "If they don't do something, there's going to be a lot more accidents like this," he told the *Charleston Gazette*.

Daniel Meredith, the son-in-law of one of the trapped miners, said the 61-year-old miner planned to retire this year. "Every day he would come home and pray for who was going in," said Meredith, who stood outside the mining complex.

More than four decades after Michael Harrington highlighted the desperate conditions in Appalachia in his work, *The Other America*, West Virginia continues to be one of the most impoverished states in America. The state has the lowest median income in the US and the sixth highest percentage of poverty (17 percent). In Upshur County, where the Sago Mine is located, more than 20 percent of the population lives below the US government's official poverty level.

Far from being an exception to the rule, the Sago Mine and its ownership epitomize the type of operation that has come to dominate the coal fields. The mine, located near Buckhannon, West Virginia has a recent history of roof falls and serious safety violations, according to the US Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), and an injury rate three times that of similar-sized underground mines across the country.

In the last year alone, the mine's owner, International Coal Group (ICG), was issued 205 citations, including 46 during the most recent inspection of the Sago Mine from early October to late December 2005. According to the *Washington Post*, inspectors listed 96 citations as "serious and substantial," i.e., those MSHA believes could cause an accident serious enough to injure or kill a miner. These included violations of

approved roof control and mine ventilation plans intended to prevent the buildup of explosive methane gas.

The *Post* noted in an editorial that the mine was forced to suspend operations 16 times in 2005 after failing to comply with safety rules.

The number of citations increased sharply after ICG took over the mine from the bankrupt Anker Energy and reopened it in 2004. ICG is owned by billionaire New York financier Wilbur Ross, who has invested \$4.5 billion during the last five years to buy up—in many cases at bargain basement prices—steel, textile, coal, automotive, rail and financial companies in the US, UK, France, China, Germany, Japan and Korea.

Ross, who is rated 278th on *Forbes* magazine's list of the 400 richest Americans, specializes in acquiring steel mills and mines held by bankrupt companies and making them profitable by wiping out jobs, dumping pension obligations and renegotiating labor contracts to drive up productivity and cut labor costs. *Fortune* magazine recently called Ross, "The Bankruptcy King," while *BusinessWeek* said Ross supervised a "growing empire of the damned."

Many of ICG's top executives, including CEO Bennett Hatfield, gained their experience at Massey Energy Company, which became the fourth largest coal company in America by spearheading the ruthless union-busting campaigns of the 1980s against the miners' union. Massey was also a generous election contributor to Bush, who has, in turn, championed coal production and the deregulation of the mining industry.

Ross is only one player among dozens of speculators and asset strippers active in the wave of acquisitions and mergers sweeping the coal industry. In order to avoid the high cost of developing unproven mines and cash in on rising coal prices, these operators are increasing their share of the market by buying out smaller companies and destroying the hard won gains of coal miners. Inevitably, safety is sacrificed.

In their efforts to defend the mine's safety record, company officials unintentionally acknowledged the fact that safety standards have declined throughout the industry. Gene Kitts, ICG vice president of mining services, said, "The mine has some history of roof conditions, roof falls and such, but it's not unlike most other mines."

If coal mining fatalities have fallen in recent years it is not primarily because of qualitative improvements in safety, but because the number of working miners has plunged to historic lows. West Virginia, the second largest coal producing state in the US, once had 120,000 mining jobs. It now has 15,000.

For more than a century, West Virginia was identified with the militant struggles of the miners. The fight against unsafe conditions, such as Black Lung Disease, was central to these struggles. After the 1968 explosion and death of 78 miners at Consolidated Coal's Farmington, West Virginia mine (just 50 miles from the site of the Sago Mine) a decade of a powerful rank-and-file struggles erupted against the coal bosses and the

pro-company Tony Boyle leadership of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). This culminated in the miners' defiance of the President Jimmy Carter's strike-breaking Taft-Hartley injunction during the national strike of 1977-78.

Over the last quarter of century, however, the UMWA has betrayed one strike after another, from the 1984-85 AT Massey strike to the 1989-90 Pittston strike, and pursued a policy of labor-management collaboration that has led to the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs and a historic reversal in the position of miners and their families.

During the 1974 national coal strike, there were 120,000 active UMWA coal miners. Today there are no more than 30,000-40,000, although the UMWA refuses to release official figures.

A measure of its indifference towards the miners is the failure of the UMWA even to post a statement on its web site about the Sago mine disaster, and union spokesmen failed to return calls from the *World Socialist Web Site*.

For its part, the Bush administration has gutted safety and health conditions in the mines. As it has in other regulatory agencies, the White House has stacked the Mine Safety and Health Administration with representatives of corporate interests, reduced funds and manpower to enforce regulations, and scrapped critical safety and health regulations.

Bush named former Massey Energy official Stanley Suboleski to the MSHA review commission that decides all legal matters under the federal Mine Act. The current MSHA chief is Richard Sickler, a former manager of Beth Energy mines.

Last month, a federal law judge threw out all eight MSHA citations against Jim Walters Resources that were the result of an investigation into the 2001 explosions at the company's Alabama mine, where 13 miners were killed. The judge, who said MSHA failed to prove its allegations, reduced the fines for the miners' deaths to \$3,000. In the eyes of the court, the life of a miner was worth no more than \$230!

Bush's policies are not unique—rather they are the culmination of policies that have been carried out by both big business parties, at the national as well as the state level. The Democrats, who have controlled the governor's office in the state capital of Charleston for 21 of the last 25 years, have overseen the destruction of working conditions and living standards in the state, while pandering to the same corporate interests as the Republicans.



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